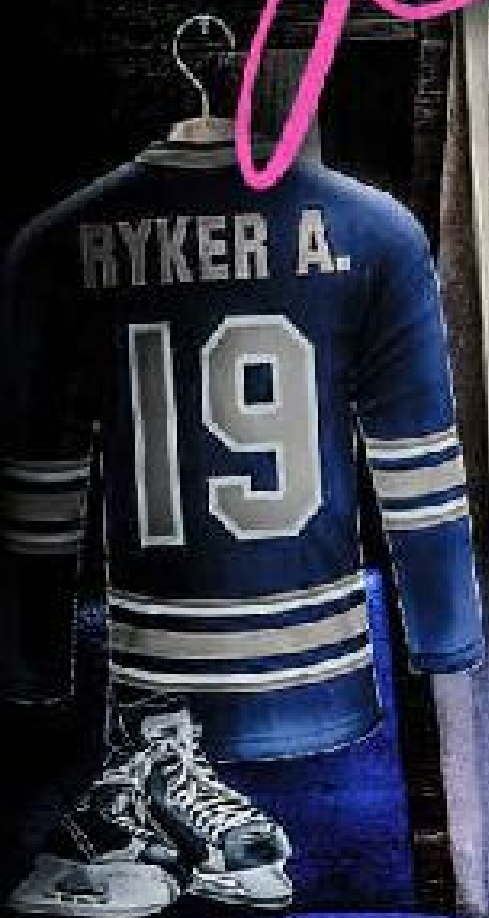


ABOUT *Packing* TIME



STACY CHARLIE
Stone & Jules

ABOUT PUCKING TIME

DENVER DEVILS

BOOK 1

CHARLIE JULES

STACY STONE

Charlie Jules & Stacy Stone

About Pucking Time: Denver Devils #1

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First published in 2023

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Cover design: Cover Couture

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CHAPTER **ONE**

AUSTIN

“Austin! Austin, you led your team to a near perfect season. Are you angry about your loss tonight?”

“Are you disappointed?”

“Austin! Is it true that Brooklyn let you down?”

“Brooklyn!”

“Brooklyn, over here!”

The questions are coming at us hard and fast, the reporters yelling over each other, nearly starting a stampede as they surge forward now that we're in the room.

Flanked by Brooklyn on my left and Travis on my right, I sit down behind the long table set up at the front of the briefing room. There are so many microphones mounted on it today, I don't even see a space for my water. I finally spot a narrow gap between two microphones and wedge my water bottle there.

From up here, the room is a sea of familiar faces - the same reporters who've tracked our season, their expressions a mix of curiosity and sympathy. I recognize a few, like Marla from 'Sports Daily', always in the front row with her sharp questions. They jostle for space, their shoulders touching, voice recorders thrust forward like weapons. Camera flashes punctuate the dim room, momentarily blinding me every few seconds.

I can't blame the vultures for wanting a piece of us, though. Less than an hour ago, we fell out of the running for

the Stanley Cup and now, we have to face the music.

Disbelief is still sizzling in my veins as I look out at the packed press conference. If it wasn't a rule that key players have to spend a few minutes with them after every game, I wouldn't have come near these guys with a barge-pole tonight.

We got so fucking close to that cup this year, I've been doing a few extra weight lifts every morning just to practice for when I hoisted it over my head in triumph.

And now, that isn't going to happen.

Fuck.

My ears ring as my identical twin practically vibrates with rage beside me. Brooklyn is a horrible loser and all-round loose cannon most days. I'll be damned if this defamation by these reporters doesn't set him off—unless I can diffuse the situation.

Guess I better fucking get to it.

The noise in the room is deafening until I lean forward and clear my throat. The shouts die down immediately, like I hit an invisible mute button, and I grin my approval at the assholes.

“Thanks for coming out tonight,” I say, flashing them what my PR team has dubbed my ‘trademark, charming smile.’ Despite wanting to throttle every last one of them for those comments about my brother, I know better. One wrong move, and Brooklyn and I are both out on our asses. “First, I'd like to thank you for your support this season. Without you and all the fans watching from home, we would never have gotten as far as we did.”

Lots of smiles and thumbs-ups are flashed at me and I pause for a second before I continue. “Second, today, as always, Brooklyn was an invaluable part of our team and honestly, the implication that he let me down tonight is false and defamatory. He played a hell of a game out there. Unless they've changed the rules and he was supposed to have let the other team score, I'm not sure why anyone would even ask that question.”

Chuckles ripple through the crowd, the reporter I just set straight flinching before he rolls his eyes. Internally, I sigh. Being the captain of the Denver Devils is my dream come true and I worked damn hard to get it, but having to play nice with the press is my least favorite part of the job.

Just once, I would like to hear some original questions. Yes, we had a near perfect season. Yes, we had a shot at the Cup and then yes, we fucking lost tonight and it sucks. Of course I'm pissed off. Of course I'm disappointed. I'm not a fucking robot. Falling out of the running this late in the season cuts deep. It slices to the very center of my being.

But I can't take it out on them so instead, I keep smiling and speak into the mics again. "As a team, we're saddened by the results of tonight's game, but we couldn't be more proud of our team and each other."

All I want right now is a cold beer, a warm meal, and a hot girl to settle down with for the night, but I need to do this before I'll be able to get any of that. If I want to hang on to the captaincy, I can't just bolt or blow them off.

We lost. Boo-*fucking*-hoo. We let everyone down. We get that. *Can we go now?*

I continue, "We would also like to congratulate the Detroit Demons on their win tonight and we wish them the best of luck in the Finals. We'll be watching you, boys. And you can rest assured that we'll be coming for you next season."

I look right into the camera at the center of the room as I say it. It's the one part of this conference that means anything to me, letting Trent Holden and his team know that we'll be coming at them hard next year to get our redemption. His smug faces flashes in my mind and my eyes narrow.

As I lift my gaze away from the camera, I check the clock mounted on the back wall and see that we've still got a few minutes left. *Fuck.*

I'd rather have major surgery than sit through more of this, but if we skip out now, the whole world will read about it in

the morning—and we'll get fined. "We'll take a few questions now."

The first hand that shoots up belongs to Oscar Adams, a veteran sports reporter who happens to be a big fan of ours. I point at him. "What have you got for me today, Oscar?"

They like it when I remember their names. In a way, they're like needy partners, but hey, We need to keep them happy. *Also the same as with needy partners, which is why I don't want one. Needy or otherwise.*

Oscar smiles and straightens up. "Austin, your alma mater released a statement today that you and Brooklyn are to be honored at a ceremony in the off-season. What are your feelings about this exciting news? Do you have anything to say to the kids at Evelyn High who want to follow in your footsteps?"

Way to stick a fucking fork in a guy who's already bleeding. But I keep smiling as I nod. I'm willing to bet my ass that at least half our hometown and all our former coaches are watching this.

"It's true. Brooklyn and I are heading home to Minnesota next week and we plan on spending some time with our family before the dinner. We feel really lucky to have such a fantastic alma mater and it's a privilege that they're doing this for us."

It's also forcing us to go to our hometown for the first time since we left. Four years is a long time to have stayed away, though. We knew we would be going back eventually, but I'm not ready. I doubt Brooklyn is either.

There's a reason we haven't been back, and that reason has a name.

"Austin!" This time, it's a new reporter. I don't know her name yet, but I've seen her on the beat the last couple weeks. She gives me such an intense stare that I already know I won't like what she's about to ask. "There's talk of replacing Brooklyn as a defenseman next season. Would you care to comment?"

“Yeah.” I sit up a little straighter, matching her intensity with my own as I shake my head. “That is categorically untrue. Our defensive pairing is too strong and we wouldn’t be the team we are without Brooklyn and Dax working together.”

I glance at our left D-man, Dax Griffin. He’s scowling at the reporter like she insulted his mother, and as he leans forward to defend my twin, I give him a barely perceptible shake of my head.

Brooklyn and Dax are both hot-heads, but since my brother would rather saw off his own arm than speak to these people, Dax is usually their mouthpiece. The last thing we need after our loss is for him to start a fight with the new girl. I’ll probably be accused of being a microphone hog again for this, but fuck that.

This woman has just started out. Whether or not she’s a fan is irrelevant. She’s wearing our blue and black team jersey but personally, as individuals and players, we haven’t won her over yet.

“Brooklyn isn’t going anywhere,” I say firmly, confident since we’ve already spoken to the coaches and the owners. “Neither are any of the rest of us.”

That part isn’t completely true. Calix Bishop, our right-winger, is thinking about retiring after next season, but I don’t even need to look at him to know he doesn’t want me to break the news yet. The dude is only twenty-eight, but he’s tired. He’s been injured too many times and his wife is pregnant. He wants to hang up his skates, but he also wants to be the one to tell them when the time comes.

The new girl nods and glances at Dax curiously, but another reporter jumps in with questions for Travis, our goalkeeper, and New Girl doesn’t try to get a follow-up. By the time the buzzer sounds to signal the end of the press conference, I can’t get out fast enough.

Leaning forward one last time, I smile and thank them again for their support, then I’m on my feet and heading for the door with the rest of the starting team hot on my heels. A heavy weight smacks into my back just after I stand up and

Brooklyn's legs wrap around my waist, his arms thrown around my shoulders.

I grunt, but catch his knees as he rides me out of the briefing room. These antics of his stopped surprising me a long time ago, but this move feels like it should be reserved for winners. *Which we're not.*

So as soon as we clear the door, I abruptly let go. Brook yelps, but then he starts laughing and when I turn, I realize he's not on his ass like I'd planned. He drops his chin and narrows his eyes at me, but his shoulders are still shaking with silent laughter.

"You're a fucking oddball." I roll my eyes at him, wondering how two people who look *exactly* alike can be so damn different. "You okay? They were brutal in there."

He shrugs, and since there isn't any outward sign of him not letting it all roll off him like water from a duck's back, I turn to the rest of our team. "So this is goodbye. You guys are all still heading home tonight, right?"

Calix nods first, taking a step forward and extending his hand to me. "Donna's probably already waiting in the car. Good luck at home, boys. I'll see you in August."

After I shake with him, he moves down the line to the others, and then he walks away. None of us have even showered yet, but I know he's eager to get to his wife and their unborn child. Once he's gone, Dax and Brooklyn hug like they're never going to see each other again, thumping each other's backs and murmuring their sweet nothings into each other's ears.

But that's my brother and his best friend for ya.

At the thought, I glance at my own best friend, Travis Oakley. His green eyes are hooded as he watches Brook and Dax, the veins in his thick neck bulging and his jaw tight, but he knows better than to think there's anything going on between them. As he drags his hands through his sweat-damp blond hair and sighs, I frown.

Biologically, *I'm* Brooklyn's identical twin but for all practical intents and purposes, it's him and Dax that are alike in every way that matters. Travis knows that, but I guess it's never fun seeing the person you're in love with hanging onto someone else for that long.

Deciding to slide it into a conversation with my brother sometime, I turn my back on them to say goodbye to the final member of our team, our left winger, Kit England.

"Thanks for a great season, Cap," he says as he shakes my hand and dips his head into a quick bow. "You sure you don't want to come out with us?"

"I'm sure. Have fun, though. Give your parents and your brothers my best when you get home, okay?"

He smirks. "It's not home I'm worried about. It's the family vacation they've got planned after that. Fuck, you're lucky you're only going to be spending a few days with your parents before you guys go do your own thing."

Even that is too much, bro. "Yeah, I hear you. Just make sure none of your brothers send you to hospital again, okay?"

Shouldn't be too hard. He's only got six younger brothers. Just the thought of a lakeside vacation, waterskiing, and corralling the England brood for three solid weeks makes me wince, and he laughs when he sees it. I've only met them a few times, but his brothers are high energy. Super high.

Even then, I know he loves his family. To this day, he still spends every off-season with them, even if he can afford to do just about anything else these days.

"I'll do my best to come home in one piece. See you, Cap. You guys get some rest."

"Yeah, you too."

Kit shakes Travis's hand after mine, rolls his eyes at Brooklyn and Dax who are *still* saying goodbye, and then heads out. When the Defence Duo finally breaks apart, Dax's deep blue eyes find mine and he launches himself at me next, but he only hugs me for a second.

“See you around, kids. Let me know if you change your minds about the Formula 1 tour. I could probably still get you in.”

“Thanks, we’ll keep that in mind,” I say, but we’ve got plans of our own for this off-season and touring through Europe following the F1 circuit isn’t it.

Dax runs a hand through his blond hair, then he makes a phone with his hand and reminds my brother to call him before he spins and strides away. Brooklyn sighs as he watches him leave before he grins at Trav and me once Dax has disappeared around the corner.

“Can we go now?”

I arch a brow at him. “Asks the guy who just spent ten minutes pretending like no one else exists.”

He widens his eyes. “I won’t be seeing Dax for almost three months. That’s a long time, bro. Trav is coming home with us. Tell me you wouldn’t have spent twice that long if you were only seeing him again in August.”

“My best friend is coming home with us because he’s your boyfr—“

“Not here,” Travis hisses, green eyes narrowing to slits before he jerks his head toward the elevators. “Let’s just get out of here.”

“Yeah,” I agree. “Okay. Lead the way.”

“I thought that was your job,” he grumbles as he marches his heavily-tatted ass to the parking lot.

Any other game, and we’d have been on our way to the hotel to get ready to go to a party or clubbing with the guys. But this wasn’t any other game and we agreed after we got off the ice that we wouldn’t be sticking around. Or going to a party as a team. Instead, we sent our empty bus out as a decoy just a few minutes after the press conference ended and we parted ways here. It’s been a very fucking long season and after our loss, none of us are in the mood to party.

Brooklyn, Travis, and I will be heading back to our hotel alone and in Brooklyn's beat-up Jeep. The tinted windows should keep us from being spotted, so we should be safe either way.

Once we're all in the car, he turns over the engine and glances at me as he joins the traffic to merge onto the street. "Can you believe we're going home? Man, how long has it been?"

"You know how long it's been." My teeth grind together and something bad spears through my gut. "Can we *not* talk about it?"

Travis leans forward and rests an elbow on each of the front seats. "Why are we not talking about it?"

"We have some unfinished business there." Brook glances at him in the rearview. "I'll tell you about it when we get to the hotel."

"I'll be in the shower when you do," I say, but I should've known they weren't just going to fucking drop it.

We're still in the elevator on the way up to our adjoining rooms when Brooklyn runs a hand over the black stubble on his jaw and looks at me. "Do you think we should drop in on her when we get home?"

"No." I scoff. "She won't want us to. Why are we talking about this?"

"The better question is *who* are we talking *about*?" Travis asks as the doors slide open. "You guys are being really fucking cryptic."

"Amaya Knox," Brooklyn responds. "The girl who lived across the street when we were growing up, our mutual first crush, and former best friend."

I blow out a heavy breath. "Aaaaand I've heard enough. I'm going to take that shower now. Grab me a bacon cheeseburger and three beers if you guys get room service. I'll see you later."

“Amaya. Amaya. Amaya,” Brooklyn chants playfully as I leave, and my teeth grind together.

Striding down the hall ahead of them, I swipe my keycard over the reader at my door and once I’m in my room, I don’t stop walking, stripping down on the move until I’m in the shower.

I haven’t thought the name *Amaya Knox* in years, but ever since we got that invite from our high school, I haven’t been able to *stop* thinking about her.

It’s fucking frustrating, and it threw me off my game tonight. To be fair, that’s not why we lost, but I’m still irritated by it. And frustrated. I hate being distracted by anything and I shouldn’t have been, even if it wasn’t what cost us the game.

We’d simply been outplayed. It happened. We were still in the game until the very last minute, but Trent’s team got around us and scored. Exasperation rolls through me as I set the spray to ice cold, sucking in a sharp breath when it starts feeling like there are icicles hitting my skin instead of water, but I don’t turn the temperature up.

I thought I left her behind a long time ago, but now that Amaya is back in my head, I can’t seem to get rid of her. For years now, she’s been my past—*our* past—but in this case, it looks like the past is what bites you in the ass while you’re making other plans.

CHAPTER
TWO

AMAYA

Once upon a time, I was happy.

Life was far from perfect. But warts and all, I was happy. I had a loving mother, a present father, and the most adorable baby brother in the world.

We weren't the richest or the poorest. We weren't the most functional or the most dysfunctional family on the block, but we really *were* happy.

That, however, was a long time ago. A different life, so far away now that I often wonder if it really happened or if I dreamed it all.

Rough carpet scrapes my knee as I kneel on the floor, wrestling with the corner of a turquoise bed sheet. With a huff, I finally yank it tight enough to tuck under the mattress of the hotel bed. My days have fallen into this repetitive pattern: making beds, cleaning rooms, the same mundane tasks each shift. Tomorrow will be no different, just a repeat of today and yesterday.

But I bite my tongue even though there's no one here to hear me bitch, plastering on an exhausted smile in the emptiness of the generic hotel room instead. *Fake it 'till you make it, right?*

The truth is that there's nothing I hate more than this job.

And *hate* is putting it mildly.

I freaking *loathe* this job.

If I could quit though, I would have done it a long time ago, but that's just not an option. I need to pay the bills. Keep the roof over our heads. Buy food. Clothes. And more importantly, I need to take care of Elijah, my baby brother. He's counting on me and I'll be damned if I'll let him down, so I stick with it.

Not that I'm allowed to call him my *baby* brother anymore, but to me, that's what he'll always be.

Eli turned seventeen this past spring and he's just like every other seventeen-year-old on the planet. Stubborn, messy, moody, angry at the entire world, and a damn pain in my ass. But he's still my brother, and I would die before I let anything happen to him.

I have to.

I'm all he's got.

For the last three years, it's only been the two of us. After Dad left, I had to step up.

Actually, before he left, it wasn't much better. Mom left our world for the hereafter nine years ago, and it's pretty much been me and Eli alone ever since.

As I smooth my hand over the sheet to make sure it's as perfect as can be, I allow my pity party to carry on for just another minute. Hell, I might as well. It's the only party I've been to in longer than I care to admit.

But Dad... he was *physically* there after Mom passed, but that was about it. Most nights, he was so drunk he didn't even remember he had children. I know losing Mom was hard, but *fuck*. *We* were the *kids*.

I check the corners of the bed, rising to my feet so I can move on. Dwelling on it isn't going to change the facts. I need to focus on the present—the reality.

No matter what, I'll do whatever it takes to keep my brother safe. Fed. And in a freaking hockey jersey that might allow him to escape this godforsaken town one day.

And if that means sticking with this horrible housekeeping job, I guess that's just what it takes.

As I move away from the bed, I tug at my starched, uncomfortable uniform, a silent protest against its ill-fitting design. This uniform, like so many others, wasn't made for someone with my stature — not tall, but undeniably curvy. My full hips and round breasts, which once were sources of insecurity, now feel like natural extensions of my strength. They used to bother me, but I've grown to appreciate how they're a part of who I am, even if they make battling with these buttons a daily ordeal.

The strain against the fabric with each breath I take is a constant reminder: I am not what this world expects, but I am unapologetically me. Cleaning an entire hotel room in this outfit is no small feat, especially when you're trying to breathe freely. I'd like to see Mr. Designer Man try it just once.

Because let's face it: It was a man who designed this thing. It had to have been. A woman would've remembered to leave space for the boobs.

I groan as I scan the room one more time.

All done.

About time. I only have ten more minutes before I need to pick Elijah up at the rink. It may be summer, but he and his team haven't stopped practicing, not really.

Their high school team camp is coming up soon, and he's trying to kill himself to be the best he can be before their senior year starts. I don't blame him. If I had a chance of getting away from here... no. There's no use thinking about something that is not now nor ever has been or will be a possibility for me.

It's different for Eli. He's got a shot. I just need to do what I can to help him take it.

Once my last room of the day is finally done, I bolt as quickly as my low-slung, practical heels will allow. These shoes, another brilliant contribution courtesy of Mr. Designer

Man, are hardly suitable for cleaning up the aftermath of wild hotel guests — *think used condoms and last night's barf*.

Yet here I am, balancing in them while scrubbing floors and changing sheets. I clock out in record time, eager to escape, and make my way to the back exit. Reaching my car — a term I use loosely, since 'piece of shit' is a more fitting description — I can't help but fantasize about trading these heels for something, anything, more practical.

The old rust bucket looks like it's survived a battlefield, maybe even two. Dents and scrapes mar its once-shiny exterior, a testament to countless battles with street poles and shopping carts. Its faded paint, now more a patchwork of rust and bare metal, probably isn't worth the cash I scraped together for it. Yet, she was the best I could afford, a relic on wheels that's somehow still chugging along.

Besides, she's not *that* bad. At least she works. Mostly. She's also painted a not-unpleasant shade of now-faded gray, and only the left side of the driver's door is dented.

As I fling myself in behind the steering wheel, I toss my purse on the passenger seat and stick the keys in the ignition. But besides a soft click, nothing happens. I try again and again, but the engine stubbornly refuses to turn over.

"Fuck!" I smash my hand against the steering wheel. "This can *not* be happening right now."

I check my wrist to see the time. *Shit, I only have five minutes left.*

I smash the dashboard with my fist and give it one more try. As if it senses my desperation, the engine finally turns over with a little sputter.

Praise the Lord.

Out of the parking lot, I put on the turn signal, pull into traffic, and make my way to the rink. Not all the way to the rink, though. I park around the corner instead of right out front. Elijah is embarrassed about the car. My uniform. *Us*.

I don't understand why, though. Everyone around here knows where I work anyway. What we drive. Who we are. *But*

hey, teenagers will be teenagers, right?

Once I'm where I need to be, I take out my phone, glad that for once the battery didn't die on me, and call Elijah. The line rings and rings, but he doesn't pick up.

My fingers flex around the wheel and I bow my head in frustration, but we need to get home. Some of us have dinner to make. Laundry to do. A house to clean.

I have no choice but to go inside and find the little brat. He better hope the car starts when we get back because if not, he's pushing us all the damn way home.

Against my better judgment, I kill the engine, step out of the car, and make my way up the block to the rink. It's an unassuming building nestled in the less glamorous part of town, and it's seen better days. Its faded facade and the graffiti-tagged walls speak of a suburban dream long forgotten. Yet, as I approach, I can't help but notice the display of victory banners hanging in the dusty window – a proud, if slightly faded, chronicle of local sports triumphs. Among them, a particularly tattered one from the year the boys won State catches my eye, a reminder of their fleeting high school glory.

Reaching the entrance, I push against the doors, but they're stubbornly locked. 'What the fuck?' I mutter under my breath.

After rattling them for a second, I put my hands on the glass and try to peer past the reflection, but there's no one in sight there. Anxiety and irritation spike somewhere deep down inside me.

If Elijah is knocking up one of those puck bunnies that's been hanging around him and his team lately, I'm going to string him up by the balls.

Exasperation makes me shove my hand into my pocket and snatch out my phone, my fingers flying across the keyboard as I text him.

ME

I'm at the rink. Where are you?

I wait a few more minutes before releasing a harsh sigh of defeat, then I shoot him another message.

ME

You better get home before dinner, or you'll be doing your own laundry for the rest of the month...

Tipping my face toward the sky, I draw in a few deep breaths. Even the weather is against me these days. The humidity is making my hair frizz and I hate it.

Shoving my hands into the frizzy mess, I spin around and head back to my car. Hopefully Elijah reads my message and gets home in time. I hate playing the strict parent, but I have no choice. He needs me to do it for now.

I get to my car and unlock it, opening the door and slamming it after getting in. Before I turn over the engine, I say a little prayer to anyone who may be listening. I need Eli to stay out of trouble and honestly, it feels like I'm going to need more and more help with that from now until he graduates.

With my prayers said, I turn the key and the car roars to life, and a wave of relief washes over me because of it.

As I drive home, I drum my fingers on the steering wheel, trying to either channel or contain some of the tension knotting my insides into a tight ball. It doesn't work, but at least it gives me something to do besides actively worry.

By the time I pull up in front of our house, I'm exhausted. *Thank God I don't have to work late tonight and can climb in bed early.*

When I get to our front door, I suddenly realize I can hear the loud voices coming from inside. My feet hurt like hell, my hair is one big mess, and all I want is a quick bite to eat, do some laundry, and then get ready for bed. But if Eli is having

an impromptu party at our house—and I'm pretty sure he is—none of that is going to happen.

Ramming my key into the lock, I open the door and I'm met with the sight of Elijah and five of his teammates sitting in our living room watching TV. On the one hand, I'm so relieved he's here that I might just cry but on the other, the room could be declared a disaster zone. *Teenage destruction at its best.*

Empty soda cans and half-eaten bags of chips are littered across every surface: shoes, socks, jackets, and even a belt strewn around on the floor. They've tossed the blankets and cushions off the sofas, laughing and yelling at the TV, so enthralled with whatever they're watching that none of them have even noticed me.

Dropping my purse and keys on the kitchen counter just a few feet in, I stride further, about to ask them just what the fuck they think they're doing when something—someone—on the TV catches my attention.

One glance and the air whooshes out of my lungs like I've been punched in the stomach. Actually, I kind of feel like I have been. Punched, I mean. Staring into the strikingly blue eyes of the Captain of the Denver Devils, my heart lurches in my chest and my mouth dries up. I used to be so damn familiar with those eyes, but these days, they hit me like a sledgehammer every time I see them—on TV or billboards, that is. I haven't seen him in person in a long, long time.

Austin Ryker.

The long table in front of him and the microphones mounted on it tell me he's giving a press conference, but I can't quite focus on any of that. Those piercing blue eyes are looking into a camera, but it feels like he's staring right at me, and with that, it's like I'm tossed into a time machine and sent back to when he used to live across the street from us and we played on the sidewalks. To a time when I was still able to act my age, be young and enjoy life.

As if seeing him so unexpectedly on my own damn TV wouldn't have been enough, his next words completely bowl

me over.

“It’s true. Brooklyn and I are heading out there next week and we plan on spending some time with our family before the dinner. We feel really lucky to have such a fantastic almatater to return to, and it’s a privilege that they’re doing this for us.”

Brooklyn. Of course, Brooklyn is still with him. They used to be inseparable—*from womb to tomb*, they used to say. It’s no wonder they’re still joined by the hip, the identical twins who took the NHL by storm. Not my words. It was their catchphrase back when they first started.

My heart rate spikes as the camera zooms in on Brooklyn next. Memories of our childhood flood my mind. The pranks we used to pull on each other. The hours we spent shooting the breeze, playing board games, and doing our homework together.

Until they left for fame and fortune and my life fell apart in every possible way.

Now, they’re both famous hockey players and I’m just a hotel maid, struggling to make ends meet for my brother and me. Brooklyn and Austin, however, are probably living the high life.

It’d be a lie to say that I’m not the least bit jealous. I am. We used to dream about getting out of here together, but obviously, that only happened for two out of the three of us.

But strolling down memory lane isn’t going to help me and neither is obsessing about the fact that they’re apparently coming home. I clear my throat, drawing the attention of Elijah and his friends. “What’s going on here?”

Eli jumps off the sofa, twisting and looking at me in one smooth movement with that what-the-hell-are-you-bitching-about expression on his face. He’s mastered it to the extent that he’s become a pro. “Uh, we were just hanging out.”

“I went to the rink to pick you up. I left you messages. Why didn’t you answer me?” I cross my arms.

He shrugs. “We finished up early to watch the game. The Denver Devils lost, in case you were wondering.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose and try to breathe in and out. When I open my eyes, all the boys are looking at me. Most of them think I'm about to have a nervous breakdown—at any given minute of any given day—and well, I guess they might be right. I love my brother but sometimes, I want to strangle him. He doesn't think this is a big deal and in the meantime, I drove to the other side of town to pick him up and then spent all that time worrying.

“I'm going to start dinner. Show your friends out and clean up the mess, Elijah.”

He opens his mouth to protest, but I lift my finger to make him stop. “Be very careful of whatever words are going to come out of your mouth right now. I've had a very long day and am not in the mood.”

I turn around and march into the kitchen, but at least I hear the guys cleaning up and then leaving. Elijah goes to his room and slams the door behind him. Of course. He's probably forgotten how to close the damn thing normally.

I drag in a shuddering breath and press my palms against the cool countertop, desperately trying to calm my racing heart. But the image of Austin Ryker's face on the TV keeps flashing in my mind. It's like it's mocking me. Even after all these years, he's still under my skin. Unfortunately, so is Brooklyn, which makes it exponentially worse.

I shake my head, trying to dispel the memories. I have other things to focus on right now, like my real life.

Forcing my attention away from the past, I start shuffling around the kitchen, slicing vegetables and readying pans for dinner. But despite my best efforts, my thoughts keep wandering back to the Ryker twins. *What would it be like to see them again? Would they even remember me?*

It's been so long since we last spoke. They went out into the world and did big things, and I'm still here, exactly where they left me.

Another pang of jealousy shoots through me as I picture their lives of luxury and fame, worlds away from my daily

struggle. They're likely living it up, wealthy and carefree, while I'm here, scraping by, drowning in bills and responsibilities. It's hard not to resent how differently our lives have unfolded.

The kitchen is my sanctuary, a place where I can express care and creativity, even when our budget is tight. Tonight, I've managed to whip up a batch of spaghetti, using a simple but tasty tomato sauce seasoned with whatever herbs were on sale. It's a humble dish, but I've learned to make the most of modest ingredients.

As the spaghetti simmers, I hear Elijah's door creak open. He emerges, his hair still damp from a shower, and he's wearing his pajamas. He shuffles quietly into the living room and takes a seat at the table. I serve him a generous portion of the pasta, steaming and inviting.

I sit across from him, placing a smaller serving in front of myself. I watch him for a reaction, hoping the familiar comfort food brings some warmth to his evening. I can't afford the luxury of expensive ingredients, but I pour all my love into these simple meals, hoping to bridge the gap left by these much tighter times. *Does he notice the effort behind the simplicity? Or does he long for something more, something we used to have before our lives turned upside down?*

We eat in silence, the only sounds coming from the TV in the background. But I'm not paying any attention to the show that came on after the press conference. My mind is elsewhere, still stuck in the past with memories of Austin and Brooklyn.

Elijah is the one who eventually breaks the silence. "Look, I'm sorry, I know you hate it when the guys crash without warning." He shrugs, "But it's nice to have friends over once in a while. I'll send you a text next time."

I sigh. "You're allowed to have friends over, Eli. That's not what I was mad about. You know I hate sounding like a parent, but I just need you to text me if your plans change. You know I've been a teenager myself, right? I get it."

He smirks. "But that was in the Stone Age, You didn't have cell phones back then."

I roll my eyes at him, but the corners of my mouth tug upward. “Ha ha, very funny. Just remember to text me next time, okay? Just so I don’t worry? It’s only you and me now, kiddo. We need to look out for each other.”

He nods “Got it. Thanks for cooking, sis.” Then he leans down and practically inhales his dinner.

I smile at him again, feeling a sense of warmth in my chest. Despite all the struggles and hardships we face, moments like this remind me why I keep going. I’ll do anything for Elijah, even if he is an annoying brat sometimes.

After I finish my meal, he helps me clean up the kitchen and we do the dishes together. I’m washing and Elijah is drying.

His voice pulls me out of my thoughts. “Did you hear the Rykers are coming home for a party at the school? I mean, I don’t really remember them much, but you do, right? Do you think you could ask them to come to the rink with us? It’d be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.”

His eyes are bright with the sort of admiration that only teenage heroes can inspire. The plate I’m holding clatters into the sink, water splashing over my hands and apron.

Eli turns to frown at me. “You okay?”

I nod, but inside, I’m reeling. Eli was just a kid when the Rykers left, but their legend has grown in his imagination. To him, they’re the hometown heroes who made it big, the stars of countless stories he’s heard at school. But to me, they’re a complicated chapter of my past, one I’ve never fully shared with Eli. Their impending return stirs up a mixture of emotions I thought I’d buried long ago.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I manage, forcing a smile. “I remember them, sure. They were... something else.” I choose my words carefully, not wanting to color his view of them or ready to revisit old wounds. “I’ll see what I can do about the rink, okay?”

A grin spreads across his face, oblivious to the storm of memories he’s just unleashed. I wonder, as I watch him eat,

how much he really knows about my history with the Rykers, and whether his innocent request might just reopen doors I thought I had closed for good.

But as I try to regain my composure, I realize it's not just the mishap with the plate that's shaken me. It's the sudden, unexpected news of Austin and Brooklyn's return to town. At the press conference, their mention of the dinner briefly caught my attention, and I'd naively hoped they'd only be here for a day, maybe two, before heading back to Colorado. *Wishful thinking, it seems.*

Eli's words echo in my mind – they're coming to spend time with their parents. That could mean they'll be staying longer than I anticipated. And with the kids at the rink idolizing them, it's almost certain they'll be asked to make an appearance there.

The mere thought of seeing Austin and Brooklyn again sends a jolt through me, my heart racing with a mix of dread and unresolved feelings. Being in the same room with them, breathing the same air after all these years, feels like a concept too surreal to grasp. My hands tremble slightly as I rinse off the plate, the water's warmth barely noticeable against the chill of my thoughts.

But then I remember who I am now. Even if I do run into them, we don't belong in the same world anymore. There will probably just be an awkward greeting and then they'll be on their merry way.

I force a smile, trying to hide my inner turmoil. "I'm sure Coach will speak to them about it. You're going to the dinner?"

Elijah nods, not noticing my discomfort. "Yeah, we all are. I can't wait to meet Austin and Brooklyn. They'll be excited to see you again."

If only he knew...

I shrug, because it doesn't matter if they're excited or even if they remember who I am. All that matters is that Eli is excited to meet them and that maybe they'll inspire the high

school team before next season—the season when the scouts will be coming.

We finish cleaning up, and Elijah goes back to his room. I take a quick shower before I head to my own bedroom. It isn't much, but I've managed to make it cozy. Flipping back the covers, I lie on the bed and grab my book from the nightstand, trying to focus on the mafia boss and his friends trying to win over their damsel who's not really in distress in the story, but I can't. My mind is still constantly drifting back to Austin and Brooklyn.

This was another incredibly long day and yet, I'm lying here wide awake, staring at the ceiling, consumed by thoughts of the boys who left me behind. I thought they were gone from my life, my mind. But every time I close my eyes, I see those clear blues of theirs staring at me.

I don't let myself think about them... ever.

Because getting over them when they left was the hardest thing I've ever had to make myself do. And I've had to do some pretty hard things in my life, so that's really saying something.

I can't go through it again. Not any of it, so I just have to forget about them and carry on. It doesn't make a difference that the boys are coming back to town. What are the chances I'll run into them? And even if I do, they probably won't even recognize me now. *It's going to be fine. It doesn't matter...*

Now if only I could make myself truly believe that, that would be great. The greatest. But I can't because deep down inside, I want so much more than to be just *fine*.

CHAPTER
THREE

BROOKLYN

I take a pile of t-shirts out of my closet and toss them into the suitcase open on my bed. We're going home tomorrow and the thought is grating at me, making packing an aggravating activity rather than the mindless drone it's become in recent years.

As I'm turning back to the cupboard, I see Travis looking at me with that curious look on his face again and I groan. "What?"

His full lips curve into a smirk as he shakes his head at me. "I've seen you packing hundreds of times, but you're doing it pretty aggressively today. Did those shirts offend you? Hurt your feelings? Piss you off?"

"They're just fucking t-shirts. It's not like they're fragile. Besides, I've seen you packing just as many times and you don't fold for shit. Maybe I'm just taking a page out of your playbook."

He arches a blond eyebrow at me as he leans back on my bed. His hair is still messy from last night and those green eyes are laser-focused on mine. From the look in them, he's not buying what I'm selling, that brow still cocked as he hooks his arms behind his head.

Naked except for the black boxer-briefs fitted around his thick thighs and cut-as-a-statue hips, the guy is a fucking demigod. An annoying demigod right now, but a demigod nonetheless. He's ripped as hell, every muscle a sharp line of

definition as it travels down from his shoulders to his obliques and beyond.

There's so much ink on his body that there are only tiny patches of pale, smooth skin in between, and I swear, lying on my bed like that, he's the sexiest damn sight I've ever seen.

"Stop staring at me and answer the fucking question properly."

My gaze snaps back up to his and I scowl. "We work out together. Why don't I look like that?"

"You do." He rakes his gaze over my bare torso with slow, deliberate purpose and my pulse spikes, my cock coming back to life even though I was inside him, like, an hour ago. "Answer the fucking question, Brook."

"What question?" I narrow my eyes at him before I spin back to my closet, grabbing a few pairs of jeans and tossing those into the suitcase as well. "I've already told you why we haven't been home. We haven't had time and also, *this* is our home now. We don't give a fuck about Evelyn."

Absently waving one hand around in the air, I motion at my bedroom in the townhouse I share with my brother. "It'd be yours too if you decided to move in with us. You practically live here anyway."

"Yeah, but I like having my own place. Plus, this house isn't big enough for the three of us to live here together permanently."

I snort as I reach into my dresser and wrap my fingers around a few pairs of socks. "Why not? We're hardly ever here during the season anyway."

"The better question is why are you dodging *my* question? What's so bad about going home? Austin is being an asshole about it and you were fine at first, but the closer we're getting to actually leaving, the more you're starting to act like him. What's wrong with home?"

"Nothing's wrong with home." After adding the socks and a few pairs of underwear to my suitcase, I slam it shut and zip

it up. “We’ve been over this, Trav. Austin’s not being an asshole. He’s nervous, is all.”

“Nervous to go home when he wasn’t even nervous to face the best team in the league.” It’s not a question. It’s a fact. Trav’s eyes burn into mine as they narrow. “I’ve met your parents. They’re good people. Nice people. So it’s gotta be the place, right? Or do both of you really have your panties in a twist about that neighbor of yours? Amara?”

“Amaya and our panties are *not* in a twist.” I heave the suitcase off the mattress and drop it on the floor with a thud.

Austin would shit himself if he saw me doing something that might damage these precious hardwood floors he loves so much, but thankfully, he’s not here. He’s out shopping for gifts for our parents and our former coaches. *Fucking suck-up.*

I blow out a heavy breath and inhale deeply, mentally checking and realizing that my man-panties probably *are* in a twist. “Okay, so we’re worked up about it. You would be too if you were going home for the first time in nearly half a decade.”

“I don’t have a home, so I wouldn’t know.” Again, he states it as fact and my heart crumbles a little bit because it’s not only a fact, it’s also devastating that it’s so true. “Maybe that’s why I don’t understand, but I really don’t get why we’re even going if you’re both so pissed about it.”

“We’re not pissed.” I rake both my hands through my hair, linking my fingers around the nape of my neck and tugging before I groan. “We’re really not pissed about it, but we’ve both avoided going back because when we left, we were immature assholes who fucked up and we haven’t forgiven ourselves for it.”

“What did you do?” His gaze locks on mine as I crawl onto the mattress and collapse beside him. “Since you guys fly your parents out for the holidays and I know you haven’t been avoiding home because of them, I’m going to assume it’s got something to do with Amaya. That’s the only reason you’d have distracted me when I tried to get these answers from you after the game.”

As I lay back on my bed, resting my head on his bicep and turning into him, I nod. “It’s really not that big a deal. It’s just been awhile since either of us have even thought about her and now, that old guilt is coming back to haunt us.”

He pushes his strong, inked fingers into my hair and turns his head to look at me. It puts his nose only about two inches from mine, and part of me wants to bite it. *Inject some fucking fun back into this morning.*

But the heaviness in his eyes stops me. With Trav’s history, he takes stuff like *home* and *family* pretty damn seriously, which is why he isn’t letting this go. Very few people—in fact, a grand total of two people, Austin and I—know about his past and even then, we don’t know everything.

I understand where he’s coming from, but I really wish he’d stop making this sound bigger than it is. As I look into those deep, bottle green eyes that used to annoy me so much, I bring my forehead forward to touch his before I roll onto my back.

“When Austin and I left Minnesota, we’d never been anywhere else. Not for anything except hockey, anyway, so when we finally got out, we wanted to see what else the world had to offer outside of hotel rooms and ice rinks, and we had the money to do it.”

“That’s why you haven’t been home?”

I shrug. “The off-seasons are short. There wasn’t time to travel, explore, and go back home, and we’d seen everything there was to see there. We wanted to see some new things and we could suddenly afford it.”

Travis stares at me for a beat before his lips curve into a somewhat relieved smile. “Fuck, that’s good news. For a second there, I thought we were going to be walking into angry ex-girlfriend drama.”

“Nah. She was never our girlfriend.” I look up at the exposed wooden beams that run along the width of my high ceilings. “Just our neighbor who became our friend. There won’t be any drama. Amaya isn’t like that anyway. She’s a big

old fan of sweeping shit under the rug, putting on her big girl panties, and then lining up the corners of the rug so well, you'd never even guess there was anything under it."

He chuckles as he moves his arm out from under my head and slides his hand under the pillow my head is on now. He rolls onto his side, facing me and looking so much more excited than I realized he was about this. "What about the rest of Evelyn, Minnesota? Are they pissed at you too?"

I turn my head to gawk comically at him. "Are you kidding? They're hockey mad. They love us. In fact, I'm going to warn you right now that when they recognize you, you better be ready to run. It's going to be chaos."

"We thrive on chaos," he says lazily. "Tell me more about your parents. I've never spent much time with them when they've been here. We're not staying with them, right?"

"Nooooo." I shake my head and laugh. "Don't get me wrong. I love them, but living with them again just isn't going to work. For starters, they wouldn't let us share a bed."

"They don't know about us?"

I snort. "We're not married, asshole. You know how mother feels about unmarried people sharing beds."

"Oh." He pauses for a minute before he nods. "It's like that, huh?"

"It's like that." I stare up at the beams some more, wondering if we really even know what we got into when we accepted the high school's invitation. Talking about all of this now is making me seriously doubt it. "The parentals have been married thirty years and to them, you don't share a bed if there isn't a ring on a very specific finger."

With one exception. They used to know that Amaya snuck into our room at night and slept in our beds with us, but they let it go when it was her.

Travis must sense the shift in my mood because he sighs. "What is it? Why did you just tense up all over again?"

"Jesus. Are you a Jedi?"

“No, but I have been dating you for the past six months. That’s the next best thing. Besides, I’ve known you for years. It’s weird that neither of you have mentioned this girl to me before when she has this kind of effect on you. Are you going to make me drag it out of you again?”

“Nah, but you’re right. I was just thinking about Amaya again. She used to sleep in our beds and our parents knew, but even when we were teenagers, they never gave us a lecture about it. Or they didn’t lecture *me*, but I’m not sure if Austin ever got *the talk*.”

One of his blond eyebrows hooks up. “So I’m not allowed to sleep in your bed, but she was?”

“What, are you jealous?” I tease.

He reaches up and punches my shoulder, but not so hard that it hurts. “Watch it, Brook. I may love you, but even that only goes so far.”

“Aww, here I thought our love was unconditional.” I let out a dramatic sigh, rolling away to dodge it when I see his fist coming up again.

Travis props himself up on his elbow as I land on my feet next to the bed. “Where are you going?”

“Out of arms’ reach,” I say playfully, striding over to my dresser and resting my butt on its edge, painfully aware that he’s the only person other than my brother who ever sees this side of me these days.

To the world, I’m a dark, broody motherfucker with a temper for days, but with him and Austin, I can be myself. Used to be same with Amaya, but—

Fuck. Why is she suddenly popping into my head every other minute again? It’s been years. I’m over this.

Travis laughs. “For the record, I wasn’t jealous. I *am* curious, though. That girl is still under your skin, isn’t she?”

“She’s not under my skin.” I scowl at him for a minute as irritation rolls through me. “She was just...we were close. We went through a lot together.” I exhale deeply, but I don’t make

him ask before I explain. “Her dad used to drink too much and he was a mean drunk.” I push my hands through my hair, dragging them back slowly as if the movement can erase all the memories tumbling back into my head. “When her mom got sick, he tried to drown himself in cheap booze instead of facing their reality.”

My fingers don’t erase the memories. If anything, they’re coming in faster now, rolling over me in a wave of nostalgia. The soft creak of our window at night when she pushed it open echoes in my ears and for just a minute, I feel the heat of her as she climbed into my bed—those nights I got lucky enough that she chose mine to get into, anyway.

I blink away those mental images of another life and find Travis still focused only on me. “Austin and I kind of stepped up when shit went real bad. Took care of the caretaker, you know? We helped her out and when she snuck over to our place at night once her mom and her little brother were asleep, we scooted up and gave her a safe place to get some rest.”

Sadness flickers to life behind his eyes, and I know I just touched a nerve, even if he’d never call me out on it. “Shit,” I say, my voice more hushed now. “I’m sorry. We don’t have to talk about any of this.”

“I want to know,” Travis says as he sits up, all ripped and fucking beautiful as he cants his head and stares right into my eyes. “She was important to you and you’re about to see her again, which means I don’t even just want to know. I *need* to know.”

I shake my head at him. “There’s not much more to tell, man. She was our best friend. We did our best to protect her and look after her, and then we got drafted and we left. End of story.”

“That’s not the end of the story, though.” He looks at me like he can see the inside of my soul, his eyes are that intent. “You were in love with her.”

My heart trips over itself, remembered pain slicing through my chest. “So was Austin.” Deflecting from the depths of emotion I’m feeling right now, I pretend to do a drumroll and

pump my eyebrows at him. “How’s that for irony? Both of us could have had just about any girl we wanted in that town and we fell for the same fucking one.”

He frowns. “So? What’s the problem with that? Last I heard, you guys used to like sharing girls.” *Well, he’d know since he’s even done it with us.* “There’s nothing wrong with it.”

“The problem was that we didn’t *know* we liked sharing back then.” I shrug as I grip the side of the dresser. “When you’re a teenager and you find out your brother wants your girl, it makes for a pretty fucking awkward situation.”

“I guess I can see it being a little weird. Who’d she like? My money is on Austin.”

I flip him off. “Gee, thanks, boyfriend.”

“You’re welcome.” He grins at me. “Let me guess: She chose Austin, he fucked it up, and that’s why neither of you have spoken to her since?”

“Uh, no. Amaya never dated. Not anyone and sure as hell not one of us. There was a time I thought she liked girls, actually. She was just that uninterested.”

“So? You like both. I like both. Are you seriously telling me that you didn’t even talk to her about it?”

I cringe. “Uh, no. I actually got my answer before I had to try talking to her about it. It turns out she *was* into boys. It just wasn’t me.” I pause for a long, awkward minute. “It was Austin.”

Travis grunts, knowing that probably would’ve caused an issue for me. “But you just said she wasn’t with him? He fucked it up somehow?”

“Before they ever got together.” I roll my head back and close my eyes. “I tried telling him that she wanted him, but he never believed me. Instead, he said I was crazy and tried to let every cheerleader and puck bunny suck his broken heart out through his dick.”

Travis's eyes grow big before he laughs. "Considering who we're talking about, that sounds about right. So what happens now? The boys are going back to town, one of them with a boyfriend in tow. If you've got some stuff to work out, I can—"

"Nothing to work out." I push away from the dresser, my eyes on his as I stalk back to the bed. "Thanks, but I wouldn't do that to you and she probably wouldn't want to when she finds out about us."

"Well, her loss is my gain." Those greens burn into mine as he watches my approach with heat flaring back into those expressive eyes. "If you had started dating her back then, you might still have been with her and you probably wouldn't have let yourself even look at me."

As my knees hit the mattress, I scoff. "There is no universe in which I would've been able *not* to look at you."

It's true, but I also happen to know that Travis needs that validation from me right now. Although he hasn't said anything that would make it obvious, I see the doubt shining in his eyes. After everything he's been through and now that he's about to face my past with me, I have to make sure he knows that I'm not about to cut and run.

As I push him back on the bed, he grabs my face and crushes his mouth to mine, his kisses hard and demanding, powerful and confident. Travis kisses like no one else in the whole damn world, and I've kissed enough people to feel pretty good about my odds of being right on that one.

With him, I never have to slow down. I give as good as I get, revving him up and never having to back off. What he wants is for me to give into the physical greed that used to live only in my mind when I was with other people.

In fact, he doesn't even just *want* me to give into it. He *demand*s that I do and as I give into that instinctual need, I'm already hard as hell and I'm really fucking relieved that our flight is tomorrow.

CHAPTER
FOUR

AMAYA

The rumble of my car's engine sounds more like a growl than a purr, and I silently plead with it not to give up on me now. I can't afford a breakdown, not with Elijah's hockey camp looming at the end of the summer. I'm already burning the candle at both ends, waitressing late into the night to scrape together the extra cash. The last thing I need is a hefty car repair bill.

As I navigate through the familiar neighborhood, my gaze inevitably falls upon the high school. My stomach tightens at the sight of the extravagant display of fanfare that surrounds it. Banners proclaiming "*Our boys are back in town*" flutter in the breeze, and an array of balloon arches in the school colors line the entrance. Gigantic photographs of the twins, their high school team pictures juxtaposed with their current ones, adorn the school walls.

Unbidden, my mind drifts back to the days when we were all so much younger. When Austin used to dream about the future and Brooklyn was so certain it would be exactly like the lives they're living now. Gazing at their pictures, I'm struck by a wave of nostalgia that crashes over me, drowning me in a whirlpool of emotions. It's not just nostalgia; it's a visceral reminder of the stark contrast between their lives and mine. I struggle to contain my green-eyed monster as I take in the extravagant display of their success.

The sight before me serves as both a reminder and a warning: no matter how hard you work, some things may never be within your reach. It's times like these that make me

wonder if I will ever be able to provide Elijah with everything he needs to succeed in life.

I let out a deep sigh, and try to stay focused on the road.

“I can’t believe I used to sleep in their beds,” I mutter to myself, my voice tinged with a bitter mix of longing and resentment. The memories of those days, once comforting, now serve as painful reminders of the chasm that separates their world from mine.

Shaking my head to break free from the reverie, I remind myself that those days are long gone. They’re different people now—wealthy, famous, and successful. I’m just a distant memory from their past, a shadow left behind in their meteoric rise to the top.

I’m not even sure they would remember me if they ever saw me again.

The memory of one particular night comes flooding back—a night when I desperately sought refuge from my tumultuous family life. A night etched into my soul. My mom had passed away, leaving my dad shattered. He sought solace at the bottom of a bottle and as he spiraled into alcoholism, our home became a battleground. That night, the tension reached a breaking point. Shouting matches and slammed doors had become routine, but this time, my dad’s rage escalated beyond words.

Elijah was still young then, only in the first grade, and I knew my dad would never harm him. After tucking my brother into bed and kissing his forehead, I also knew I couldn’t stay in that house any longer. Desperation fueled my decision as I slipped out of our small, broken-down home and crept across the moonlit yard to the twins’ house.

I snuck into their house through Austin and Brooklyn’s bedroom window. It made an eerie screeching noise as it swung open against the frame. I slipped inside and tiptoed across the rug-covered floor to Austin’s bed.

My breath caught in my throat when Austin’s inviting eyes met mine, even groggy with sleep as they were. He beckoned

me to join him with just a movement of his hand, and I eagerly complied.

His arms were strong and comforting, like a blanket of warmth that enveloped me and held me close. His embrace was like a refuge from the troubles in my life, providing a safe haven of tranquility and peace.

He pulled me close to him, creating a cocoon of safety that flooded my body with serenity. The scent of his skin, a subtle mix of cologne and soap, made me feel even more at peace. The sweet smell of fabric softener contributed to the sense that I was finally safe. For a moment, I felt as if none of the worries about my mom or the violence of my drunk dad could touch me before I gradually drifted off into a deep sleep for the first time in so long.

That night, it was Austin who held me together as my world fell apart.

I shake my head to snap out of the reverie. Now isn't the time to get lost in memories. Besides, they're different people now and so am I.

The sun beats down on the asphalt as I pull into the hotel's parking lot, the brightness outside so very striking compared to the heavy darkness that has settled within me. My aging car reluctantly shudders to a halt, its mechanical protest against another day's journey evident.

As I step out of the car, the scent of freshly mowed grass hangs in the air, and the distant sounds of laughter drift from a group of kids playing in a nearby park. It's a reminder of the simplicity I used to crave, the life we once had before everything unraveled.

I'm not usually this hopeless. I'm not always waxing poetic about my past or drowning in memories. Usually, I'm a pretty pragmatic person. I do what I have to do and I don't complain. This is simply the cards I was dealt and I've genuinely made peace with it.

But the thought that they'll be here soon has tossed me into a downward spiral. A dark emotional frame of mind I haven't

been in for the longest time, and it's not even just about them. It's about all those things they used to represent for me.

Friends that were like family. Safety. Fun. Hope. A time when things were easy. And then hard. And then horrible. But through it all, I had them. They were my stability.

And this? Them coming back to town? It's reminding me that I lost all those things. That I'll never get them back. I suppose a shrink will say that it's been triggering for me, and I wouldn't disagree.

Right now, since the first moment I found out they'd be coming back, I've been triggered and I don't think it's going to get better until they're gone. My only saving grace is that I might not see them. I might not have to come face-to-face with a past I'd really just rather forget.

My gaze falls upon the grand facade of the hotel, its large, clean windows and well-maintained stone cladding. It's a luxurious haven for those who can afford it. It's weird to think that a place like this exists in the same town as the humble home I share with Elijah, a house that still bears the scars of our painful past. There aren't many in this town that can afford to live here, but there are always people passing through. People who come from places where money isn't always tight and luxury is a way of life.

Since those people essentially pay my bills though, I'm glad the hotel is here. I'm glad it's still surviving even when the town itself is mostly rundown and shabby.

Pushing open the glass doors, I step into the hotel's elegant lobby. Polished wooden floors exude a warm, inviting ambiance, reflecting the soft, ambient light and giving the space a cozy yet upscale feel. Grand chandeliers overhead cast a gentle glow, adding a touch of sophistication to the surroundings, the scents of sandalwood and vanilla hanging in the air. A buzz of excitement fills the air, mingling with the soft murmur of conversations. It's as if the entire hotel is holding its breath, waiting for something extraordinary.

Unable to contain my curiosity any longer, I approach the front desk, where the receptionist greets me with an eager

smile.

“Good morning, Amaya,” she chirps, her tone filled with anticipation. “Did you hear the news?”

“No, I haven’t. What’s going on?”

The receptionist leans in closer, as if she’s about to share a secret. “Guess who’s staying with us,” she says, her eyes twinkling with excitement. “The twins—those hockey superstars, Austin and Brooklyn Ryker. They’re from Evelyn, you know? They just checked in this morning.”

My heart plummets, the realization sinking in like an anchor pulling me down. My breath catches in my throat and a rush of emotions threatens to overwhelm me.

It’s been years since I last saw them in real life, and I’m far from prepared to see them now or ever again. The thought of cleaning up after them only adds to my despair.

My voice trembles as I manage to stammer, “The twins? They’re here?” The words feel foreign on my lips, a surreal twist of fate that I never expected.

The receptionist nods enthusiastically. “Yes! It’s so exciting. They’re in town for an event, and they chose *our* hotel. Can you believe it?”

As the weight of the news settles upon me, I find myself torn between conflicting emotions—fear, nostalgia, and a lingering sense of longing. The twins, my childhood friends turned distant memories, are here, and I’m about to be plunged into a world I thought I’d left behind forever.

CHAPTER
FIVE

TRAVIS

Driving into Evelyn, Minnesota feels a little like we've gone back in time. We're still on the outskirts, but damn. This place looks like it could've been used as the set of a sixties, small town America romance movie.

The houses we've seen so far are picturesque, with literal white picket fences and swing sets in the front yards. Narrow, tree-lined streets and little signs everywhere saying to watch out for the kids.

It's weird. I can't imagine growing up here.

Me? I'm from Detroit. Inner-city. Where they had lakes and forests, I had the concrete jungle. I only moved to Denver when I got traded to the Devils three years ago and even that was a culture shock.

I've never spent much time in small towns, and this one is about as small as they come. There's even a sign that says "Welcome to Evelyn. Population: 3,300."

That's fucking tiny. Three thousand people? *How do you hide your secrets in a place like this?*

I lean back against the seat of our rental, grabbing the handle above my head when Austin suddenly jerks at the steering wheel. "The fuck, man?"

He grunts, both hands on the wheel as he scowls at the road ahead of him. "Fucking potholes. Someone should fix that."

Twisting in my seat, I see the small space where the blacktop has given way to dirt, but it's really not that bad. If he thinks it is, he really doesn't want to see the neighborhoods I grew up in.

"Relax," I tell him, my head shaking as I face forward again. "You're both too damn tense today. Seriously, what gives?"

As far as I know from everything they've both told me, they're from a solid, lower-middle class home, their parents are excited about their visit, and the closer we get to the town, the more I realize that the other 3298 people who live here are pretty fucking excited too.

Someone painted the words *Welcome home, Rykers* on the faded yellow water tower that guards the edge of the town. There are Devils and Evelyn High flags stuck into the ground and every business seems to have their pictures or their names stuck up in the windows.

"You're getting a real hometown heroes' welcome." I glance at Austin. "You should be living for this, bro. It's got to be a teenage dream come true to come back to this kind of fanfare."

He grunts again, but Brooklyn rolls his eyes and shifts in the passenger seat to face me. Coming back here is hard for him. I can see it in the tightness around the corners of his eyes and the worry in his usually clear blues, and I reach out to rub his shoulder.

Not a lot of stuff gets to him like this. Not much bothers Austin either, to be honest. But my best friend and my boyfriend are both on edge, which puts me on edge too. And it makes me curious as hell about why they're reacting like this.

Brooklyn gave me the basics yesterday, but he tried to play it off as nothing. The thing is, in my experience, a person's past is rarely nothing. It's always something. It just depends on what that something is.

"If he wasn't so scared of Amaya, he'd have been hard right now because of all this," Brook jokes, but it falls flat.

He's too worried, but Austin takes the bait anyway. "I'm not scared of her."

Brooklyn's pitch black eyebrows hike up. "You should be. She's the only girl who's ever been able to put you on your ass."

He scoffs. "We were helping her learn self-defense. I had to let her put me on my ass."

"Uh." I widen my eyes as I sit forward. "No? That's definitely not the point of teaching self-defense. You think any attacker is going to just let her win?"

"I wasn't *letting* her win," he says irritably. "I was showing her how to take someone down."

Brooklyn laughs. "More like you went down so she'd get on top of you."

"Oh, fuck off." Austin shoves a hand through his hair before he drops it back down on the steering wheel. "I'm not scared of her, okay? I'm just sure that she hates my ass now and she has every right to. Now that we're here, we're going to want to see her and that's going to open a can of worms I don't want to have to face."

"Like how much we probably hurt her." Brooklyn's eyes shutter closed as he says it, groaning and leaning back in his chair.

I flick my gaze between the two of them. It's not often that my boys are so completely on the same page about something. They have dissenting opinions about pretty much everything. Whether pineapple belongs on pizza. Sneaker types. Beach or mountains. *What exactly did this Amaya girl do to them?*

Austin's the golden boy to Brooklyn's dark horse. The darling of the press and the hard-working, dedicated team Captain.

Brook? I love the guy, but he's on the team because he's got god given talent and he knows it. So does everyone else. He's more likely to ignore the press pointblank than to speak to them and he's been painted as the bad boy of the NHL because of it.

He's got a good heart, though. He just doesn't like people to know about it. As he sighs and blinks his eyes open, I give him a pointed look.

I'm worried about these guys. They don't behave like this, and I want to know for my sake what I'm walking into. This is the third time I'm going to ask for the full story and this time, I'm not stopping until I get it. Even if it means pushing them further than they're comfortable with. "Okay, I'm gonna need to hear everything now. One of you better come clean about her. You hurt her?"

"Not on purpose," Austin says stubbornly. "We just kind of lost touch, is all."

I stare at him for a long beat. This is the guy who was relentless about becoming my friend when I first got traded. He's one of those Captains who says words like *teamwork* and *cohesiveness* with the same kind of reverence some people get when they're talking about deities. He truly believes in it, and I honestly don't give a shit.

I play because I love it, but also because the money puts a roof over my head and food on my table. With no other marketable skills, it was the ice or the streets for me. I didn't move to the Devils to make friends. I moved because they made me a better offer than the one I had with the Demons at the time.

Austin wouldn't quit, though. He broke through my defenses with that same tenacity and bull-headed determination he has on the ice, and look at us now. He's the closest friend I've ever had—and for the first time ever, he's lying to me.

My eyes narrow. "You just kind of lost touch, huh?"

He blows out a heavy breath, dropping his head forward so his black hair flops over his forehead but his eyes are still on the road. "We got busy, Trav." I roll my eyes because it sounds like bullshit to me, but he keeps going, "We didn't have time to call her every day and to keep texting selfies and shit. We had lives to live and careers to build, and she was still here, living the nightmare we couldn't save her from."

“What he means to say is that we *left* her here, in that nightmare,” Brooklyn adds mildly. “Then we forgot about her, which is why we’re not exactly looking forward to the reunion.”

“*If* there’s a reunion.” Austin raises his chin again and sucks in a deep breath. “We’re here for three days. Let’s accept there’s a decent chance we won’t run into her.”

Brooklyn snorts. “Mom says she still lives across the street. We’re going to see her.”

“We’re staying at the hotel, though. Not at home. We won’t necessarily see her.”

As they go back and forth, both making good points that mean absolutely *nothing*, I feel a little bad for this Amara. No, *Amaya*.

I’ve never met the girl, but I can relate to her. She had a shitty upbringing, but at least she had the twins across the street to help her out. There were no twins across the street from the foster homes I grew up in, but I get the shitty upbringing part. Hell, I even share the alcoholic paternal problem with her.

Yesterday, when Brooklyn accused me of being jealous, I didn’t really give him an answer but maybe I was. A little. Probably still am, but Brooklyn and I...we understand each other. We know each other’s boundaries and we respect them.

“Why didn’t you take her with you?” I ask when there’s a pause in their conversation. “If her life was so shit, I’m sure she’d have packed up and left if you asked her. Clearly, both of you cared about this chick, so why not bring her to Denver?”

“Eli,” Brooklyn says with a heavy sigh. “Her little brother. He was about twelve when we left. Too young to look after himself. No way she’d have left him behind.”

Once again, I feel a pang of sympathy deep inside my damaged soul. *Yeah, I feel you, Amaya.*

“Shit. That’s rough.” I reach forward and squeeze Austin’s shoulder before I move my hand to Brooklyn’s and let it linger

there. “So that’s it then? You grew up with this girl, got close to her, fell in love with her, and then got drafted and left town?”

“That’s about it.” Austin groans when we drive into the main part of town and as soon as I turn my focus to the square coming up ahead, I realize why.

There’s a huge barbeque going on with the Devils’ colors everywhere, combined with the blue and gold of their local high school. Massive banners with their names on them have been strung up in the trees and paper bunting with their faces printed on it hangs from the tents they’ve put up for shade.

“Wow. This town really is hockey mad,” I say as Austin slows to allow traffic and people to pass in front of our car as we make our way around the square. The windows of our rental are tinted dark enough that I doubt anyone will know for a fact who’s inside, but we’re drawing a lot of curious gazes our way. “We gonna stop and say hi?”

“No.” He snorts. “We need to get to our hotel and hope the press is waiting for us to show up here instead of there.”

“Aww, you don’t feel like talking to your buddies today?” Brooklyn teases his brother, his go-to way of coping with his nerves, and Austin’s hand shoots out to smack him behind his head.

He winces, but laughs quietly as he turns to take in the festivities from behind the safety of the tinted windows. I do the same.

These people are enthusiastic as fuck. At this rate, the town is going to declare today as a local holiday just because it’s the day their boys came home.

I don’t mention it, though. I’m more interested in the town itself than the people anyway. As we keep crawling down the streets, I realize that the picturesque facade may have been just that: a facade.

The truth is that the place is a bit rundown. Weeds growing on the sidewalks. Holes in the streets. Paint chipping off buildings and gutters sagging.

It's sad actually. I can see the kind of place this used to be, but obviously, there's just not enough money to get it back to that Midwestern ideal.

My attention is grabbed from the state of the town when Brooklyn curses loudly. I blink hard and refocus on our reality, which is an entire street lined with fans, reporters, news vans, and even cops trying to keep them all under control.

The large building at the end of the street appears to be our hotel. Austin wouldn't have turned this way if it wasn't. We're in a dead-end that stops at the front doors of a hotel that's more impressive from the outside than I'd have thought for a town like this. The exterior is a seamless blend of contemporary design and comfort. Two colossal columns, adorned with ornate details flank the entrance, offering a sense of grandeur. Massive windows. Stone. Above the entrance, where the name of the hotel should be, there's a draped banner with words in bold letters: "The Hat Trick."

My jaw drops.

"The Hat Trick?"

Brooklyn chuckles even as he scowls at the crowds lining the street. "Yep. Told you to be ready to run."

Austin stops when a patrolman motions for him to pull over and when he cracks his window, the town seems to realize that we've arrived. Deafening cheers and shouts of their names ring out and I sag back in my chair.

Shit. Here we go.

CHAPTER
SIX

AMAYA

It feels like the hotel has entered the Twilight Zone or something. The lobby is bustling with activity as people dart around, their movements frantic as they hurry this way and that. It's a scene of organized chaos, with hotel staff in starched uniforms scurrying to ensure that every detail is just right.

While they work, there's a low chorus of hushed whispers and knowing glances being exchanged. Gossip swirls in the air like an uninvited guest as they exchange tidbits of information about the Rykers' impending arrival. Everyone seems to have a story or a rumor to share, from "Brooklyn only drinks Diet Coke," to, "I heard they're landing a helicopter on the roof with a whole cadre of models!"

As I weave through the commotion, I can't help but roll my eyes at them. The way they're acting, you'd swear Brad Pitt had just arrived at our hotel. I might shake my head at their behavior but even I feel a thrill of anticipation. Deep down inside, despite my best efforts to look unimpressed, I'm just as starstruck as they are. To this tight-knit community, these guys are a much bigger deal than Brad or any actor ever will be.

As I step closer to the door, my heart lodges itself firmly in my throat. I can feel their presence before I lay eyes on them. They're here. Austin and Brooklyn have arrived, and the buzz of excitement among the staff intensifies. This is more than just a celebrity sighting; it's a homecoming for the *heroes* of our community. I'm probably the only person around here

who, while starstruck and excited, resents them a little bit for how they left.

The glass doors swing open, and my eyes fixate on the black car pulling up to the entrance. My heart is lodged in my throat as they step out of it, one by one.

Austin's the first to emerge, and my gaze locks onto him as he steps out from behind the car door. He's a striking figure. His sharp jawline and well-defined cheekbones give him a chiseled appearance that makes heads turn. Dark, tousled hair frames his face, adding an air of casual charm to his rugged good looks. As I watch him, a familiar, almost boyish twinkle in his blue eyes tugs at the corners of my memory, reminding me of the teenager I once knew.

He's dressed in jeans that fit him like a second skin, emphasizing his lean physique and athletic build. A comfortable, well-worn, plain black hoodie completes his attire, giving him an approachable, down-to-earth vibe. Despite the casual clothing, he still manages to exude an aura of confidence and charisma.

He flashes his charming, dimpled smile, and his eyes sparkle as he shakes hands with the hotel manager. It's clear that this is a well-practiced routine for him, one that has likely played out countless times before. But beneath the practiced veneer, I notice a subtle flicker of interest in those eyes as he discreetly checks out some of my female co-workers, a reminder that he's a man with a reputation, both on and off the ice.

Some things haven't changed.

Then again, he's known as the league's playboy, with a never-ending trail of pictures surfacing with yet another, skinny, beautiful woman on his arm.

Not that I keep track of him...

Still, a part of me wonders if any of those women know how big his heart is—or if they only care about the size of his... well, you know.

It's so freaking weird seeing that same face I used to see every day, but all grown up now and in person, his features so much harder and more matured. His face now belonging to a man instead of a boy.

Brooklyn follows, his black hair cascading in loose, rebellious curls. He's a stark contrast to his brother in both appearance and demeanor. There's an unmistakable air of nonchalance about him and a sarcastic smirk plays on his lips as he greets the hotel staff with a single raised fist.

His features are sharp, like Austin's, but with a touch of aloofness that sets them apart. His light, expressive eyes hint at a hidden depth, and a perpetual five o'clock shadow adds an edge to his rugged good looks. Brooklyn's attire is a reflection of his relaxed attitude, opting for a well-worn leather jacket over a plain T-shirt and faded jeans, embodying a rebellious charm that's impossible to ignore.

As he steps out of the car, it becomes clear that Brooklyn is the embodiment of effortless cool, an enigmatic figure who exudes an air of mystery with every step he takes.

Then, true to his more introverted nature, he doesn't engage with the staff like Austin is doing. Instead, he waits for someone else to climb out of the car, and the two of them cut a path through the staff and onlookers, leaving their bags in the car for someone else to deal with.

Typical superstars.

As I get a better look at the third man, a flare of recognition shoots through me. I know him too. Not personally, but from the team. I've seen him in their games and he's all over social media. This is Travis Oakley. His presence is understated compared to Austin and Brooklyn, but there's a quiet confidence about him that's hard to miss.

Travis's rugged handsomeness is undeniable. Longish blond hair with a jawline that is strong and defined, framed by a neatly trimmed beard that adds a touch of masculinity to his features. His physique is lean yet athletic, a testament to a life of discipline and dedication. His piercing green eyes hold a

hint of mystery, their intensity suggesting depths of thought and emotion hidden beneath the surface.

He's dressed in a well-fitted leather jacket that complements his rugged appearance, but there's a simplicity to his attire, reflecting a desire to remain inconspicuous. Unlike the twins, Travis seems to do his best not to be noticed. He doesn't give as many interviews, not even to snap at reporters in passing like Brooklyn, but there's something about him that demands attention in its own unique way.

I'm genuinely surprised to see him here. I didn't know he was tagging along with his friends. From what I've read about them, I know he's their best friend and part of me can't help feeling a twinge of bitterness about it. It's like he replaced me in their lives.

Throughout all of this, I hang back and stay out of sight, expertly blending into the backdrop of the bustling hotel lobby. The orchestrated chaos around me seems to heighten, the frenetic energy of the staff and the eager whispers of guests creating a maelstrom of anticipation.

As Brooklyn and Travis take their first steps into the lobby, a sudden shock of electricity rips through the air. They move with an easy grace as they make their way to the reception desk. I keep my eyes trained on their backs, my heart pounding with a mixture of anticipation and trepidation.

Suddenly, I stumble on the bucket of my mop that I forgot was there, and let out an involuntary gasp, drawing the eyes of the other guests and staff nearby. My heart races as I regain my footing, but it's too late to escape notice. Travis, alerted by the commotion, unexpectedly looks back over his shoulder, his intelligent gaze locking onto mine as I instinctively dart behind a heavy curtain, my heart pounding in my chest.

Fuck, fuck, fuck... so much for expertly blending in.

With my back pressed against the cool wall, I close my eyes and take a deep breath through my nose, willing my racing heart to slow. The seconds drag by like hours as I try to calm my frayed nerves. After what feels like an agonizing age hidden behind the curtain, I finally dare to peek out, and there

he is—Travis. Just a few feet away as he follows Brooklyn into the hotel. His eyes, the color of a stormy greenish sea, bore into mine with an intensity that sends shivers down my spine.

Our eyes meet and in that instant, time itself seems to suspend, the world narrowing to the two of us amidst the surrounding chaos. I swallow hard, feeling an inexplicable connection, a spark that defies reason and explanation. Travis's furrowed brow betrays his puzzlement, and a hint of a smile tugs at the corner of his lips as he shakes his head ever so slightly. He must think I'm trying to hide from them, unaware of the tumultuous emotions that churn within me.

Eventually, Travis turns away, following a clueless Brooklyn who's gone to the reception desk. The relief washes over me in waves.

Thank God he didn't notice anything.

With trembling legs, I emerge from my hiding place and make my way to the other side of the lobby, attempting to regain my composure. I steal a glance out the window, where Austin is still pandering to the fans outside, posing for selfies and signing autographs. My heart flutters with a strange mix of emotions as I watch him scanning the gathered crowd.

Is he looking for someone?

A part of me desperately longs to believe that it might be me, but I know that's impossible. I try to tell myself that the feeling is foolish, but my stubborn heart refuses to listen.

He left me behind, and so did Brooklyn. They probably forgot all about me once they started meeting all those shiny, happy people who form part of their new lives.

With a sigh, I remind myself that there are other guests to attend to besides the players. It's time to stop lurking and get back to work. After all, someone needs to pay attention to our other guests too and it looks like that someone is going to have to be me.

CHAPTER
SEVEN

AUSTIN

When you're me, what you *want* to do and say and what you *have* to do and say are two completely different things. Take the cop who pulled us over, for example.

I get that he's just doing his job. He was probably told not to let any unknown, unmarked cars onto the street leading up to the hotel this afternoon. Everyone knew we were coming—hence the crowd—and it's sweet that they wanted to keep the road clear for us.

However, if I had my way, I'd ask him to just back off and let us pass. But I can't. Because he's looking at me like he's just seen the face of God and I'm pretty sure he pissed himself when I rolled down the window and he realized it was me.

“Austin.” He clears his throat, all flustered and grinning. “Mr. Ryker, sir. It's an honor. We're going to accompany you from here with the lights on, sir. Will you sign this?”

He shoves a little notebook and a pen through the crack in the window and I smile as I take it. If I could, I'd have gone straight to our parents' house, cracked open a beer with Dad and then helped Mom cook her roast chicken in the kitchen.

I've never had that, but it's my idea of a perfect homecoming these days, but nope. Brooklyn refused to stay with them and besides, we wanted to keep all this craziness off their lawn, so here we are. Home for the first time in years, and staying in a *hotel*.

When I was a kid, I thought this kind of homecoming would be awesome, but now that it's happening, I really would've preferred anything but. People never really talk about it enough, but the fame part of fame and fortune gets tiring and old real damn quick.

Unfortunately, this is the job.

And I'm good at it, which is why I'm one of the most popular players with the fans, press, and even the coaches.

Since that guarantees my future right now and Brooklyn's, I press the button to roll down the window further and amplify my smile as I send it to the row of people behind the cop. "Sure thing, Officer..."

"Jones," the man says quickly. "Officer Jones, but you can make it out to Bill."

"Of course." I nod and glance down, realizing that the book he passed me is filled with empty traffic fines. "As long as you don't give me one of these."

He laughs like it's the funniest thing he's ever heard while I scribble my signature at the top of the page. "Would you like Brooklyn and Travis Oakley to sign it too?"

My brother growls beside me, but I ignore him. The cop finally seems to realize I'm not alone in the car, and he gawks past me, practically squealing when he sees Brooklyn and when Travis leans forward and waves, he almost faints.

Swaying on his feet, he nods wildly and I pass the book over to Brooklyn, who takes the pen and scribbles his chicken scratch next to mine before he hands it to Travis. Neither of them say anything though—color me surprised—and it's up to me to pick up the slack.

"So Officer Jones, we hope the people out here are behaving themselves. They're not giving you any trouble, are they?"

"No, sir." He shakes his head back and forth as he grins. "We're all just excited to see you. I went to high school with you, sir. Four years behind you two."

“A fellow Panther. It’s always nice to come across one of those in the wild.” The book lands on my lap when Travis tosses it back to me, and I grin at Bill again as I hand it over. “There you go, Officer. Think you can get us to the hotel now? It’s been a long day.”

The man nods again, salutes me, and then turns and motions to his friends to join him on their waiting motorbikes. The engines roar to life and lights and sirens come on, and so starts our slow procession for all of one block.

It’s ridiculous, but hey. Even if I’m over it, it really is kinda cute that they went to all this trouble for us.

Brooklyn grumbles under his breath in the seat next to me and I sigh, cutting a quick glance his way. My window is wide open now and I’m waving absently at them, a smile on my face at all times.

“Would it kill you to just say hello? Just wave, guys. We knew this was coming. It’s why we kept them off Dad’s lawn and away from Mom’s flowerbeds. Just smile and wave.”

As I say it, I hit the buttons for both of their windows on the control panel on the inside of my door, and although Travis mumbles something about murder and neither of them smile, at least they both start waving. When I glance at them, I realize they’re also both suddenly wearing sunglasses.

Fucking assholes. “You know you’re not rockstars, right?”

“That was my back-up career,” Brooklyn jokes darkly and quietly, his facial expression stoic but his voice betraying how pissed off he is at me. “I coulda made it as a rockstar if I could sing.”

“Or play any instruments,” I add, not letting his mood get to me.

It’s always been this way. Me and Brooklyn. Honestly, I think the only people outside of myself that have ever really understood him are Travis and Amaya. He’s a really good guy—and it’s not just because he’s my twin—he really is good, but he’s never liked too much attention.

That was where the trouble started—way back when he was born as an identical twin who was also a pretty baby. Big green eyes, thick tufts of black hair...we were cute. People noticed. Brook used to fuss when old ladies in the checkout queue tried to cuddle him. I went willingly.

And that's kind of the way it's been ever since.

The first time my brother picked up a real hockey stick, we were four. Dad got them for us for Christmas.

But that day, we picked up the real thing and Brook took to the sport like a duck to water. For me, it didn't come as naturally, but it came eventually. With practice and patience, I got to be just as good as he was. Better—some days anyway.

In a town like ours though, being the pretty twins would've gotten us enough attention. Being the pretty twins who quickly got real good at the only sport that matters to these people? That made us local celebrities.

Even when we were teenagers, everyone knew we were going to go far. The pressure was not great. Amaya took the edge off, treated us like normal people and let us help her, but other than that, Brooklyn was pretty closed off with people pretty early on in life.

He still is closed off. Took him a year and a half to open up to even Trav. I'm pretty sure their relationship only happened 'cause I kept inviting Travis to our place. Brook never would've let him get close enough to fall for him otherwise.

'Course, I didn't know he was bi when I kept inviting him over.

Not that it would've bothered me, but at least I'd have been able to tell my brother, who after he figured it out, spent a month pissed at me because he thought I knew and was trying to set them up.

The road to hell really is paved with good intentions...

I sigh, blinking myself out of my thoughts when we pull up in front of the hotel. As soon as I open my door, cheers ring out and people start chanting our names, then there are the

shrill screams when the back door opens and Travis climbs out.

No one knew he was going to be coming here with us, but I doubt they're so surprised. According to some reports, he and I had been sewn together at the hip.

No one outside of our immediate family knows about him and Brook. They think Travis is always with us because of me, which is also kind of true.

Thing is, I don't think people would care. Not in this day and age, but it's not my business. They're not ready and that's their decision.

All I need to do is sign autographs and take pictures with babies. Thank God. At least that's easier than the decisions they've got to make.

And so, that's what I spend the next hour doing. I sign autographs for everyone and their mother—literally. I pose for pics with the babies and put the little kids on my neck. I engage in conversation—*respectful* conversation—about the Detroit Demons and how we're going to kick their asses next year, and then I *respectfully* field all the questions about why we don't play for our own state's team.

“The Devils asked first, I'm afraid.” I smile and keep doing it, even though it's the same line I've been saying for over four years. “Brooklyn and I would've loved being closer to home and all you great people, but our souls belong to the Devils now.”

My cheeks are hurting from all the smiling and I'm pretty sure my voice is going to be hoarse later, but I keep doing my thing. Brooklyn and Travis stomped inside with the luggage ages ago, so it's just me, swanning around out here and pretending to love it.

By the time I head upstairs to our adjoining *suites*—which in this hotel pretty much only means that we've got private bathrooms and some windows—Brooklyn and Travis have unlocked and opened all the doors between the three suites we

reserved, unpacked, and they're lying on the couch in Travis's room watching TV.

They've both got beers in their hands and judging by the empties on the coffee table with their feet, those aren't their first ones. "Watch yourselves. I don't want you unfit and with beer bellies by the time the pre-season starts. Anyone up for a run?"

Brooklyn scoffs. "No way in hell I'm going back out there right now, bro. Want one?"

Travis leans forward and pulls another out of the bucket on the floor that I didn't even see, and I shrug as I take it, dropping into the little armchair beside their couch. "You do know we have to go out there again in a couple hours anyway, right? Mom and Dad are still expecting us for dinner."

Brooklyn grins. "Yeah, but the fans have seen you now. That should tide them over for a bit. Just give them time to disperse and we can leave."

I sigh, arching a steep eyebrow at him. "They saw *me*, but I'm not the only one they came here to see."

Brooklyn scoffs, arching a brow at me like he's thinking 'It's always you', and I don't argue. I don't even ask.

Not because I think it's true, but because I know better than to get into it with him when I'm tired. And I am.

I'm fucking exhausted.

Thankfully, Brooklyn doesn't bring it up either. He turns back to the comedian they're watching and so does Travis. I don't get up, but I don't watch the comedian either. I'm too distracted and my gaze eventually settles on the windows.

As I'm looking out at the town, I wonder where Amaya is and what she's doing right now. I'm also wondering if she's going to smack me, kick me, or kiss me—unlikely, but you never know—when we inevitably run into each other.

Because despite what I said to the guys earlier, I know Amaya is here and as much as I might've liked to leave without ever seeing her again, that's just not an option.

Not now that she's so close I can almost taste her.

In my head, I snort at the thought. *Yeah, you wish, Ryker. It's not like you ever got to find out what she tastes like anyway.*

A long, heavy sigh escapes me as I push my hand through my hair, turning so my elbow is on the back of the armchair and I can rest my head on my arm as I keep staring at the window. *Because yep, welcome to fame and fortune, people. It's not all it's cracked up to be, right?*

CHAPTER
EIGHT

AMAYA

I step into the next hotel room on my schedule, my cleaning supply cart in tow. It's a routine task, or it should be since I've done this countless times, but today, I can't seem to focus. I try, I really do, but my mind keeps drifting to earlier, to how close I was to being spotted by either one of the twins.

I desperately try to push away any lingering thoughts of them. I can't afford to lose this job—it's my lifeline. It's not the first time I've needed to put on my big girl panties and just do what needs to be done.

The soft hum of the vacuum cleaner fills the room as I move through it methodically, trying to focus on the task at hand. But it's a futile effort; my mind is a whirlwind of memories and what-ifs.

What if they recognize me?

What if they don't?

What if they remember the girl from their past, the one who used to be a part of their lives?

It seems like a lifetime ago I was that girl, but it would be even worse if they just...don't remember me at all.

My stomach twists into knots as I contemplate what they will think if they find out that this is what I do for a living. A part of me feels ashamed that it's come down to this; another part feels proud. I didn't crumble or break. I faced my situation head on and I'm making the best of it.

I didn't have to take care of my brother; I *wanted* to. I'm determined to give him a future brighter than mine. No matter what I have to sacrifice, I'm willing to go the extra mile to ensure he'll have everything that he needs for a successful life.

So it's time for me to stop this pity-party and get back to work.

I do my complete routine and clean the entire room. As I start tidying up, I can hear the TV coming on in the room next door. Thank God it isn't on my list to clean this afternoon, so I won't disturb whoever's in there now. Also, thank God I'm almost done for the day. The realization kicks me into hyperdrive and I rush through the rest of the tidying, very much ready to get out of here, make my way to the rink, and pick up Elijah.

As I'm checking over the final details to make sure the room looks impeccable, the door opens to reveal a coworker. Cherry's face is lit up with a bright, joyful smile as she darts into the room, eyes wide with enthusiasm and a hint of mischief.

"You won't believe who's staying in the suite next door," she squeals, those eyes still wide as she jerks her head at the room the TV just came on in.

No.

It would be just my luck that they'd be right there. Just a thin wall away. *I should have checked it before I started doing my rounds.*

A jolt of nervous energy shoots through me, my heart suddenly racing when I realize just how close they are. Closer than they have been for years. Closer even than they were down in the lobby. My lungs instantly shrink two sizes at the realization and my breathing speeds up as a result.

I'm not sure if it's nerves, excitement, or dread, but *shit*. It's like I can *feel* their presence now that I'm aware of it. Like I can still hear their laughter from way back when echoing in my ears and smell their fresh shower gel when they emerged from the locker rooms after practice.

Aaaand now my lungs are three sizes smaller. That's great. Just great.

Cherry's bright smile dims, replaced by a puzzled frown as she takes in whatever is happening on my face right now. Her eyes narrow with confusion and I can practically see her trying to process my flustered state.

I can't afford to let her in on my inner turmoil though, not now. Cherry's not a friend, exactly, although I don't have many of those these days, but she's also not an enemy. She's nice enough. It's just that she's a talker and if I tell her what's bothering me, she'll keep me here for *hours*. And probably try to score an introduction.

A loud laugh echoes from the room next door, sending another wave of nerves through me. It's doing all sorts of crazy things to my stomach—things I shouldn't be feeling at all.

The laugh is followed by the low murmur of voices, but I can't make out what they're saying. My heart continues to race, and I'm sure it's so loud by now that Cherry can actually hear it.

I need to get out of here. As fast as I can. And I need to do it now. I can't keep standing here, eavesdropping but not quite hearing anything. Waiting but not being searched for. *Well, some might call it hiding, but I'm not about to get caught up in the semantics.*

"My shift is over," I stammer, my voice betraying my anxiety, "I need to get going or I'll be late to pick up Elijah."

Cherry's puzzled frown deepens, but she nods slowly, her confusion evident. She opens her mouth, perhaps about to ask questions, but I'm not about to stick around and explain.

I wipe my clammy hands on my uniform and clear my throat, mustering a forced smile. "Would you mind bringing my cleaning cart to the storage?" I ask, hoping to divert her attention away from me and my nerves.

She blinks, still perplexed, but nods her agreement. "Sure, Amaya. I'll take care of it."

Relief washes over me as I retreat hastily, leaving behind the suite, the laughter, and the memories that have stirred up a storm within me. I need to get out of this place before I do something I might regret. *Like go in there and confront them, which will definitely cost me my job.*

As I make my way down the dimly lit corridor, the sound of my footsteps echoes through the empty hallway. But the sound of prayers is louder as far as I'm concerned. *Please, for the love of everything that is holy, don't let either of those men come out of their room right now.*

Luck hasn't been on my side often though, so my heart races faster with each passing moment as I hope it will hold this time. A bead of sweat forms on my brow, a testament to the storm brewing inside me.

Standing in front of the stainless steel elevator doors, my finger jabs at the button with the down arrow on it over and over again. I know that won't make it come faster, but...*hell, it's worth a shot.*

There's a tightness wedging itself between my stomach and ribs, and it's growing with every second I'm forced to wait. When the doors finally open, I'm met with my own reflection in the mirror on the other side of the—mercifully empty—elevator car. It doesn't take me more than a split second to realize why Cherry was so confused. My face is flushed with anxiety, my eyes wide with uncertainty. I can feel the trepidation clawing at me from the inside out as I step into the mirrored chamber.

As the elevator descends, I feel like I'm plummeting into the depths of my own unease. The lobby approaches, and with it, the escape I so desperately need. The doors finally open, and I nearly bolt out of the hotel, my footsteps fast and frantic.

The warm breeze outside welcomes me like a long-lost friend, its gentle caress like a soothing embrace after all that. I reach into my purse for my keys and unlock the car door, slipping into the driver's seat without wasting any time. My fingers tremble as I insert the key into the ignition. The engine stutters and sputters, as it always does, but this time, after a

few of the usual sputters, it comes to life and I breathe out a massive sigh of relief.

In that moment, as the engine hums with newfound vitality, I'm grateful for this small victory amidst the chaos of the day. It's as if the car understands the urgency of my escape and is offering its support.

With a steadying breath, I settle into the seat, the engine's purr soothing my frayed nerves. I ease my foot down on the gas, taking the back way out so I don't get held up by the press and fans still lining the street. But there is no back way out of my own head and as I put the miles between myself and the hotel, memories and lingering questions are my silent companions. But for the moment, the likelihood of a chance encounter with them fades into the distance, a weight lifting from my shoulders when I realize I made a clean getaway.

Looks like just this one time, luck was on my side.

As I pull into the rink's parking lot, I crane my neck and look around, but I don't see Elijah anywhere. Annoyance simmers to the surface, burning away the memories and even the nerves from before.

He knows better than to keep me waiting. I pleaded with him just the other night, asking for a simple heads-up if he planned to disappear from here with his friends. My grip on the steering wheel tightens, my head bowing as I reach deep down into myself and search for even just a modicum of understanding.

He's barely more than a child, but a little consideration wouldn't hurt, would it? Blowing out a deep breath, I shake my head and reach for the door handle. Once again, I'm going to have to go in there. Which also means that once again, I'm going to have to pray that the engine turns over once it's off.

As I step out of the car, I glance around the lot again, just in case, searching for any sign of him, but there's no trace of Elijah *or* his friends.

Determined to find him, grab him by the damn ear, drag him home with me, and keep him there until I've made it clear that this is un-freaking-acceptable, I make my way inside the rink. The familiar scent of cold air and freshly zambonied ice envelops me, but it offers little comfort today.

Instead, I don't even stop to breathe it in this time. I just march toward the locker rooms, my impatience mounting with each step. *Maybe he's just running late*, I tell myself, trying to quell the rising anger. But when I push open the heavy door and step inside, the hollowness of the space hits me like a punch to the gut.

Elijah definitely isn't here, and neither are his friends. The locker room is empty, an eerie silence replacing the usual chatter and laughter.

My frustration builds like a tempest within me, and I can't help but clench my fists at my sides. This is just not what I needed today. Or any other day, but especially not today.

With a heavy sigh, I drop onto the bench, my phone's screen displaying the absence of any messages from Elijah. The frustration that's been simmering just below the surface begins to boil, threatening to blow.

"Why today, Eli? Why did it have to be today?" I mutter to myself, rubbing my temples in a futile attempt to ease the building tension.

My gaze drifts around the empty locker room, searching for any sign of my elusive brother. That's when I spot them—a pair of skates, abandoned haphazardly on the floor. They're even the right size. *If that's not a sign, I don't know what is.*

The sight of those skates triggers something within me, an impulse to release my pent-up emotions. Without a second thought, I snatch them up, and stride over to Eli's locker. Thankfully, the kid has ignored my warning to change his combination and the lock creaks open when I enter the last one I remember.

My heart thuds against my ribs as I slam open the door, desperately hoping that he also ignored my request to throw

out the change of clothes I used to keep here. As recently as last year, I made time to get out there myself as often as I could. Eli and I would practice whatever he was struggling with but now...

He's about to be a senior. That's changed the game for me, knowing that it's now or never. I had to pick up those extra shifts at the diner and honestly, I just haven't had it in me to hang around here too much. I'm grateful for the opportunity hockey is giving Eli, but it also means that I'm about to lose him, too. And the rink is central to that. Without it...

Heaving out a frustrated breath, I scan the messy interior of the locker, relief barreling into me when I see them, peeking out from under a pile of dirty socks, discarded notebooks, and all kinds of odds and ends: the clothes I left here when I still thought I'd be back the next day. After I dash into a cubicle to change, I put on the skates and lace them up, my fingers working deftly, and then I head out, stepping onto the ice's pristine surface only a few seconds later.

My heart pounds with a mixture of anger and determination as I pick up my pace, the skates gliding effortlessly underneath me. The rink stretches out ahead as I go, empty, vast, and inviting, the ice glistening under the harsh lights overhead.

With each stride, I feel the tension in my body begin to ebb away.

The sharp bite of the cold seeps through my clothes, but I hardly notice. I grab a puck, balance it on the blade of my stick, and let it fly. It soars through the air, striking the net with a satisfying thud.

I repeat the motion again and again, each shot a release of the frustration that's been building inside me. The rhythmic sound of the pucks hitting the net fills the empty rink, drowning out everything else.

For a moment, the world fades away, and I'm not just a worried sister. I'm a player on the ice, skillfully aiming for the goal, taking control of the chaos around me.

As I shoot puck after puck, the weight on my shoulders gets lighter and my mind starts clearing. If only for a little while, I find solace in the familiar rhythm of the game, letting it wash over me like a cleansing wave.

One memory, in particular, stands out, vivid and bittersweet.

I'm standing in almost the exact same spot I was then, give or take a few feet, but the difference is that then, I thought I had the world at my feet. All three of us did. Austin, Brooklyn, and I. All three of us dreaming dreams that were way too big to fit inside our small town.

Brooklyn and Austin took it upon themselves that day to teach me how to shoot a puck that day. Austin had been my instructor, his patience unwavering as he showed me the proper stance, the angle of the stick, and the precise moment to release the puck. He stood beside me, offering gentle guidance, his encouraging words spurring me on.

And there, in the background, was Brooklyn, his enthusiasm boundless. With every successful shot, he'd whoop with joy, his laughter echoing through the crisp, wintry air. His support, both genuine and infectious, fueled my determination to improve.

I remember the feeling of the puck against the blade of my stick, the satisfying sound it made as it sailed into the net, and the elation that coursed through me with every shot. Those moments on the ice were a testament to our friendship, a time when we were united by the simple joy of the game.

It was that day, right here, in the same place where I saw them grow up, that I knew they were destined for greatness. I knew that day that they were going to become legends.

And deep down in my heart, I also knew that day that I would eventually lose them. That I would always be stuck here in this little town, watching from a distance as they conquered the hockey world. And that's exactly what happened.

I still don't even know why it only hit me that day. It just... did. I remember it so well because it was such a huge,

heartbreaking moment for me. The first of many to come that involved them.

I sigh. I don't need those memories now. All I need is to blow off some steam, and then I need to find my brother.

CHAPTER
NINE

BROOKLYN

“Stop at the rink,” I repeat, but Austin ignores me again. “Come on, Aus. Don’t be a dick. Just stop at the goddamn rink for five minutes, would you?”

“We have to get to dinner.” He doesn’t even look at me. “What do you want to stop at the rink for anyway? We’ve only been off the ice for, like, five days.”

“He’s an addict,” Travis supplies unhelpfully from the backseat.

I roll my eyes at him. “I’m not an addict. I just want to show you where all the magic was born, man. Seriously, this is the rink that made us who we are today. It also happens to be my favorite part of town and I want to show it to you.”

“As far as I’m concerned, the only magic you’ve got is in the bedroom, Brook,” he jokes.

I flip him off, smirking as a comeback comes to mind, but Austin beats me to it with a loud groan. “Jesus. I don’t need to know what you two do in the bedroom.”

Travis scoffs back a laugh and sits forward so Austin can see the shit-eating grin on his face. “Maybe you don’t need to, but you know anyway. You’ve been in there with us enough that you should know. Unless you’ve taken too many pucks to the head recently and you’re suffering from memory loss?”

My brother glares at him. “At this point, I might just *pay* to take a few more pucks to the head so I can forget.”

“Liar.” Travis smirks at him. “Sharing with us is one of your favorite things to do.”

“It was until you said that,” he retorts, sighing as he glances at me. “Are you serious about the rink right now?”

“Yeah. Of course. It’s Reynold’s Rink, man. That place used to mean everything to us. Besides, it’s summer. He’s going to be locking up soon, so it’s not like we’ll have to stay there for hours. Let’s just drop in real quick.”

“I’d like to see it,” Travis says as he brings those deep green eyes to mine. “God knows, I’ve heard enough about the famous Reynold’s Rink from you guys over the years. Let’s go check it out before we head over to your parents’.”

Austin glances at both of us in the rearview, but then he makes the next left and I cheer. “To the rink we go.”

I kick my feet up on the dash and since it’s not his car, I see Austin’s jaw tighten, but he doesn’t say anything. For the first time we drove into town, I’m feeling a flutter of excitement about this visit.

The pomp and circumstance earlier wasn’t for me, but this? Getting to go back to our rink and seeing it after all this time? That’s going to be great. I can’t fucking wait.

Most of the best memories I have of growing up were made in that rink. It’s where I discovered what I was born to do. That shit’s special.

My knee starts bouncing and my heart thrums as we get closer. When the building finally comes into view, a dull ache builds in my chest at what has become of the place.

It’s always been in a sad state of repair. Mr. Reynold kept telling us that one day, he’d fix the place up as good as new, but it looks like that day hasn’t come just yet. It’s gone way beyond a sad state of repair now. In fact, it kinda looks like the roof might just cave in.

There are cracks in the outside walls and the red paint has faded so much that the whole thing looks to be a muddy brown. Austin sucks in a quiet breath, and I know that means he’s seen it too.

Travis makes a low humming sound at the back of his throat. “Man, I’m guessing it didn’t always look like that.”

“No.” My voice is so soft, it’s probably more of a whisper. “No, it really didn’t.”

“That’s fucking sad.” Austin ducks his head to get a better look at the place as he slows when we drive into the parking lot. “Why’d nobody tell us about this?”

“What did you want them to tell us?” I’m not trying to be snarky. I mean it. What could our parents possibly have told us? That the rink is falling apart? Sure, but that doesn’t mean anything would’ve changed.

As I drag in a deep breath and scrub my hands over my face, I spot a familiar car in the lot. It’s one of only two besides ours, and it’s a brown station wagon I’ve been in more times than I can count. The owner used to take pity on us after long, grueling, self-imposed practice sessions. He lived right down the block from our parents. “Look, Reynold’s still driving the same car.”

Austin’s gaze follows mine and his lips curve into a sad smile. “At least some things never change, am I right?”

“Yeah.” I reach for the door handle when he pulls into the spot in front of the other car in the lot. Not Mr. Reynold’s, but the car we don’t know.

It’s a rusted out hunk of junk, though. “Think that thing broke down here and Reynold’s just good enough to let it sit there until whoever it belongs to can afford to have it fixed?”

Austin glances at the car. “Yeah, probably. Wouldn’t be the first time. Remember that shitty ass van that used to live here? I wonder when that finally got towed away.”

I shrug, tugging at the handle and climbing out of the car. Travis is already out too, looking around curiously until his gaze settles on the beat-up car. I look at him for minute, not able to stop myself from staring at the tattoos on those hands I love so much, on his arms and neck are on display in the short-sleeved t-shirt he’s got on, a backward baseball cap tugged over his head hiding that mop of longish blonde hair.

If I didn't know any better, I'd say he's a surfer who got seriously lost, but the way he's looking at that car makes me wonder if I *could* know him better. I mean, I know there's a lot I don't know about him, but he's looking at it almost like he's assessing it, trying to develop x-ray vision to see what's going on under the hood.

I reach out to give him a soft smack on the bicep as Austin locks the car and heads to the rink. "Come on, let's go. We've only got a few minutes before it'll be closing."

He jerks his chin in a nod, but his gaze lingers on the car even as he follows me to the open, grimy glass doors leading inside. Immediately, that cool bite in the air makes me smile. I inhale deeply, closing my eyes as our childhood washes over me with the slightly chemical scent of artificial ice, gasoline, and musky feet.

Watered down, powdered hot chocolate. Tacos in a bag. Learning how to walk in skates on the warm, rubber coated floors. Man, those were good times.

I hear a soft, happy sounding sigh beside me and open my eyes to see even Travis is smiling, the corners of his lips tilted up and his expression soft. But the smile melts from my face when my gaze travels to the ice itself—and the lone figure on it.

I blink hard. Because there's *no way*. There's just no *fucking way*...

But it is.

That right there, the girl shooting a bucket of pucks into the net? That's Amaya Knox. There's no doubt about it, and by the way Austin has tensed on my other side, he's just noticed her too.

My heart leaps into my throat and I keep blinking. I'm pretty sure my eyelids are glitching, actually, but I'm not imagining things. There's only one woman I know in this town who spends her free time on the ice, and that's her.

More than that, though, I remember those shorts. It sounds crazy, but I really do. They're these khaki shorts with footballs

on them. Boy shorts. I teased her about them back when she bought them when we were sixteen.

Shit.

For a second, all I can do is stare. Stare—and remember. So many memories of her crash into me that it becomes hard to even breathe. Amaya right here, doing what she is right now, has always been a spectacular sight to behold, and that’s no less true now.

Her pretty, heart-shaped face is all scrunched up in concentration, her pink tongue sticking out between her lips. *God, the fantasies I used to have about that fucking tongue...*

“Holy fuck,” Austin mutters next to me, his gaze locked on her full figure as she skates around the bucket and stops in showy spray of ice. “Is that...”

“Amaya,” Mr. Reynold’s voice comes from behind us. “The Knox kids still practically live here. Unlike you two. How’re we doing, superstars? I was wondering if you were going to come say hi to an old man.”

I wrench my eyes away from her and spin to face the man who was like a second father to us once upon a time. The lines on his face are etched so deep now, I think I could fit a coin in them and he’s lost almost all his hair, but his kind brown eyes are exactly the same.

“It’s good to see you, sir,” I say as I take his hand, shake it, and then pull him in for a quick hug.

He pats my back. “Same to you, son. It’s been too long.”

When he lets go of me, he pulls Austin in for a hug too and then shakes hands with Travis, but as he releases his hand, he suddenly turns and calls to Amaya. “I’m locking up in five minutes, sweetheart. Wrap it up, but look who’s here!”

My blood freezes but my gaze swings back to the ice. I can’t believe that this is about to happen, but as I turn, Amaya’s gaze snaps our way for the first time since we walked in. She looks at me, and I look at her, and it’s like all the air in the rink gets sucked out. All the oxygen just...*boom!* It’s gone.

Even from this distance, I see her lips part, shock shining bright in her soft, sea-green eyes as they lock on mine before they move to Austin. The color drains from her face and she drops the stick she was holding. He doesn't move a muscle as their gazes clash, frozen as he stares right back at her.

I think it's safe to say that none of us were prepared for this, but *shit*. The memories were coming hot and heavy before, but now... I look at that thick brown braid hanging down on her back and those fucking god-awful shorts, and the widest grin I've had in a long time spreads on my face.

My heart thunders, everything in me suddenly itching to get to her. My oldest friend. My first love. This girl who took the time to get to know me for me and not just one of the twins. One of the only people who can tell us apart at a glance. I stay put though, not moving toward her until I feel Travis nudging my hip.

"Maya!" I shove down the nerves, nostalgia, and even the fear about how angry she is at us and bound toward her, managing to stay upright without skidding too much on the ice. As soon as I'm close enough, I toss my arms up and around her, enveloping her in a bear hug and yanking that softly curved body into mine. "Shit. Fuck. It's good to see you, Maya. It's really fucking good."

I squeeze her, but she goes as still as a statue in my arms. She doesn't say anything. Doesn't move. I don't even think she's breathing.

Suddenly, I feel her hands push in between us and they land on my chest just a half second before she steps out of my embrace and shoves me away. I didn't expect it at all, and the next thing I know, I'm flailing, falling down on my ass on the ice.

I'm still trying to process it all when she comes to stand over me, hands on her hips and those aquamarine eyes dead serious. "Brooklyn Ryker, you don't call. You don't write. You don't even ask a lady's permission to hug her."

I stare up at her disapproving frown, my heart racing as I cock my head at her. "Maybe that's because I don't see any

ladies here.”

Those chocolate-brown eyebrows sweep up and for a beat, I wonder if I misread the situation, but then she starts laughing and that sense of dread in my soul evaporates as I join in.

Austin was right when we were outside. At least some things never seem to change, and it looks like my friendship with Amaya might just be one of them.

CHAPTER TEN

AMAYA

My heart thunders in my chest as I stare down at Brooklyn on his butt on the ice. Blinking hard, he stares back at me, surprise shining in those permanently twinkling blue eyes. Obviously, he wasn't expecting me to push him off.

I wasn't expecting to do it either. I didn't plan it, but as soon as he wrapped those strong arms around me, I got overwhelmed. I couldn't even believe I was seeing him. Being hugged like that was just taking it a step too far. It amounted to sensory overload, being back in those arms that were so much stronger now, feeling that body that was so much harder now against me.

Yet, he smelled the same. He smelled...like Brooklyn. He'd always favored scents that were somehow dark but clean at the same time, and it'd triggered my olfactory sense in a big way, smelling that leathery, citrusy, freshness again. *Just...too much.*

He tilts his head at me, those mischievous eyes locking onto mine as the shock finally disappears. "Maybe that's because I don't see any ladies here."

His playful retort catches me off guard and my eyebrows shoot up in surprise. Maybe it's that this has been a crazy-as-hell day, or maybe it's just the insanity that's been stalking me finally catching up, but I find myself bursting into laughter.

A moment later, he joins in, the sound deep, rumbling and carefree—and for just a few seconds, it's like no time at all has

passed since I last saw him and he's still just my best friend. Warmth fills my chest, the familiarity of a moment like this with him hitting me like a sledgehammer to the chest, but in a good way.

That makes no sense. I laugh harder. Hysterically, feeling tears gathering in my eyes as I laugh harder than I have in years.

And god, it feels good.

Brooklyn keeps laughing with me, even as he shakes his head and holds out a hand for me to help him up.

As I extend it to pull him back onto his feet, our palms connect, our skins touching for the first time in so long, and it sends a jolt of electricity up my arm. The sensation transports me back to a time when everything was simpler; when we were just teenagers messing around together on this very ice.

Now, as I help Brooklyn up from the ice, the echo of that memory I had earlier of the day I realized I was going to lose them lingers, a poignant reminder of how things used to be.

Earlier, I hoped I'd be able to savor at least an hour of peace, but fate, it seems, had other plans. The realization triggers even more memories of our past. Of a time when they had a knack for finding me, no matter where I tried to hide. It's as if they possessed a sixth sense for my whereabouts.

Inwardly, I breathe a sigh of relief that they didn't see me at work earlier. I'm reluctant to let them get a glimpse of the harsh realities life has dealt me or the pain they unknowingly caused. So, for now, I'll slip into that familiar role – just another buddy, another pal, reconnecting with long-lost friends.

Brooklyn flashes me a warm grin, those gorgeous, burning eyes crinkling at the corners, and I can't help but return it. "You haven't changed a bit, Maya, but seriously, it's great to see you. How are you?"

I chuckle, determined to shake off the unease that now accompanies their presence. "I could say the same about you,

but I'm good. Not as good as you, obviously, but good enough."

A sharp whistle from the side catches our attention, and Brooklyn rolls his eyes at his brother standing at the railing, waving us over. "The king is calling. We better go or he'll come out here and drag you back there caveman style."

I laugh, but my heart is pounding all over again. Austin's stare is even more intense now than it used to be. Even more so in person than when he's staring into cameras. And it's aimed right at me, making all my internal organs misfire and do things they're not supposed to.

Seeing him back here is so surreal. He—both of them—seem too big to be in here. Like the rink itself isn't large enough to contain them now that they're larger than life. Austin's dark hair gleams under the bright lights overhead, styled so that it's off his face even if it's longer on top. Brooklyn's flop over his forehead, but it's always been that way.

Austin's strong jaw ticks and Brooklyn grabs my hand, spurring me into motion and together, we glide across the ice to join his impatient brother. My heart climbs further into my throat with every inch we gain, and I can't seem to look away from him, like there's some kind of otherworldly force at play, connecting me to him and drawing me closer.

Meanwhile, Brooklyn's fingers are still wrapped around my wrist and that same otherworldly electricity courses through me from that point of connection. It's crazy. I know it is, to still feel this after almost five *fucking* years, but I do feel it. With both of them, which is just wrong in so many freaking ways that I finally pull my hand out of Brooklyn's grasp and break eye-contact with Austin for a moment before we reach him.

When we finally do, he flashes me a smirk, reaching out and pulling me right into him. He envelops me in a warm, friendly hug and it's a different kind of greeting compared to Brooklyn's exuberance, but it's equally comforting.

Just like I did with his brother, I push him off, but unlike Brooklyn, Austin was obviously expecting it. He doesn't

stumble or look surprised as he takes a step back and sweeps his gaze over me from head to toe and back again, making my skin tingle pleasantly in its wake.

His deep blue eyes carry a hint of mischief when he brings them back to mine. “Amaya, it’s been too long.”

“Yeah. I agree.” *You have no idea, buddy.* “Welcome home.”

“Thanks. This is Travis.” He gestures to Travis Oakley, who’s standing next to him, a blond haired, green-eyed, tattooed superstar in his own right. Of course, I know who he is, but I don’t let on.

As our eyes meet, I nod and hold out a hand, catching the glimmer of recognition in his eyes as they meet mine. He remembers me from the hotel, from my rather embarrassing attempt to hide behind that curtain. Panic briefly flares up in me, but I force myself to stand tall.

Travis steps forward with a warm smile on his lips as he takes my outstretched hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Amaya. The guys have told me a lot about you.”

I doubt it, but when he continues, it turns out that he might not be lying after all. “They mentioned you’ve got some skills of your own on the ice. They weren’t exaggerating. There must be something in the water in this town.”

His words catch me off guard, and I feel a surge of gratitude toward him. Instead of embarrassing me about the hotel incident, he’s chosen to focus on something positive. It’s a gesture that earns my respect and simultaneously eases the tension that has been simmering within me.

“Thank you,” I reply with a genuine smile. “I appreciate the compliment. It’s great to meet you, too.”

As we continue our conversation, I can’t help but notice the subtle shift in dynamics. Brooklyn and Austin engage with me like old friends, slipping back into our familiar banter and camaraderie. Travis, on the other hand, observes us with a quiet intensity, as if trying to decipher the unspoken history between us.

He inclines his head at me with a soft smile still on his lips, but the look in his eyes is more distant now. Brooklyn grins at me, pushing that dark hair off his forehead as his gaze moves slowly across my face, almost like he's cataloging whatever changes he sees.

"How's Elijah?" he asks.

That irritation I suppressed earlier comes roaring back and I shake my head, my eyes narrowing. "Well, he's been good until now, but he's going to be dead when I find him."

"He's, what, seventeen now?" Brooklyn lifts both his eyebrows at me like I should be understanding the point he's trying to make. "I don't know what he's done, but I figure being seventeen is the excuse."

"Not anymore." My brow smooths out as I shoot a glance at the windows like I'm hoping he's magically going to appear out there. "That excuse only gets you so far and he's gone way past that point."

"Maybe he's at the hotel?" Austin suggests with a smug shrug that makes my insides clench. "A lot of kids are hanging out there on account of us. We drove past whole groups of them earlier."

"Drove past?" I arch an eyebrow at him. "You could've stopped. It would've made their year if you had."

"Yeah, but we were busy." That smirk he gave me before, the same he regularly flashes at strangers and cameras alike, tugs at the corners of his lips.

"You were *busy*?" I retort incredulously. "Doing what? Stalking me?"

"No." He blinks a few times like he's confused, but the smirk quickly makes a reappearance. "We don't stalk people these days, babe. We get stalked."

"Babe?" I squeeze my eyes shut for a moment. If he's going to treat me like just another puck bunny, then a conversation with him isn't even worth it.

Purposely turning my back on him, I look at Brooklyn instead, once again feeling that warmth in my chest when our eyes connect. Between the two, he's definitely the one who makes me more comfortable these days.

"How are *you*?" I say, emphasizing the word and hoping he knows I'm talking only about him. Too many times, people lump him and his brother together, like twins should always feel the same damn way about everything when in truth, at least with these two, that's very rarely true. "Having fun in Denver?"

He shrugs, those twinkling eyes darting to Travis for just a moment before they settle back on mine. "Denver's good. *I'm* good. It's, uh, it's been a busy few years."

"I bet." I'll never let them know that I don't miss any of their games, but it still feels like I should give him something. "You guys are doing well for yourselves out there. I'm proud."

"Thanks." His full lips curve into a lopsided grin. "We try our best. What did Eli do to earn your wrath?"

"He disappeared." When Brooklyn's eyes widen, I sigh. "Well, sort of. He was supposed to be here and obviously, he's not. He also didn't bother letting me know where he's gone, so I don't know where to even start looking for him."

A deep laugh sounds from my side, and though I don't want to feel anything about hearing it again, I can't help it. Austin's laughter—his chuckles, all of it—used to be one of my favorite sounds in the world and even now, it wraps itself around my soul and makes me want to say something funny just so I'll hear it again.

"It's the summer before he starts his senior year. Have you checked the lake?"

I shake my head, forcing myself to focus instead of swoon just because the superstar is talking to me. "Eli and his friends don't spend as much time there as we did. If they're not here, they're usually at one of his teammate's houses. I just don't know which one."

"Teammates?" Brooklyn asks. "Hockey?"

“Yep.” I smile at him before I bring my hands to my hips, squeezing tight in an effort to remain centered and calm before I glance at Travis. “What do you think of our humble little town so far?”

“It’s nice,” he says with a strange look at Brooklyn. “Seeing where these two came from has been fun.”

As I watch a silent exchange happen between the two men, I get this weird feeling of being caught between past and present. Between the friends I used to know and the people they’ve become.

But then Brooklyn extends an invitation that threatens to disrupt the fragile balance of my carefully guarded secrets.

“You should join us for dinner at our parents’ place tonight. It’ll be like old times.”

My heart races at the invitation. Another rush of memories floods my brain, mostly of me, lying in my bed, missing them. Missing my two best friends. Missing all those amazing times we spent together. Missing dinners at their house and feeling like part of their family.

I take a deep breath and clench my fists, feeling a flood of emotions raging inside me. I force myself to stay still and keep breathing, even as my lower lip trembles, threatening to betray my inner turmoil.

The guys exchange glances, their expressions a mix of curiosity and concern. Austin’s easy smile fades, replaced by a more serious look, while Travis’s intense gaze remains firmly fixed on me.

“I appreciate the offer,” my voice quivers despite my best efforts to keep it even, “but I can’t. I... I have to find Elijah. You know how it is. I’m just hoping he’s not out there impregnating a puck bunny.”

I try to infuse humor into my words, hoping to lighten the atmosphere, but the underlying tension refuses to dissipate.

I swallow hard and continue, “I’m sure I’ll catch up with you guys later.”

With those words, I turn on my heels and step off the ice, hurrying back to the locker room. Once I'm there, I lose the skates as fast as I can, collecting my uniform and slipping my worn-out shoes back on. My determination to leave the place is palpable, and I run out of the rink with a sense of urgency that has nothing to do with Eli.

In the parking lot, my car is a constant reminder of my less-than-ideal situation. Fumbling for my keys, I look up only to find all three of them standing near their sleek SUV, their attention firmly fixed on me.

I slide in behind my steering wheel, insert the key into the ignition, and turn it with a hopeful heart. But the engine remains silent, choosing this moment to betray me.

My cheeks flush with embarrassment, and I groan inwardly.

“Of all the damn times,” I mutter to myself, “it decides to stop working now. Fuck my life.”

CHAPTER
ELEVEN

TRAVIS

A maya's jaw is tight with frustration, her cheeks glowing a bright shade of red as she repeatedly tries to get her car started. The dull click every time she turns the key tells me that this thing is dead—and the way she's blushing to the roots of her hair says that she's really goddamn humiliated about it.

I don't know much about their childhood friend, but it's clear that she's proud. Maybe it takes one to know one, but she's definitely got a stubbornly proud streak. It's in the way she carries her shoulders and holds her head up high even when her eyes betray how much she just wants to tuck in her chin and cry.

She's doing it right now. I can even see the moisture shimmering on her lids, but I know she won't let the tears fall. I saw the way Brooklyn was with her in there, though. It was crystal clear that she still means a lot to him and that he still likes her.

Same with Austin. I don't know if either of them feel any more for her than that, but she seems...plucky.

And she's a lot more like me than they are.

She's a maid at a hotel, she drives a fucked up car, and though I saw that she was hurt by the way Austin treated her, she kept her chin up and didn't throw herself at his feet. Because of all that, I finally swing my gaze to the oblivious Rykers and shove Brooklyn's shoulder.

“Are you two idiots just going to stand there watching her struggle, or are you going to help her?” I ask.

“She won’t appreciate it,” Austin murmurs, his jaw clenched and his arms crossed over his chest. “Amaya hates having to accept help.”

“Yet she used to accept it from you all the time.”

Brooklyn suddenly thaws out, nodding as he steps forward and glances at me. “Are you coming? I don’t know jack shit about cars.”

I sigh, but go with my boyfriend, leaning down as I knock on the glass of her window to get her attention. “Pop the hood. Let us take a look at what’s happening in there.”

For a long second, I don’t think she’s going to do it—or even acknowledge that I’m here. But then I see her chest rise on a deep breath and those interesting blue-green eyes meet mine for just a fraction of a moment before a loud crack tells me she’s opened the hood.

I nod at her and push away from the window, walking to the front of the car and watching as Brooklyn tries to find the arm that keeps the hood up. There doesn’t seem to be one, though. *Probably long gone.*

“Here. Just let me.” I take over holding the metal and nudge him out of the way with my hip, instantly appalled by the state this vehicle is in.

It’s not safe for her to drive it. Not by a long shot, but I don’t mention it to the Rykers. They don’t know this, but not so long ago, my own car was in a lot worse shape than this one will ever be. I also happen to know a thing or two about being too poor to fix it and quite a few things about pride, so I won’t offer to pay to have it fixed either.

Even if I really want to.

I poke at the engine a bit, but ultimately, the best I’m going to be able to do is a temporary fix. A Band-Aid at most.

I drag in a deep breath, mentally bracing myself for the blow I know I’m about to deliver. Austin has ambled over now

too, and he's looking at her car with a perplexed expression on his face, his fingers around his chin and his head lowered to one side.

While they're trying to figure out whatever they're trying to figure out about her right now, I walk back to the window and motion for her to roll it down. Those eyes flicker to mine again, and for just a second before she steels herself, I see the hopelessness in them. The fear.

Fuck. I'm about to break her goddamn heart and soul. Shit.

"Listen, Amaya." I keep my voice down so TweedleDum and TweedleDee—who know I refer to them as that sometimes—won't overhear me. If they do, they'll race her to the nearest dealership and buy her a new car, and since I doubt she wants that, I'm going to keep this between her and I. "Your engine is shot. You need a new distributor and a new carburetor. Among other things. I can help you get it started for now, but once you get this car home, it's going to have to stay there until you can get it fixed."

She stares at me, swallowing so hard that I can hear and see it happen, and something passes between us as our eyes remain connected. An unspoken understanding that I give voice to before she has to ask.

"I won't tell them. Just sit tight, okay?"

"Okay," she murmurs, her face scrunching up as she closes her eyes and takes a deep breath.

I turn my back to give her the privacy she needs. With the hood open and the Rykers on the other side, I know I don't have to worry about them seeing her either.

My own next breath is a little shaky too. I might not know this girl, but I feel like I do.

Her situation reminds me way too much of my own. In fact, in some ways, it's like we're the same person. *The violent, alcoholic father. The dead mother. The money troubles. Wearing clothes so old that they're threadbare and holey but pretending not to care. The fucked up car...*

It's like she's a female, curvy, tattooless version of me four years ago—without the possibility of a pro hockey jersey to get her out of it. I can't remember the last time I really felt bad for someone. Felt much of anything for anyone except my teammates, actually, but this? Her?

Right now, my chest hurts for her, my leg itching where my wallet rests heavily against it in my pocket. I could make this go away. I can make it *all* disappear with a few swipes of my trusty Black Card, but I can't.

And that fucking sucks.

So instead, I do what I can. I walk back to the front of her car and stick the Band-Aid. I picked up a few questionable skills from my foster brothers that come in handy in situations like this, and I feel no need to explain any of it to Brooklyn even though I feel his eyes burning into the backs of my shoulders as I work.

After checking the floats and getting a whiff of gas, I wipe off the points on the distributor and hope that a little tender, loving, care is enough.

When I'm done, it's almost completely dark. The sun set fast while I was busy and if this doesn't work, she's going to have to get a ride with us and try again in the morning. I peek out at her from behind the hood, folding my hand around my mouth as I call, "Try it now. No promises!"

She nods, both of her lips in her mouth as she reaches for the key. The moment she turns it, there's a low sputter and my heart sinks.

But then the old beast roars to life and the smile that washes over her face is nothing less than pure beauty.

Amaya is one of those girls who's so stunning in such an understated way that I don't even think she realizes how beautiful she really is. She's definitely got a no-frills, almost tom-boyish style with her faded shorts, but I like even that about her. It adds to the wholesome, girl-next-door thing she and the smattering of freckles across the bridge of her nose have going on.

“Whoop whoop!” Brooklyn tosses his arms into the air. “Go, Trav! How the fuck did you do that, man?”

I shrug, giving Amaya a tight nod as I shut the hood before turning back to him. “Call it a lucky guess.”

My boyfriend’s dark eyebrows inch up as he stares at me, but then Amaya gets the car in gear and inches forward, and he scoots out the way before she runs him over. She winks at him as she drives past and he gives her a friendly wave, but I can see the gears are still turning in his head.

Eventually, once her tail lights disappear, he turns back again, now suddenly looking at me like I’m Superman as he grins. “You know what? Never mind. I probably wouldn’t understand what you’re saying even if you tried to explain what you did. That was great. Thanks for helping her.”

I dip my head in a nod. “Yeah, of course.”

Austin glances at me, but he knows a little bit more about my time in foster care than his brother and he probably has an idea of where that came from. Instead of mentioning it though, he jerks his head at the car and starts toward it.

“We should get going. Mom’s chicken is probably getting cold.”

Brooklyn nods, climbing into the back with me this time and wrapping his hand around mine in the dark. “I mean it, Travis. Thank you for helping. I thought for sure her car was fucked.”

“Fucked? Never fear when Travis is near,” Austin jokes, slamming the driver’s door behind him and then groaning when he sees the empty passenger seat. “Oh, that’s cool. I’m a taxi driver now? Fine, but if you guys start making out back there, I’m pulling over and you can walk.”

“We’re not going to make out.” I squeeze Brooklyn’s hand, but only to let him know that I’m serious. “There’s no way I’m getting to my first dinner with your parents with sex hair. It’s just not going to happen.”

Brooklyn smirks, but he doesn’t push the issue. Instead, he just keeps a firm grip on my hand as Austin pulls out of our

parking spot and heads to their house. Everything in this town is only a few miles away, it seems, and before I even know it, we're pulling up to a small but neat, single family home with a double garage and a decently sized front lawn.

The grass is patchy, but there are pretty flowers planted around the edge of the property and between the driveway and the lawn. It's pretty obvious that their parents take pride in their home, which is also why Austin wanted to keep the circus away from here.

As I look at the house with its bright yellow front door and light gray walls, the little ball of nerves that's just been sitting in my stomach all day suddenly starts growing. I've met the Rykers a few times, but this feels different.

Those were quick, casual interactions when they were in town visiting their sons. This is dinner at their house with my boyfriend's parents.

It's also the first time I've ever done anything like it.

The first time I'm actually even giving a romantic relationship a try. Before Brooklyn, I was all about the one-nighters. The thrill of the chase. The instant gratification and even the walks of shame.

That was actually one of the first things Austin and I bonded over—our mutual disdain for the dating thing. It was also how he and I ended up in bed together—with a girl—one time, and then that one time led to many more.

Always with a girl, though. *Dude's straight as an arrow as well as not being my type in the personality department.*

Now, however, I'm about to have dinner with my partner's family and he told me they know about us, but shit. This is a big step.

Before I have any more time to psych myself up about it, the door swings open and a pretty brunette appears in it. Mrs. Ryker squeals and opens her arms, and Austin runs right into them. She wraps him up in a hug, her smile practically splitting her face in two. He scoops her up, lifting her off her

feet and spinning her around before setting her back down again.

Brooklyn squeezes my hand and when I look at him, he jerks his head toward the house. “You ready for this?”

I nod, but I appreciate him taking the time to check in with me even though he hasn’t seen his mother for months. Before he turns away from me to get out of the car though, I tighten my grip on his hand and let the nerves shine through. *Just for a second.*

“It’s going to be okay, right? Your dad doesn’t have the rest of the town waiting in the backyard with pitchforks to run me out of here?”

“Not unless he wants to run me right out with you.” He releases my hand to bring his to my cheek, then he moves his forehead to mine for a beat, his long fingers gliding around to grip the nape of my neck. “You’re safe here, Trav. This is home. I know it’s not yours, but you can adopt it if you want. This. Is. Home.”

I breathe in deep, letting his words wash over me like a calming balm. I know finding a home isn’t that simple—fuck, do I know—but *hell*. It really would be nice if just this once, it could be.

If maybe, this is the home I was meant to find eventually all along.

CHAPTER
TWELVE

AMAYA

The early morning light shines through the windows of the bus, casting long shadows across my feet. My body slumps against the worn seat as I try to make sense of my life. The bus jostles beneath me, the vibrations from its engine creating a dull rhythm in my chest. The distant hum of the engine lulls me into a trance-like state with the vibrations rocketing through my body with each rattle and creak of the big old vehicle as it moves through town.

I hate taking the bus to work, but after speaking to the local mechanic, it seems this will be my only option for the foreseeable future. As I dialed his number, I felt a wave of dread wash over me and once I gave him the names of the broken parts Travis mentioned, he provided me with a quote for the repair. It left me with the realization that I'll have to endure these bus rides for a long time. Elijah's fees for the camp have to come first and then I'll be able start saving to get the car fixed.

I should be able to save that amount in, like, ten years. Not so bad, right?

As I sit on the bus, pondering my expenses, my income, and my projected expenses for Eli until he gets his first paycheck, my thoughts drift to my father. It's been three years since he left town, abandoning us without a second thought. He's a raging alcoholic and when things got tough, he just walked away. Left me to pick up the pieces of our shattered family.

I remember the day he left like it was yesterday. Elijah was just a kid then, barely old enough to understand what was happening. I was thrust into the role of caregiver, forced to be the responsible one.

Although it wasn't a new role for me, this time felt different - in some ways more difficult - because it made me realize how truly alone I was. My father had checked out on us when Mom died, so it's not that I wasn't used to it, but it felt harder because with him officially and physically gone, I was truly alone.

I needed to grow up overnight and the weight of that responsibility was crushing.

My father's face, etched with the weariness of a man who had lost himself to addiction, lingers in my mind. The disappointment and anger I felt toward him still smolders deep within my heart. *How could he abandon us like that, leaving me to struggle and protect my little brother on my own?*

I clench my fists, my knuckles turning white as I remember the countless nights I stayed up, waiting for him to stumble through the door, reeking of alcohol. The fights, the tears, the promises he never kept...they all come flooding back, filling me with a potent mix of sorrow and resentment.

And now, here I am, riding this bus to a dead-end job, trying to make ends meet while raising my brother. I can't help but wonder if my father ever even thinks about us. If he's even still alive. The anger I feel toward him definitely takes the prize, but it's accompanied by a deep sense of loss and longing for the father I never really had. A man who cares about his children and does everything to protect them.

As the bus rumbles on, I wipe away a stray tear, vowing all over again to do whatever it takes to give Elijah a better life than the one we've been handed. My father's abandonment will not define us; I won't let it. Even when Eli drives me crazy, even when I want to throttle him, I resolve to remember that he's had even less parenting than I have. Like me, he's only doing the best he can.

My thoughts shift from my absent father to my mother, who left us nine years ago, taken away by the cruel grip of the cancer that raged through her body. She was the anchor in our turbulent lives, the one who showered us with love and warmth even as the world crumbled around us.

I remember her smile, a beacon of hope, and her laughter, like a soothing melody that could chase away the pain. She fought her illness with unwavering courage and even in her weakest moments, she never lost her spirit.

In her memory, I find the strength to carry on; to provide a better life for myself and for Elijah. I try my best to have my mother's love and resilience live on in me, a reminder that even in the face of adversity, there is hope. She taught me that family is worth fighting for, and I'll do whatever it takes to honor her memory and ensure that my brother and I have a brighter future.

With renewed determination, I wipe away my tears and face the challenges ahead, knowing that her love will guide me through even this, which honestly feels like the toughest of times.

The bus comes to a stop and I lift my head just in time to see that it's *my* stop, so I rush out and make my way to the entrance of the hotel. The job doesn't have any prospects for advancement and it barely covers the bills. Right now, that seems more suffocating than ever.

With a heavy heart, I make my way to the staff room, hang my jacket in my locker, and get ready for my shift. I'm about to put my purse away when I feel my phone vibrate inside. I know I'm already late, but I can't help but take a sneak peek. You never know when something is going to go wrong with Elijah.

And speak of the devil, his name appears on the screen, and I click open his message.

ELI: LOVE YOU, SIS

Tears flood my eyes and I clutch my phone to my heart, trying to reassure myself that everything will be alright.

ME: LOVE YOU TOO, TROUBLEMAKER

After my quick response, I put away my phone. I need to get started if I don't want to lose this job, and I *definitely* can't afford that. Once I'm ready, I run to reception as fast as my feet can carry me but when I round the corner, I collide with something hard.

Ouch! My hand flies up to massage the sore spot on my forehead as I stumble back, wondering what the hell I hit. It felt like a wall, but walls don't smell like soap and some kind of masculine spice. I look up, and that's when I see him.

Travis.

He's holding his phone in one hand, blinking like he was lost in thought, but when his eyes focus on me, they fix on mine with a piercing intensity. His brow furrows and those lines deepen as he inspects every detail of my face so closely, it almost feels like he's looking at me through a microscope.

"You look like you're in desperate need of a cup of coffee. Or a whiskey, but it's too early for that, so you're going to have to settle for the coffee."

I let out a small laugh. *He must be joking, right?*

"I don't have time for coffee or whiskey. Sorry, but unfortunately, I'm already late and I need to get started. Otherwise all our guests, and that includes you, will complain about the housekeeping staff to my boss."

He slides the phone into his pocket and crosses his arms in front of him, his biceps flexing against the fabric of his shirt. His jaw is set and his lips are pressed into a thin line as he stares into my eyes with that same intensity that's somehow both intimidating and reassuring at the same time.

"We're grown men, Amaya," he says, his tone casual but filled with a sense of knowing. "We can pick up after

ourselves, so take the time you would've spent cleaning our rooms to have coffee with me.”

I shoot him a conflicted glance, my mind racing with all the reasons why I can't possibly have a coffee break right now.

“Thanks. I would've liked that, but as I said, I'm already late and this job—“

He cuts me off gently but firmly. “Trust me, I get it, but we all need a breather sometimes. And I can see it in your eyes; you need this. A moment to just... exhale.”

“But I can't just—“

Travis leans in closer, his gaze unwavering and that fresh soapy, spicy scent wafting over me like a sad excuse for a hug. *But since I'm in desperate need of any kind of hug, I'll take it.* “You can. You should. Let's make a deal. We'll both have a quick coffee and then you can head to work and I'll feel like I helped someone today. What do you say?”

My heart races and my mind reels, caught between the two warring parts of myself. I stand still, frozen in limbo as I debate with myself. I haven't done anything for myself in a really, really long time. *A cup of coffee and a breather does sound amazing.*

Finally, I let out a reluctant sigh, realizing that maybe, just maybe, a short break won't cost me as much as I fear.

“Fine,” I concede, “but it has to be quick.”

Travis grins triumphantly, his green eyes sparkling with a touch of mischief. “Deal. Let's go do it.”

I nod and together, we make our way to the bank of elevators. As Travis and I step into one and the doors slide shut, sealing us in alone, the air suddenly feels charged with unspoken words. Him covering for me after I hid and then again when he didn't tell the Rykers about my car.

He breaks the silence a moment later, like he heard me obsessing about the things he knows but hasn't said, his voice gentle and soft. “Do you want to talk about it?”

I hesitate for a moment, my mind a whirlwind as yet another war starts up inside me. Part of me wants to confide in him, to unburden my soul to someone who genuinely seems willing to listen. But the fear of vulnerability, of exposing the raw edges of my heart and soul, holds me back.

I sigh and give him a little one-shouldered shrug. “Not really.”

But then, completely to even my own surprise, the words start pouring out, a torrent of pent-up frustration and despair. Like a dam wall breaking after only just managing to hold out for *years*.

“It’s just... everything. My life is a disaster. I have no idea how I’m ever going to be able to get my fucking car fixed. Or how to pay my brother’s fees for hockey camp. Or how to keep the *fucking* roof over our heads.” My voice starts trembling and hysterical laughter threatens to break free. “You’d think that my mother dying or my fucking drunk dad leaving us would’ve been what broke me. It turns out, it wasn’t. It’s a broken fucking car. How crazy is that? And I wouldn’t even call it a car. It’s a piece of fucking crap, but it’s *my* piece of crap and now it’s worthless.”

I blink in surprise at the outpouring of emotions. I’ve never shared these thoughts and fears with anyone and yet, here I am, baring my soul to Travis Oakley. A stranger. A superstar. A man I don’t know but who has already been so much better to me than anyone else has been in so damn long. My sudden and complete vulnerability stretches between us, hanging in the air and immediately, I’m worried that I’ve made a giant mistake.

“Would you like to say fuck one more time before the doors open?” he asks mildly as he glances up at the numbers above that indicate we’re almost to their floor.

“Fuck,” I say emphatically, and he chuckles, glancing at me just as the doors start sliding open.

“Attagirl.” He motions for me to precede him and I do, walking down the carpeted hall—past the rooms I’m supposed to be cleaning—and stop in front of the door I know belongs to

him. He reaches past me to swipe a keycard in front of the reader, then he pushes open the door and once again gestures for me to go ahead.

As I step into the room, surprise crashes into me when I realize we're not alone. As far as I know, this is his room, but Brooklyn is lying in one of the beds, peacefully asleep. Despite that, I know it's him and not Austin, although the situation might make more sense if I'm wrong. As Travis's best friend, I suppose it wouldn't be so weird that he fell asleep here, but it's definitely not Austin.

Even in their sleep, I can tell the difference. Brooklyn sleeps like a man-child, with his leg hooked around the blanket and his mouth slightly open. Austin, on the other hand, has always been a more composed sleeper. One of those freaky people who climb in bed and wake up in almost exactly the same position they were in when they drifted off.

It's an unexpected sight to see Brooklyn. In a bed. In Travis's room. It catches me off guard. I hadn't anticipated anyone else being in the room, and the realization that I'm entering as a visitor, not the cleaner, feels strangely unfamiliar.

My eyes linger on Brooklyn's sleeping form, his chest rising and falling in a steady rhythm. It's a rare glimpse into a side of him I haven't seen for the longest time, a vulnerability that humanizes him in a way I wouldn't have imagined was still possible. Also, and I can't be completely sure about this, but he definitely seems to be naked. With that bare leg hooked around the blanket, I can't see any of his parts, but the leg itself is absolutely bare.

My heart flutters at the thought, my body tensing in places it doesn't usually tense. But his presence also adds a layer of complexity to this newfound connection I have with Travis.

He must notice my surprise because he suddenly offers me a reassuring smile. "Don't worry," he says, his voice hushed like he's trying not to disturb Brooklyn's slumber. "He's just catching up on some rest. It was a long season."

I nod, my uncertainty fading as I take a seat in one of the chairs by the window. Despite this unexpected turn of events, I

find myself appreciating the sense of comfort and belonging that this room offers. It's a reminder that, for just these few moments, I'm not just a visitor or a cleaner but a welcomed guest in a space where I can let my guard down.

Travis heads over to the fancy coffee makers we've got in the suites and hits a few buttons. As the scent of freshly brewing coffee fills in the air and sunlight streams in through the windows, I suddenly realize that this moment is unlike any other I've experienced in a long time. And for the first time in years, I feel a sense of hope and peace that I thought was lost to me forever.

But it doesn't last long because the next thing I know, the adjoining door between the suites bursts open and Austin strides in. Freshly showered with his black hair damp and wearing a pair of casual sweats with no shirt, his eyes are glued to his phone as he smiles.

And while I know that it shouldn't affect me this way, this is Austin Ryker we're talking about. The man is a legend and he's half-naked, the expensive scent of some kind of masculine body wash drifting over to me and he's in this room.

With only me, Travis, and a possibly even more naked Brooklyn. My mind isn't prone to the gutter, but dear *lord*, I'm only human and it's been a while since I've even thought about sex. But this scenario? It's like the beginning of a damn porno and I, for one, am suddenly more interested to see how it could play out than I ever would've thought I could be.

CHAPTER
THIRTEEN

AUSTIN

I stride into Travis's room with my face buried in my phone and without bothering to knock. The door bangs open as I shove at it with my shoulder, grinning at the pictures of the England family that Kit texted me just now.

"Check it out, Trav. Kit's trying to teach Jonty how to wakeb—" I slam to a stop when I look up to see *Amaya* in Travis's room.

The words I was about to say fly right out of my head and my jaw drops. Not only is she in his room, but she's wearing a housekeeper's uniform with a name tag and the hotel logo embroidered onto the pocket.

Brooklyn's in the bed, just starting to wake up. He grins sleepily, his eyes still closed as he stretches his arms out above his head and yawns. "Kit's seriously trying to teach him how to wakeboard *again*? Isn't that how he broke his arm last year?"

"Yep," I say, but I'm still staring at Amaya, confused as hell about what's happening here. I haven't seen her since the rink last night, but clearly, I missed something between then and now.

She stares right back at me, her cheeks flushing as her gaze darts to the coffee she's holding. Travis isn't any help either. He's all calm and collected, and he's got that lazy look in his eye that I know all too well.

I've been there with him enough times the morning after to know exactly what he did the night before when he's like this.

What the fuck? Why is she here and why is she wearing that? Also, why the hell is Brooklyn naked? Well, actually, I know why he's naked, but the real question is why he's naked with her in the room.

Immediately, the pieces of the puzzle click together in my head.

After we got back to the hotel last night, Brooklyn and Travis must've invited her over, fucked her, and since she's apparently already at work, she's taking the time to have a morning-after coffee with Travis before she heads downstairs.

On the one hand, I'm really fucking surprised that she's a housekeeper at the hotel. She never used to like this place much, always calling it an, 'uppity hellhole where people who think they're important get their rocks off.'

If I had to guess, I'd have thought that she was a bartender over at Mikey's or perhaps a store assistant over at Joshua Sporting Goods on Main Street. She used to love both of those places.

But even as those thoughts flit through my mind, they're not front and center. That honor belongs to the knowledge that Brooklyn and Travis hooked up with her last night, and not only did they not invite me, they didn't even bother to give me a heads-up.

A thousand emotions tear through me all at once. Gut-wrenching jealousy, blind rage, a completely unreasonable flash of betrayal and all kinds of other shit I have no business feeling.

As my jaw tightens, Amaya pales, her eyes going round as she keeps looking right at me. My attention has turned to my brother, though. The half-asleep fucker who couldn't even have told me that he was planning on calling her.

Hell, I didn't even have to join them. It just would've been nice to have had a few minutes to hang out with our fucking friend. *Okay, former friend, but still.*

Striding past her, I walk to the bed and shove my asshole twin so hard that he almost falls off the mattress. Suddenly

wide awake, his eyes fly open and he bolts upright, face scrunched up in confusion as he glares at me.

“What the hell, man?”

With that blind rage I have no right to feel burning me up from the inside out, I bend over and get in his face. “I thought we agreed that neither of us would make a move on her?”

“What?” He frowns, his hands coming up to rub his eyes before he looks around wildly. “Make a move on—“

His gaze lands on Amaya and his frown deepens, but then he shrugs and looks back at me. “Yeah, we did. Ten fucking years ago, though.”

All that jealousy bubbles to the surface and my fingers roll into fists at my sides. Brooklyn glances down, sees it, and then scoffs before he throws his palms up in surrender. “Relax, dude. I didn’t touch her. I have no idea what she’s doing here, but she wasn’t here when I fell asleep.”

Travis’s gaze bounces between us, then he steps in, clearing his throat as his eyes finally come to rest on mine. “This is a misunderstanding, I think. It took me a second to catch up, but if you’re thinking we slept with her, you’re wrong.”

“What?” I spin to face him, but Travis doesn’t lie. Especially not about sex and not to me.

When he doesn’t want to answer a question, he’s evasive as shit and you’ll never get an answer out of him, but he doesn’t lie. My throat works, my jaw relaxing just a little bit as I cock my head at him.

“Mind telling me what the *fuck* is going on here, then?”

Amaya still hasn’t said a word, her eyes wide as she watches us with her body so still, it’s like she’s wax figure of herself instead of a real person. Travis shrugs, his green eyes suddenly dancing with amusement. “I found her in the lobby, bro. It looked like she needed a coffee so I invited her up, but with this little show she’s getting, maybe we should add some whiskey to that coffee after all. Jesus, is it absolutely necessary for you to be such an alpha fuck at all times?”

Brooklyn climbs out of bed before he seems to remember that he's naked, but when he glances down and sees his junk hanging free, he laughs and he grabs a pair of pants I'm pretty sure belong to Travis before he smirks at him.

“Alpha fuck.’ That’s a good one, but this isn’t what you think.” My twin’s eyes move back to mine as he lifts a hand and scratches the back of his head. “What’s this about Kit and wakeboarding? I know he’s a family guy and all, but you’d think he’d have given up on Jonty and watersports by now.”

“Yeah, I know,” I say absently, but my gaze has drifted back to Amaya, who’s now staring at us all like someone smacked her.

As soon as she realizes I’m looking at her again, she frowns and articulates each word slowly and carefully. “What do you mean you agreed not to make a move on me?”

Uh-oh.

I feel the blood rushing out of my cheeks, but I play it off as nothing. Waving a hand at her, I roll my eyes and shrug. *Cool, calm, and collected.*

I’m Austin *fucking* Ryker. I’m not going to let a pact I made with my stupid brother a decade ago make me feel like I got caught with my hand in the cookie jar now. “It’s not important anymore, Maya. Brook and I just promised each other that we’d keep our hands off you back in the day.”

Her vibrant aquamarines flash with anger so real and so fresh, it kind of shocks me a little bit. “Did it ever occur to you to talk to me about this?”

“Why would we?” It’s a genuine question. I really don’t understand why she’s so angry about it when we’re talking about something that happened when we were teenagers. “It really doesn’t even matter anymore anyway.”

“Then why bring it up at all?” she shoots back at me, one of her dark eyebrows arching as her hands find her hips and squeeze. “It looked like it mattered to you two minutes ago, when it also looked like you were about to punch your own

damn brother for breaking this unimportant agreement of yours.”

I glance at Brooklyn for back-up, but he shakes his head and points at me. “She’s right. You did bring it up and I thought you were about to hit me too.”

I sigh. *Thanks for the fucking help, brother.*

Travis is watching all of this go down without saying a word, but he still looks damn amused by it. Those greens are dancing with laughter and I’d have been pissed at him if I didn’t know where it was coming from.

Brooklyn and I don’t get bent out of shape. Not for anything. I’m not being immodest about it. It’s just true. We’ve learned to take shit in our stride and for the most part, we do. But this is different and I bet Trav is getting one hell of a kick out of seeing a girl who still doesn’t know we had feelings for her once upon a time stand up to me like this.

Amaya nods her agreement with Brooklyn, her arms folding over her chest and her eyes cool. “Out with it, Ryker. I’m going to find out one way or another. Or I guess I can always just march right downstairs and go tell the press about your rare and irrational phobia for—“

“You wouldn’t.” My chin drops and my eyebrows shoot up, my heart jumping into my throat. “I told you that in confidence. As my best *fucking* friend.”

“Yeah, well, as Brooklyn said, ‘That was ten fucking years ago!’” she repeats the words back to me. “The way I hear it, he’s your best friend now.” She tips her head toward Travis, her eyes still glued to mine. “Tell me the truth and your secrets stay locked in the vault.”

I shake my head, but as much as I want to feel all angry and betrayed, I just don’t. This feels too familiar. Too good. It’s been *years* since anyone but Brooklyn and Travis have called me out on *anything*.

“Okay,” I agree finally. “I’ll tell you.”

Brooklyn curses under his breath, falling back onto the mattress and covering his face with his hands. “For the record,

I meant to talk to you about everything he's about to say. I just never got around it."

"Never got around to it?" she echoes as she twists to face him for a moment. Her pretty face contorts as she shakes her head. "Oh, of course. I mean, we only met up every morning before school, walked there together, had classes together, walked home together, and spent most of our afternoons and nights together. When was I expecting you to get around to having a freaking conversation with me?"

Travis holds up his hand for a fist bump and to my surprise, she smiles as she knocks her knuckles against his, but then she turns back to me and the smile disappears like it was never even there. "Okay, Ryker. Let's hear it."

"It's nothing," I repeat, but I already know it won't make any difference. Besides, it's a complete lie. "Brooklyn and I both had crushes on you when we were kids, but we're brothers and we're teammates. We couldn't allow any girl, not even you, to come between us so we agreed to back off. It's not a big deal."

Amaya seems dumbfounded, her face slowly lowering until her chin hits the collar of her hideous shirt and her eyes as wide as I've ever seen them. "You had a crush on me? Both of you?"

"Duh." Brooklyn pushes himself up onto his elbows, still lying back on the bed but at least not hiding anymore. "You can't tell me you really didn't know."

Properly awake now and with the immediate danger of being punched over, he gets up again and strides over to Travis. As their gazes meet, he smiles at his boyfriend, grabbing his chin and leaning in to give him a kiss.

"Good morning," he murmurs against Trav's lips. "Sorry I'm only saying it now. I got a bit sidetracked."

Travis kisses him back, but then promptly punches him in the shoulder and scowls as he moves his gaze pointedly to Amaya. "We have company, Brook."

“Oh, relax,” my brother says easily. “We can trust her. She’s practically family. She won’t say anything. Right, Maya?”

As he asks the question, I glance back at her with them. At first, I don’t know why she looks even more confused now than she did before, but her features are all tight and confuddled as she openly gawks at them.

“How did you have a crush on me when...” she trails off, waving a hand in their direction, “...well, you know?”

Brooklyn grins at her, not in the least bit offended as he takes Travis’s hand. “Bi people do exist, you know?”

“Oh.” She stares at them for another beat, and for a moment, I see them the way she does. Neither of them are known for smiling or being sweet, but right now, they’re doing both. With Travis’s blond hair and borderline-surfer looks, Brooklyn’s pitch black hair and almost permanent scowl when he’s in public, they make for a handsome couple.

When they first got together, I thought it was weird too. Anyone would freak out about their best friend and their twin getting together. My *brother* and my *best friend* hooking up. The first time they kissed in front of me, I’m pretty sure my face looked exactly like Amaya’s does right now.

She looks them over for another beat, but then she zeroes in on Brooklyn and I. Obviously, Travis is lucky enough to escape the wrath suddenly brewing behind the eyes that haunted my dreams for so fucking long.

“Why didn’t you ever tell me how you felt?” She gives Brooklyn a pointed look. “None of that bullshit about not getting around to it. We spent almost every waking minute together. You could’ve made time to tell me.”

I frown. “It wouldn’t have made a difference anyway. You were never interested in us like that and I don’t even know why we’re talking about it now.”

She blinks at me, dragging in a deep breath and not averting her gaze as she drops the biggest bombshell we’ve been hit with in a long ass time. “That’s not true, Austin. I had

the biggest crush on both of you assholes back then. Why did you think I never went on any dates? Never had a boyfriend? Was always hanging around you? More importantly, why do you think it hurt so much when you left without looking back and forgot that I ever *freaking* existed?”

CHAPTER
FOURTEEN

BROOKLYN

*M*aybe I'm still dreaming. There's no way Amaya Knox just said she used to have a crush on the both of us, right?

But Travis pinches the back of my hand then, knowing me well enough to know what I'm thinking and nope, the searing pain that shoots me says that I'm definitely awake. *Also, ouch.*

I give my boyfriend a quick glare before I turn my attention back to her just as she shakes her head and lets out a deep sigh, her hands back on her hips and her face cast down toward the ground.

"You know what? Austin is right. None of this even matters anymore. Thanks for the coffee, but I need to get to work."

She's halfway to the door when Travis makes his eyes big at me, jerking his head in her direction. I know he feels for her, but first he brought her here and now he wants me to stop her from leaving.

The fuck is this?

Since I happen to agree with him though, I release his hand and go after her, closing the distance between us in a few long strides. Gently wrapping my fingers around her wrist, I spin her toward me.

"Please don't go. We haven't seen each other for years and I'd really like to catch up." I'm begging her here, which I don't do, but now that she's here, in one of our rooms, it doesn't really feel like it's been so long.

Amaya is still so familiar. Her mannerisms. The thick braid hanging down her back. And I mean, sure, seeing her in the housekeeping uniform is a little weird, but that's just an outfit. Mostly, I'm surprised because the bottom of it is a skirt and I know how much she hates those.

When her mom got sick, she was only eight years old. It didn't get bad right away, but by the time Amaya got to the stage where other girls cared about how they dressed, makeup, hair, and all that other stuff, she was waking up early every morning to make sure her brother's breakfast would be ready before she went to wake him up. She spent her afternoons looking after him and her mom, and when other girls were eventually being taught how to apply said makeup or do their hair, Amaya's mom was in the hospital, fighting to stay alive.

She spent all her time there, reading to her mom between the meals she cooked her brother, cleaning their house, watching him and then darting back to the hospital to spend just another hour with Mrs. Knox. Austin and I helped her with Eli, taking turns to go over to their house to babysit or bring him over to our place.

It was a hell of a rough time and through it all, Amaya was their family's rock. She did everything for them and while she was busy doing that, the other girls grew up in a whole different way. She became a mother to her little brother and they learned how to wear high heels.

When I look at her now, I still see that girl. The perpetual tomboy whose mom wasn't there to teach her how to become a girly girl. Not that I think Mrs. Knox would've done that anyway, but still, she's...*Amaya*.

Now that I'm looking right at her, with all this knowledge about who she is and why, and all these memories of those times swirling around in my head, she still feels like my friend. Despite the years, the distance, the complete and utter lack of communication, she's still *her*.

"Look, okay, if you really have to get to work, then I understand. I do want to catch up, though. Will you be my date to that thing at the high school tomorrow night? They're

having a dinner for us and we can spend the day together tomorrow. Catch up. Go shopping for a dress for you. Maybe even get your car looked at.”

Those pretty sea-green eyes turn completely distant, like the light inside has just extinguished. “No.”

Hurt and surprise slam into me, but it’s Travis that puts things into perspective. “Did you not just hear her say that thing about you guys leaving and forgetting that she ever existed? Maybe you should start by addressing that before you start talking about shopping for a dress.”

“Fuck.” He’s right. *Of course, he’s right.*

Travis has spent most of his life observing. People. Places. Behavior. His actual fucking survival depended on it once upon a time. Right now, it looks like his observation skills might just buy me another shot at spending some more time with her.

Austin, however, the stubborn ox of a golden boy who probably can’t fathom that Travis might know something about Amaya purely because of his own history, shakes his head. “That’s bullshit. We never forgot about her. She stopped taking my calls less than a year after we left and sure, we didn’t keep in touch, but it’s not just a one-way street.”

Her gaze hits the floor once more. “I did that because it hurt too much to talk to you. You were gone. Both of you and whenever I asked, you said you had no plans to come visit.”

I shift on my feet, uncomfortable but guilty. Because she’s right. We never did make plans to come see her.

When she looks up at me, I see the residual pain shining in her eyes. “Austin tried calling every once in a while, but I started hearing from you less and less. You even stopped reading my texts.”

As she says it, I blink hard. “I didn’t stop—“

I cut myself off then, because she’s right. I did stop reading her texts, but it was because I stopped getting them. “Shit. I lost my phone, Amaya. At an afterparty for some of the players. Things got a little out of hand and when I woke up the

next morning, it was gone. When I got a new one, I got a new number and everything too.”

“A new number?” Doubt creeps into those eyes as she keeps looking at me. “Why?”

“Too many people had the old one. All the random calls I kept getting felt like too much of an invasion of privacy. People asking for tickets to games or to meet the team. Debbie Houser even tried to get me to come home for her 21st birthday as a celebrity guest. It was ridiculous.”

Austin grunts. “You never sent Amaya your number?”

“I never even realized you didn’t have it.” The words are barely a whisper. “I fucked up. I’m so sorry. I just kind of figured Aus would’ve given it to you and I didn’t realize you’d stopped speaking to him. I just...”

I shove my hands in my hair and not a moment later, I feel Travis’s hand on my back. Right between my shoulder blades. The touch steadies me and strengthens me all at the same time. “I’m sorry.”

As she looks at me, she nods, understanding in her eyes before she shuts me down all over again. “I get it, B. Life happened. It was always going to. You guys were never going to stay here and I was never going to leave. I do get it, but that doesn’t change anything.”

For some reason, my heart feels like tiny edges of it are crumbling away at her words. It doesn’t make any sense considering that it’s been almost five years since I last saw her, but it is what it is. Being faced with the inevitable fucking hurts.

And she’s still not even done. Reaching out, she takes my hand and gives it a little squeeze, her eyes too shiny as she offers me a sad smile. “We live in different worlds now. I’m stuck here. You’re not. It was good to see you guys, but I should get back to my life.”

Austin opens his mouth to say something, but hesitates. And then the door shuts behind her and she’s gone. As the lock

clicks into place, a massive chunk of my heart drops with a dull thud to the floor of my chest.

Travis slides an arm around my hips, pressing his hot, hard torso to my back as he sighs. “Well, shit. At least now I know why you guys were so nervous about coming back. She’s feisty, isn’t she? Feisty and practical. A realist. And she calls things as she sees them. I like her.”

“Yeah.” Especially because we’re only planning on staying for a few days.

After that, we’re going hiking, then fishing, then mountain climbing for a few weeks. Once we’re done with all of that, we’re heading back to Colorado early. Dax will be home by then and he and I have plans to spend a few days on a ranch he’s thinking of buying.

Austin and Travis are going to surprise the England brood at the lake before they kidnap Kit to go to some or other motorcycle exhibition. Dax and I will be meeting them in LA for it.

So many plans, but as the sound of that door shutting echoes in my ears, I want to cancel them all and just stay. For just a little while longer. To let her know that while she’s been out of sight, she was never going to be out of mind forever.

Austin is staring at the door like he’s about to hit his knees, his features all contorted in pain before he strides to the interleading door between his room and Travis’s and slams it shut behind him. I melt into Trav’s front, exhaling deeply as I keep looking at the door she disappeared out of.

“Hey, you okay?” He presses a hot, open-mouthed kiss to the side of my neck. “That couldn’t have been easy.”

“I’m okay. Sort of.” I catch his hand around my waist and cover it with my own, leaning my head back against his shoulder as I sigh. “I’m sorry you had to see all of that. I promised you no drama and I definitely haven’t kept that promise.”

He chuckles, his hot breath ghosting over my skin as he holds me. He doesn’t try to move me or to get my attention

away from the door, which I appreciate. I just need a minute to let the finality of it shutting in my face sink in.

“Well, it wasn’t the kind of drama I was afraid of, so there’s that,” he says after a minute. “I’m also starting to realize that she’s a part of your lives that was way more important than either of you led on. I mean, before you got invited back here, I’d never even heard her name.”

“Yeah, I know. I think it was just easier to put her behind us. The fact is that she’s here and she has to stay until Eli finishes school at least. God knows what her dad is up to or if she’ll leave the day Elijah does.”

“He’s, what, seventeen-ish now? Depending on his birthday, he’ll be a senior this year. Do you think he’ll leave?”

I shrug. “I don’t know. Fuck, man. I haven’t thought about any of them for so long. I haven’t checked in. I haven’t...” I blow out a hard breath. “I’ve been an asshole.”

“No, you’ve been human,” he says evenly. “People leave, Brook. It’s what they do. At least you’re feeling bad about it. Most don’t.”

My chest caves in on itself as I turn to face him. All that ink, the muscle, the demigodness? It has nothing on this guy’s heart. He just doesn’t really show it. Ever. Because he’s not wrong. People do leave. They sure as fuck haven’t given him any reason to believe anyone will ever stick around.

I haven’t spoken to him about it yet, but I intend on sticking around. As I look into those deep green eyes, seeing nothing but worry reflected back at me, I touch my forehead to his and tighten my grip on his hand.

“I’m not going anywhere. You know that, right?”

“Yeah, I’ve heard. Apparently, neither is Austin.” He breathes out, long and slow, his gaze not leaving mine but what I see in it isn’t exactly reassuring. “You don’t have to make me any promises, Brooklyn. We’re giving this thing a try, but that doesn’t mean it’s going to work out.”

“It’s going to work out,” I say confidently. “At least, I want it to. Do you want it to?”

He looks back at me for a long moment before he responds, still seeming hesitant and uncomfortable as he grimaces. “Right now, yeah. I do want it to, but there are a lot of things about me that might still make you change your mind. Plus, there’s Amaya. You still have feelings for her.”

I groan. “It’s not like that. She’s just...she was a huge part of my past. I’m not about to go fucking her in a janitor’s closet if she shows up for the dinner tomorrow night. Even if I do, I’d only want her if you were going to be right there with us.”

“I don’t do janitor’s closets.” The words sound easy enough, but he grimaces again as he says them. “But that’s a story for another day.”

“It’s always a story for another day.” I move my hand to his neck, holding it firmly before I kiss him. “I love you, you know that, right? Stuff with Amaya is complicated right now, but that doesn’t change this.”

He smiles and nips at my lower lip. “I love you too, Brook. You have to figure it out with her, though. We can’t leave here with everything up in the air like this. For starters, Austin will never be able to play the way he is now, but you need to figure it out for you, too.”

“She’s not just another puck bunny, though. If anything happens, it would be a new experience for us. You can’t just tell me to figure it out without telling me how you’d feel about it.”

“I like her,” he says slowly, being honest but considering every word before he says it. “I’ve told you that. I understand why you were attracted to her and I even get why you still are. If we’re being completely transparent here, I’m attracted to her myself, but if it was anything more than just sex, we’d have to talk about it if it ever gets that far.”

“Agreed.”

Letting go of me, he turns toward the door my brother went out of and jerks his head toward the bathroom. “Grab a shower and brush your fucking teeth. I’ll be back soon. Let me just check on him, okay?”

I nod. As he leaves, it doesn't escape my notice that if anyone should be checking on Austin about Amaya, it should be me, but he and Travis are close. Austin and I have never been able to have a logical conversation about her. I doubt that's changed.

At the end of the day, I have Dax now for those kinds of talks and he has Travis. Don't get me wrong, my brother and I are tight as hell.

If it was about anything else, I'd have been the first person in there to talk to him, but it's not. It's Amaya. That puts us at opposite ends of this thing. Because of that fucking promise we made ten years ago.

I'm happy with Travis. I love him and he loves me, but if he wants Amaya too, then we could give it a try. But then there's Austin. And the pact.

We've shared a lot of women over the years. Travis and I, Austin and I, and Austin, Travis, and I. In my and Austin's case, maybe that was even because Amaya made us realize that we liked the same kind of girls, but probably just because we've always done everything together. Once we relaxed a little bit, I guess we realized fucking wasn't all that different.

We enjoy doing that together too. As does Travis.

The difference is that Amaya wouldn't just be a one-night stand. She wouldn't be a quick fuck that we'd all forget about approximately seven minutes later.

And Austin doesn't do more than that. The Golden Boy is a serial commitment-phobe. Along with his weird phobia of having peanut butter sticking to the roof of his mouth.

Travis was hesitant about trying a relationship just with me, and I wouldn't want to try anything with Amaya without him. But he's like Austin that way.

Me? I've always enjoyed casual dating. Nothing serious, but I like knowing the person I'm fucking whereas Trav and Austin wouldn't even ask for names if it wasn't socially expected.

All things considered, there's nothing *to* consider here. Ten years ago, Austin and I made a pact and if it's the last thing we do, we're going to have to follow through. For all our sakes, but most of all for Amaya's. None of us have anything worthwhile—anything *real*—to offer her and she doesn't deserve anything less than the best.

And right now? We're just not it. But that doesn't mean I'm going to give up. I'll find something we can do for her. Something to make up for how shit we've been as friends these last few years.

I don't know what yet, but I will find out and when I do, I'll make it happen. That's just who I am. It's why the Devils keep me around.

When I set my mind on something, I damn well see it through. That's also why I'm a sore loser, but that set aside, I'm not going to lose this time. No one is. I'll make really fucking sure of it.

CHAPTER
FIFTEEN

AMAYA

How on earth is this possible?

They made a pact? A fucking *pact*? About me?

The weight of their revelation feels like a vice around my heart, squeezing the air from my lungs. My mind is a tempest of confusion and disbelief, my stomach ice cold as I try to process this knowledge that shouldn't mean as much as it does anymore.

I've always thought they didn't make any moves because they just weren't that into me, not romantically anyway, so my mind is reeling about the fact that they did, in fact, have feelings for me after all. I can't stop thinking about it, even though I know damn well that it doesn't matter. It still feels like it does, but I guess that's shock for ya.

If only I had known then...

I shake my head, trying to dispel those tormenting thoughts. It wouldn't have mattered, would it? They've always been out of my league, the unreachable stars in my personal galaxy. They were then and they are now, so there's no use in indulging any wild fantasies about this.

Even so, I obsess about it for the rest of the day and toss and turn all night, wrestling with this newfound knowledge. The memories of moments we spent together replay in my head like a broken record, seeking some elusive clue that their feelings were always there. I can't believe that all this time, they had wanted something more and I was blissfully unaware.

But it doesn't matter now.

They are only here for the festivities on Saturday and then they'll be gone.

Again.

Leaving me behind.

Again.

I have to guard against letting this mean something to me, because I can't be heartbroken.

Again.

Opening up all those old wounds for a few days of reliving my childhood with them just isn't worth it.

With a heavy sigh, I force myself to push those thoughts aside and focus on the day ahead. It's time to get up, face the world, and put on a brave front. The past may haunt me, but I won't let it define my future.

When I finally leave work, every step feels like a painful reminder of the long, grueling day I just had. My feet are killing me and the persistent ache in my back is a dull throb. I step out into the humid, hot air outside and it slams into me like a wall.

My phone buzzes and I fish it out of my bag. It's a message from Elijah, and his excitement practically leaps off the screen.

ELIJAH

Sis! You won't believe it! I'm at the rink with the twins and Travis!

My heart skips a beat as I read his words and my eyes widen as I watch the video he sent. There they are, the three of them, skating and laughing, with Travis confidently guarding the

goal. They're giving tips and tricks, and all the teenage boys seem to be hanging on their every word.

Tears prick at the corners of my eyes as I witness the sheer joy on my brother's face when he turns the camera on himself and gives it a thumbs-up. For a moment, the exhaustion and worries of the day fade away, replaced by a profound sense of warmth and happiness.

ME

That's amazing, Eli. I'm so glad you're having a great time.

ELIJAH

You should come and watch.

Maybe even come on the ice. I know you'd love that.

My fingers hover over the keyboard as I contemplate my response. Part of me longs to join them, to share in the joy of the moment, to bridge the gap that's widened over the years. The thought of being on the ice with the twins, just like we used to do so often when we were kids, tugs at my heartstrings. Those are memories I cherish of a time when everything was simple. When our laughter echoed across the rink and we were just carefree children.

But hesitation holds me back now, weighing me down like an anchor. Doubt gnaws at the edge of my mind as I question whether I can truly step back into that world. *Will I still be the same person they remember, or have the years changed me too much? What if I don't belong there anymore, like a puzzle piece that no longer fits?*

A nagging fear at the back of my mind whispers that I might not quite fit with them anymore. I take a deep breath, trying to push aside those worries, but they cling to me like stubborn shadows. It also shouldn't matter whether I fit with them anymore, but they were the last place I felt like I

belonged. If I lose that now, tarnish even those memories, I'm not sure I'll ever find that feeling again.

ME

That's amazing, Eli. I'm really tired from work, though.

His reply comes almost instantly, filled with an eagerness that's impossible to resist.

ELIJAH

Please, sis! It won't be the same without you here. They want to see you too!

The guilt gnaws at me. On one hand, the idea of joining the boys at the rink with all the complicated feelings it's already stirred up makes my stomach churn with uncertainty. But on the other hand, my brother's eagerness to have me there tugs at my heart. This is a huge deal for him and he's begging to share it with me.

Elijah wants me there and the thought of disappointing him feels like a dagger to the heart. I would die for that kid and he knows it. Despite my doubts, I can't bear to let him down. With a reluctant sigh, I type out my response.

ME

Okay, I'll come. But I won't stay long.

ELIJAH

Love you, sis.

My heart melts when I see his last message. I know I'm a sucker, but I don't mind it. With a sigh, I put away my phone

and make my way to the bus. *There's no backing out now.*

The rink comes into view and nerves thrum at the center of my being. I shove them down, reminding myself that this is no big deal. After I get off at the next stop, I double back to the rink, the familiar scent of the cold air filling my nostrils as I step inside.

Once I'm in, Mr. Reynold closes the door behind me. "Let's keep the looky-loos out." He smiles at me. "Back so soon, Amaya? Feels like the old days."

Something about the way he says it makes me feel like a teenager again, and the words hit me with a mix of nostalgia and embarrassment. I can feel my cheeks burning as I offer my meek explanation. "I'm here for my brother," I reply, my voice carrying a hint of defensiveness.

His smile just gets bigger. "Of course you are." He nods with his head to the ice. "I'm sure the twins are as well."

I follow his gaze to where all three pros are on the ice, practicing with the high school team. But something doesn't quite add up. I don't see any of the cameras I was expecting. No reporters. Nothing that would suggest an official event. In fact, it doesn't look like an organized publicity stunt at all.

Mr. Reynold notices my confusion and leans in. "The boys were here, same as every other day, and then the Rykers showed up and asked if they'd like to play. It's a friendly match. No big deal."

None of them have noticed me yet and I take my time to watch them on the ice as I stay next to Mr. Reynold. Elijah stands near the boards, a bright smile on his face as he chats animatedly with the pros. Their laughter echoes across the rink, a joyful symphony that pulls at my heartstrings. I can't help but smile, remembering how their laughter used to be my favorite sound in the world. I'm also grateful that Eli is getting to share it with them now.

I'm not sure if it's obvious to them yet, but he absolutely idolizes them all. Getting to not only play with them, but to

chat? To bond and to feel like they're getting to know him? It's not something he's ever going to forget.

Austin tells him something and then suddenly, they all break apart. Eli hangs back to watch them now too, his eyes following their every move as they glide effortlessly across the ice, executing perfect passes and spins, their movements a testament to years of practice and camaraderie. The way they move together, as if they share a telepathic connection, reminds me of the countless hours they spent perfecting their skills.

Back then, I always watched them with awe, amazed by their talent but also fascinated by the bond that still ties them together. With Travis in the mix now too, it's like they found their lost triplet, all three of them so in sync it's like they can read each other's minds.

As I stand there, lost in the memories of the past and simultaneously captivated by the sights before me, I'm pulled from my reverie by Elijah's voice, and his eyes light up with genuine excitement as they land on me—even though I'm still dressed in my work uniform. There's no hint of embarrassment today. No desire to distance himself from his big sister.

"Amaya!" he calls out, skating over to where I stand by the boards. "You won't believe it! The guys said they're here because of you."

I'm taken aback by his words, my heart skipping a beat at the unexpected revelation. "Because of me?"

Elijah nods eagerly, his enthusiasm infectious. "Yeah, they wanted to see you. They missed you."

A warmth spreads through me at his words, a feeling of belonging that I thought I'd lost. And then, he delivers the final blow, the one that makes my resolve crumble.

"Come on, sis," he says with a grin, his eyes filled with hope. "Get out there with them. Have some fun for once in your life."

Reluctantly, I agree, my heart heavy with conflicting emotions. But as I step onto the ice, the barrier that had separated us begins to melt away, and for a brief moment, I feel like I've come home.

CHAPTER
SIXTEEN

TRAVIS

Austin paid Mr. Reynold to keep the rink open later so we could keep messing around with the boys. As I stand off to the side, hearing the comforting swish of skates slicing over the ice, I have to admit, I'm impressed by some of these kids.

When Brooklyn first told me their high school had invited them for the dinner and asked if I wanted to tag along, I wasn't particularly excited. I was happy he asked, but I could think of about a thousand things I'd rather do in the off-season than visit small-town Minnesota.

Going to a beach somewhere and drinking Bloody Marys for breakfast, for one. Or just skipping ahead to the mountain climbing part of our plans so I could get the adrenaline pumping and maybe get hurt *off* the ice for a change.

Now that we're here though, I'm glad we came. I'm also glad we're here, at the rink with the kids and possibly helping. My phone rings in my pocket while I'm watching them, but I ignore it.

There's no one I want to talk to right now and it's probably just Clyde anyway. A frisson of panic works its way down my spine. My former foster brother has been making life difficult for me since I first got drafted and he's not just going to go away.

The problem is that he's got plenty of evidence to do what he's saying he will if I don't cooperate, but even if it *is* him calling, he's going to have to wait until I'm done here. I

haven't gotten to do anything with teenagers or any young players for a while now, and it's something I've always wanted to get more involved with.

Fuck knows, I owe it to the universe to give back after it nudged me to the ice and didn't relent until I had a chance to change my fate. More than that though, it's nice to just be playing. Giving pointers and stuff as well, but to just play.

No pressure. No nothing. Just for the love of the game.

As I lean back against the railing, I watch Elijah as he coaxes Amaya onto the ice. The boy is good and I saw her that first day, she's not half bad herself. It takes some doing but eventually, she relents and goes to grab a pair of skates.

Brooklyn throws his arms into the air, grinning from ear to ear when she reappears, ready to join in. "The fun is really going to start now. What do you say, Knox? If memory serves, you and I still have a shootout to finish."

"We started that five years ago. Let's just say I won."

"Nah." He laughs, skating in a circle around her when she steps onto the ice. "The way I remember it, the score was one each."

She eyes him for a moment before she narrows her eyes and nods. "Okay, Superstar. You're on. Let's finish it."

Elijah watches the two of them with rapt interest, excitement brimming in his eyes at the exchange. "Seriously? You're going up against Brooklyn Ryker?"

Without looking at her brother, she shrugs, a small smirk appearing at one corner of her mouth. "Brooklyn Ryker is going up against *me*."

Brook laughs and skates over to one of the boys to borrow his stick. The kid nearly falls over when he addresses him directly, but he dutifully hands over what I'm sure is his prized possession.

Amaya skates to his side, takes it, and then glances at Austin. "You have to stay out of it this time? No yelling pointers *or* insults, got it?"

Austin snorts. “I was on *your* side. Give me a break.”

“Nope, because when Brooklyn loses, I don’t want him to be able to say it’s because of you.” She gives him a stern look and he inhales deeply before he shrugs and comes over to me, shaking his head as I laugh.

“What? You enjoyed that?”

I nod, watching as she and Brooklyn recap where they were when this ended five years ago. It seems they had a bet and now that the prize can’t be about who gets to choose where they take prom pictures anymore, they need new stakes.

“He took her to prom?” I ask Austin quietly while they hash it out.

He swallows down a scoff of laughter. “Nope. Neither did I, but we wanted pictures with her anyway. She wanted to take them in the park and he wanted them to be taken here.”

I chuckle. “I’d have thought she would be good with taking them here.” He sighed, and something about the sound was so weirdly sad that I frowned at him. “What is it?”

Austin’s gaze is pinned on his brother and Amaya as they take their places, the high school team watching and silently taking bets of their own. “I thought the same thing until I realized that she didn’t want to be here with us. We could be anywhere else with her. As long as it wasn’t here. I think it made it too real that we would be leaving soon and what we were leaving for.”

Pain pricks at my heart. “Yeah, I guess that would’ve been hard.”

Austin cheers when Amaya scores first, but only a couple minutes later, Brooklyn takes the lead. The boys are all leaning forward, most of them surprised that she’s pretty much keeping up with him.

He wins, though. Amaya laughs good-naturedly when he does, skating over to shake his hand. “I don’t think it was quite fair, but I’ll cook dinner for you sometime. A deal is a deal.”

He beams at her, using his grip on her hand to tug her into his arms. “You did good, kiddo.”

She laughs as she shoves him away, but he doesn’t land on his ass this time. “I’m only two months younger than you, *kiddo*.”

After she winks at him, she comes over to me, leaning against the railing as she takes the spot Austin vacated by my side when he left to go play with the boys again. She glances at me. “I guess I was stupid for thinking I still had a chance at winning.”

“Nah. I think it was brave to take him on. You’re a pretty good match for him, too. I bet you’ve beaten him before.”

Those eyes of hers sparkle with the memories as she nods. “A lot. I used to beat him all the time, actually. Kept him on his toes.”

“Yeah, I bet.” I chuckle, feeling her gaze on my face as I turned back to the boys.

“You’re in your element here,” she observes lightly a few minutes later. “I was watching you before. You like teaching.”

I shrug, even if my heart speeds up a little bit. No one has ever said that to me before, yet she’s pieced it together after less than an hour. I don’t have any reason to lie to her, though. Besides, I don’t really do that. Never seen the point.

“I love it,” I say as I fight against the urge to cross my arms. Revealing personal information is never easy for me, and this feels way more personal than it really is. “I don’t have the opportunity to help younger players very often, but when it presents itself, I enjoy it.”

Those sea-green eyes slide to mine. “That’s pretty cool. I don’t know you, but somehow, I wouldn’t have taken you for a natural-born teacher with a passion for it to boot.”

I scoff back a laugh. “I’m definitely not a natural-born teacher.”

She cocks her head at me, her brow puckering with a ‘come on, now’ look in her eyes. “I saw you with them. You

are a natural, Travis Oakley. Whether you want to admit it or not. The fact that you actually enjoy it just makes it even better.”

“Yeah, well, I guess it doesn’t really matter. I do enjoy it. Can’t argue with that. It’s giving back and that’s something I need to do anyway.”

“Giving back?”

I glance at her, still resisting that temptation to cross my arms but now also resisting the urge to physically push her away from me. *She’s Brooklyn’s childhood friend*, I remind myself. *It’s okay to talk to her about this.*

Still, it takes breaking down some mental barriers to get the words out. “Not all of us were child prodigies that were idolized by our entire hometowns.”

Amaya doesn’t push for more, leaving it at that as she nods, which is admirable considering that I can still see the curiosity in her eyes. “Do you think this is what you’ll do one day? When you’re done playing, I mean. You’re good at it. I know none of you want to think about the day you hang up your skates, but you are all going to have to at some point.”

“Yeah, I know, but you’re also right that we don’t want to think about it too much.” I drag a hand through my hair, my breathing shaky when I even consider the possibility of that day. “I might do this, though. Coach. When I get too old or too hurt to play, maybe I will. It’ll be nice to help the future generation of players just like my coaches helped me back in the day.”

She smiles softly as she follows my gaze back to Austin and Brooklyn, who are bantering with the high school team as they fuck around. “Well, as someone with a loved one who is really good, but who wouldn’t have been able to afford to pay for the level of help you’re offering, I can tell you that the future generation will always appreciate it.”

Something warm sparks in my chest and to my surprise, I find myself smiling at her. “Thanks. I’ll keep that in mind. Should we go join them?”

She nods. “Let’s do it. I’m not sure how much help I’ll be, but maybe the mere prospect of getting their asses handed to them by a girl will be enough.”

“That’ll be more help than you think.” I push away from the railing and skate over to Austin and Brooklyn, adding to the tips our fearless Captain is busy giving. While we’re doing it though, I pay special attention to Elijah.

He’s who we’re really here for, after all. Brooklyn hatched the plan after she stormed out of our room. If the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach, then apparently, the path to Amaya’s is through her brother.

Not that Brooklyn is after her heart, but he’s definitely interested in her forgiveness, which I understand. He wants to make it all up to her somehow and Elijah was where he chose to start. We didn’t know for sure that we’d find the kid here, but the rink owner did say that first day that the Knox kids practically live at the rink and besides, a teenage hockey player with some time to kill? He was either going to be here or getting it on somewhere.

We got lucky. He was here, messing around on the ice with his boys. It took us all of about a minute to realize they weren’t just fucking around, though. They were practicing, taking it pretty seriously at that.

So we lined up and watched for a minute before we asked if we could join them. At first, I thought that we might just end up giving Amaya false hope by making her think that a few professionals were interested in her brother’s game. It’s rare you do something for someone and it turns out you discover something real. But I think we have.

The boy is a winger, which means that ideally, Kit or Calix should be weighing in on him, but I think he’s got something. A raw talent that needs fine-tuning, but he’s already good at listening to what we’re saying. He’s also really just good.

We came here in an attempt to start making amends, but shit. *I think we may just be able to do some real good for this kid.*

On a whim, I leave the ice to lessen the chance of anyone overhearing the conversation I'm about to have. I really don't want to inspire that false hope I was—and still am—afraid of, but we're here. *I may as well get an outside opinion.*

Sliding my phone out of my pocket, I try Calix, but he doesn't pick up so I call Kit instead. Moments later, the Devil's left-winger appears on my screen with a cocky smirk on his face. Those silver-blue eyes are alight with laughter and his dark hair is dripping wet, so I'm assuming my call dragged him out of the lake.

“Miss me already? I gotta say Trav, I didn't think you'd be the first to break down and admit just how much you enjoy seeing me every day.”

I snort, shaking my head at the asshole. Because, like the rest of us, he *is* an asshole, but he's also one of *my* assholes, so I grin back at him as my head starts shaking. “Always, England, but that's not why I'm interrupting your regularly scheduled family time.”

Kit's expression sobers when he sees whatever look I've got on my face, the smirk vanishing as moves away from whoever he was with when he picked up. “What's up? Everyone okay? Are you guys at a...rink?”

“Yep.” I lift the phone a little higher and turn it away from my face, giving him a glimpse of the Rykers' original home turf. When I bring the camera back to me, he's smiling goofily. “Austin and Brooklyn found some kids to coach in the offseason? That's...not like them, but it's cute. Let me guess. You're wondering if I can hop on a plane to come help?”

“Nah. Not unless you want to escape and you need someone to blame it on,” I offer. “There's a hotel here called The Hat Trick. It's actually pretty nice. I'm sure you'll be very comfortable there instead of in a tent with your brothers.”

“We're not in a tent.” He laughs. “The Hat Trick, huh? It's no wonder the guys got into hockey instead of another sport. I've heard that town is crazy for it. If they even named their hotel that, you guys must be getting treated like royalty.” He

pauses for a moment before he frowns. “So, what’s this about?”

I could fuck around with him for a bit, but I’m not in the mood. Besides, Kit and I are on good terms, but we don’t really do stuff like shoot the breeze. “I want to take a look at the local team’s right winger. He’s the dark-haired kid with Austin right now. Hang on a sec. Let me just get them to separate so you can see him in action.”

Interest sparks in Kit’s eyes. “Sure thing. Any particular reason we’re doing this? Are we trying to replace Calix already?”

“No.” I shake my head firmly. “The kid’s the brother of one of the Rykers’ childhood friends. We’re just trying to help out while we’re here.”

He arches a brow at me, but nods. “Yeah, sure. Okay. Let’s see what he’s got.”

Lowering the phone so as not to alert anyone that there’s another pro now essentially in the room, I call out to Austin who frowns, but shouts a few instructions to the boys. They take off and I stride closer to the ice, but stay off it for now, trying to keep my camera on the action *and* be discreet about it.

While the boys do their thing, I don’t say a word and neither does Kit. A couple minutes later, Eli sprays ice all over Austin and laughs. “Man, that was awesome! Did you see me? I did everything just like you said.”

Austin claps him on the shoulder, but he brings his eyes to mine, questions in them as he tilts his head at me. *Enough?*

I dip my chin in a curt nod and turn away from him before I lift my phone back up. “So? What do you think?”

“The kid’s good. Really fucking good. Aggressive and a little bit stupid because of it, but good. He reminds me of Brooklyn, actually. They grew up together?”

“Sort of,” I say. “Eli’s only seventeen, but he was their neighbor. I know he’s good, but is he good enough?”

“Good enough for the Devils? Going pro?” Kit thinks it over before he nods slowly. “Yeah, I think he might be. Get some videos of him. Maybe we can drum up some interest. Seventeen, huh? He’s got a big year ahead of him.”

“Yeah, I know. That’s exactly what I’m thinking. As far as I know, he’s on the market or at least, he will be soon. Figured we might be able to give him a nudge in the right direction.”

Kit grins. “Must be some childhood friend to make you guys do all this.”

I shrug. “We’re not doing anything except having some fun on the ice for a change. Thanks for taking a look. Tell your family I said hi and stay off the fucking wakeboards, bro. Your brother’s just never going to get it.”

He drops his head back as he laughs. “I can’t make any promises, but maybe you’re right. He’s got other talents. Maybe it’s time to encourage those instead. See you around, Oakley.”

“See you.”

Once we hang up, I navigate to my camera and scroll to video, still hanging out on the sidelines like some creep while I record Eli speeding around the rink. Right now, Austin’s his center and he supports him like a custom-made bra. He keeps up, attacking and gaining control of the puck every chance he gets.

Brooklyn’s also playing his own position, like his brother, and he’s paired with another high schooler. Brook’s defense is world class and the boy he’s playing with is struggling, but Eli doesn’t seem as hesitant as his teammate against the Rykers.

If anything, it seems he’s using their energy, feeding from it and letting it fuel him. I don’t know if this is how he always plays or if it’s just because he’s with them, but damn. This is going to be a fucking good video for him to have.

Amaya’s watching from the other side of the rink, her eyebrows riding high on her forehead as her eyes dart from one side to the other, not missing a second of the action. She’s leaning back against the railing, clearly impressed by the

display she's seeing. So am I, so I get where she's coming from.

After the guys are done with their play, Austin grins at the boys as he motions to them to gather around. "You guys did really well today. Keep working at it, but don't work too hard. Get some rest, boys. That's important too."

They nod, a cheer going up before they start clapping their hands for us. Most of them are still hanging out, the applause fading as he glides over to me and gives my phone a pointed look. "Want to tell me what that was all about?"

"Kit." I know it's vague, but I don't want anyone to hear us talking about this. There's no way I want to give the Knoxes hope when I don't know if I can deliver. "I also got some videos after I spoke to him. That was a good session."

He narrows his eyes at me for a beat, then he inhales deeply and shrugs. "Yeah, it was. The coaches have done a great job with this team. You ready to get going?"

As he asks it, Brooklyn skates up with Amaya and Elijah hot on his heels. He's grinning from ear to ear, his cheeks flushed with the adrenaline and exhilaration as he stops beside me. "That was awesome. They're good, right? It's nice to know the coaches didn't stop trying after they churned out perfection."

"You're the perfection?" I ask dryly.

He winks at me. "Don't you know it. Let's go eat. I'm starving."

With that, he hops off the ice and Austin follows. I glance at the Knox siblings, who are looking from one of us to the other like they're following a damn tennis match, and let out a deep breath.

"Would you guys like to join us for dinner?" I ask. Brooklyn should've invited them, but at least one of us remembered.

Amaya starts shaking her head, but Elijah's chest swells as he nods and proudly accepts just as his teammates start passing by us. "We'd love to have dinner with you."

His sister widens her eyes at him, but Brooklyn rolls his. “Of course, they’re having dinner with us. What’s good around here these days? I need a cheeseburger. With bacon. Maybe two. It’s my treat.”

When he gets up from the bench he was on to take off his skates, Elijah races after him, practically tearing off his own skates in an effort to keep up with the men he obviously idolizes. Austin has the decency to wait for him, but Brooklyn’s almost to the door by the time he realizes we’re not with him.

He doesn’t stop walking as he turns and spreads his arms out to the sides. “Well? Are you coming or what? Let’s go, people. My stomach is going to start eating itself if we don’t make this happen soon.”

I sigh and extend a hand to Amaya, who’s only just finished taking off her skates. “I’m sure you know this about him, but we should run to catch up. He doesn’t let anyone come between him and his cheeseburgers.”

She laughs and slaps her palm into mine, allowing me to pull her up. “I did know that, but thanks for reminding me. I’d hate to see what the fans would say about me if Brooklyn dies from being eaten by his own stomach.”

“I can see the headlines now,” I muse. “Actually, I can’t. I can’t come up with catchy, funny shit on the fly, but I don’t think they’d say anything good. Hustle, Knox. He’s not above taking off without us.”

CHAPTER
SEVENTEEN

AMAYA

As I enter the dimly lit fast-food restaurant with the twins and a rowdy group of high school boys, a sense of nostalgia washes over me. The familiar scent of sizzling burgers and greasy fries greets me at the door, instantly transporting me back to simpler times. The place is adorned with neon signs and checkered tablecloths, giving it a cozy yet retro atmosphere.

The booths and tables are occupied by a mix of families, teenagers, and local patrons, their laughter and chatter creating a lively backdrop. It's a place that has witnessed countless gatherings and shared moments, a true slice of hometown charm.

I take a moment to look around as we walk in, my heart warmed by the memories that come flooding back now that I'm here with them again. The twins and I used to be regulars here, celebrating victories on the ice or simply hanging out after school. We came here when we were happy, sad, bored, or even just plain hungry.

Seeing it now with them by my sides feels like staring at a time capsule of our youth. Absolutely nothing has changed about this place. Same decor, same menu, same everything.

Nostalgia and a twinge of bittersweetness washes over me with the memories, though. As with all the others, back then, our time here was filled with laughter, inside jokes, and shared dreams. I felt like I belonged when I was with them. Like I was an essential part of our trio. The twins and I were

inseparable, and those moments were some of the happiest of my life.

As I settle into the booth next to Austin, across from Brooklyn and Travis, with my gaze wandering over the familiar interior of the restaurant, I realize that dwelling on the past won't change a thing. We've all followed our separate paths, and those carefree days of high school are just memories now. I can't turn back time, but I can choose how to approach the present. And the future.

The laughter and camaraderie of the boys and the twins brings a smile to my face. It's time to stop feeling like an outsider and to start enjoying their presence. They won't be here for much longer and I've spent enough time dwelling on what I've lost. It's time to make the most of the time we have now, to create new memories and enjoy the time we're sharing now.

With newfound determination, I take a deep breath and focus on said present, ready to savor every moment with the twins and Travis before they inevitably leave again.

As the lively conversation unfolds around me, I find myself drawn into the banter and laughter. The older guys effortlessly engage with the high school boys, and their camaraderie is infectious. It's as if time has stood still, and we're back in our own high school days, sharing stories and jokes with the team without a care in the world.

Austin, always a joker in a group like this, regales us with an embarrassing story about Brooklyn from their first year as NHL. He and Travis exchange playful glares while Brooklyn's face turns a shade of crimson that perfectly matches the ketchup bottles on the table. I can't help but join in the laughter, feeling a sense of belonging that I thought was lost to the past.

“So there we are, newbies in every sense of the word. We haven't met half the guys on the team. We don't even know how to get to our new place from the rink. We're just hoping one of us has our address somewhere to give to the cab driver, and Brooklyn tosses his towel at a guy in the locker room, not

even looking at him and just accepting that we've made it to the big leagues now, so obviously it's got to be someone who's there to help him. And he says 'Thanks. You can just leave it in my locker when it's clean'."

The boys are hanging on his every word, but so am I. "Who was it?" I ask, already feeling laughter bubbling up inside of me. "It was Waylon McGregor, wasn't it?"

Austin grins. "The one and only. Brooklyn's reason for wanting to join the Devils so bad, he nearly peed his pants when he found out they were interested in us. Our almighty Captain and one of the greatest players of our fucking time, and Brooklyn chucks his dirty towel right in the guy's face."

"What did he do?" Eli asks eagerly. "Did he toss it right back at you?"

Brooklyn shakes his head, an embarrassed, sheepish grin on his lips as he says, "Nah. He told me he'd get it done, but that we didn't need to bring our own towels. Said the team had some nice, fluffy ones that are always freshly laundered and that I could just drop them in the basket on my way out after practice."

"When did you realize it was him?" I made my eyes big, loving to hear about all the behind-the-scenes snippets I missed. "You never told me this story, but if you were that new, we were still talking almost every day, then."

He glances at me. "We were, but it wasn't exactly my proudest moment. Jeez. We'd just been drafted and were playing for the fucking Devils. I wanted to sound cool. I didn't want you to know that I almost pissed myself when I heard his voice. How many of his interviews did we watch together back in high school? As soon as he opened his mouth, I knew I'd made a mistake."

"Did he hold it against you?" I try to imagine Waylon, a huge, real life Cornhusker who had grown up on a farm in Nebraska, having it in for Brooklyn when he was only a tiny bit older than Eli is now. "Please tell me he made you pay for it."

Brooklyn scoffs and points at his chest. “Me? Please. He knew I was the second coming. He—“

“—made Brooklyn gather up all the towels that had been left around the locker room for a *year*,” Austin interjects before he starts laughing. “To this day, some of the older players call him Fluffer. For all the fluffy towels he—“

“I’m sure they got it,” Brooklyn grumbles, but even he’s chuckling as he shakes his head. “Asshole.”

“I can’t believe I’ve never heard that story.” I wipe away the tears of laughter under my eyes and in that moment, I’m grateful for the opportunity to enjoy their presence, to be a part of this lively group, even if it’s just for a short while.

Elijah leans in, his eyes shining with excitement as he recounts their last game of the season once the guys have run out of stories they’re willing to tell right now.

“You won’t believe it, Brooklyn,” he says, “we were down by one goal in the final period. It looked like we were done for.”

Brooklyn, who’s been listening intently, nods and encourages him to continue.

“But then,” Elijah carries on, clearly enjoying having Brook’s full attention, “I faked left, then went right, and slipped the puck into the net. The whole place went wild!”

Brooklyn smiles and reaches out to pat him on the back. “That’s awesome, Eli. You’ve got some serious skills, man. But you know what made that goal happen? Your determination and that you never gave up, even when things were looking tough out there.”

Elijah’s face lights up, and he shoots a beaming grin at everyone in the whole damn restaurant. I smile, quietly sipping my drink and not able to help the swell of pride in my chest. Hearing the praise and encouragement they’re showering on my brother fills me with a sense of joy that’s hard to put into words. Elijah’s journey hasn’t been easy, and seeing him thrive and earn the respect of his teammates and now, even professionals, warms my heart.

I've always known he's both talented and determined, but hearing it from others, especially from people like Brooklyn who know what it takes, is a reminder of just how far he's come. It makes all the sacrifices and struggles worthwhile because my brother can make it. He can and he will, as long as he keeps his nose clean and his chin up.

As the team's conversations starts back up around the table, their laughter continuing with Travis and Austin chiming in every once in a while, Brooklyn leans over to speak to Elijah. With my curiosity piqued, I straighten up a little, managing to hear some of what they're saying even though their voices are hushed.

"Hey, buddy," Brooklyn says, "I need your help with something. I want to take your sister to the party as my date tomorrow night, but she's not too keen on it. I think if *you* give her the go-ahead, I might be able to convince her. "

Elijah's eyes widen, and he glances at me briefly before turning back to Brooklyn. There's a moment of hesitation, but then a smile tugs at his lips.

"I think she could use a night out. After everything she's done for me, she really deserves it," he replies, his voice filled with warmth.

A lump forms in my throat. It's been a long time since I've received any kind of acknowledgement from him, let alone anything so heartfelt.

I clear my throat, trying to hold back the tears that threaten to well in my eyes. I know I wasn't supposed to hear, but I did and when my brother glances at me again, I know he knows I overheard what he said, so I nod at him. "Thank you, Elijah," I manage to say, my voice filled with gratitude. "I really appreciate it."

Elijah gives me a genuine smile before he adds, "And guess what, sis? I'll be there too. The team has to go to the party as well, so you won't be alone."

Some of the hockey boys are done eating and they call on Elijah as they start gathering their things and get up,

interrupting our conversation with zero remorse. “You wanna go to the movies with us?”

He looks at me, his eyes pleading, and I can see how much he wants me to say yes. I give him a warm smile. “You can go, but please be careful.”

“Always, sis.”

Elijah gets up to join his friends and I watch as they exit the restaurant, leaving me with the twins and Travis. Brooklyn suddenly turns to his boyfriend, jerking his head at the arcade attached to the restaurant.

“Bet I can beat you at every game there,” he says. “Care to show me what you’ve got?”

Travis smirks. “Bring it on, Ryker. I grew up in arcades. It’s amazing how many coins you can find to keep yourself busy when you share a bedroom with five other kids.”

My eyes stretch wide open. I’ve heard a little bit about Travis’s past so far, but that was...telling. Descriptive.

I see the sadness tugging at the corners of Brooklyn’s lips as they turn down, but he hides it quickly, shoving his chair back and walking to the arcade with Travis in tow. Once they’re gone, it’s just Austin and me, and it’s a little—*read: very*—freaking awkward all of a sudden.

Those blue eyes of his are intent on mine, but he doesn’t say anything, just staring at me with his handsome, chiseled features completely blank. My cheeks start burning under the heat of that stare, but I meet it, staring right back at him until I can’t take it anymore.

“What?” I ask. “Do I have burger stuck in my teeth or something?”

He chuckles, his head shaking before he clears his throat, his own cheeks staining with red as he averts his gaze for a moment. “Nah, that’s not it. This is awkward. Why is it awkward? We’ve been alone a lot before and it was never awkward.”

“Yeah, but we haven’t really been alone much since you guys have been back. If we’ve even been alone at all.” I prop my elbows on the table, trying to ignore the way my entire body seems to tighten under his gaze. “How are you? For real.”

“Me?” His black eyebrows twitch in surprise, but then he shrugs. “I’m...okay. Not great. Definitely not as awesome as I thought I would be at this point in my life, but okay. Happy, mostly, which I guess is good.”

“It is good, and that makes two of us, but why? You’re an NHL star. We’re both okay, even if we thought we would be doing so much better than that, but shouldn’t you be way more than just okay?”

“Yeah. I guess I should. It’s just, uh, I don’t know. Maybe I’ve just gotten too used to certain things about this life I have now, but it’s not as fulfilling as I thought it would be. It feels like something is missing, but I don’t know what that something is.”

“That’s...not what I was expecting you to say,” I admit softly. “It’s nice to know you’re still in there, though. The real you. The guy has feelings and stuff.”

“I’m in here, alright. I just don’t always know how to get out.” Austin chuckles again as he inclines his head, but then we lapse into silence again.

Letting out an internal sigh, I resolve that I will use this time to catch up with him properly instead of sitting here, letting the awkward silence reign supreme.

Thankfully, I know exactly how to draw him out. “Your game against Sentinels in March,” I start and his eyes immediately come back to mine. “You let Waylon have that puck. It was a mistake and you made it, but I think you did it on purpose.”

“What?” He frowns. “No. Of course, not.”

My eyebrows climb on my forehead. Waylon was traded to the Sentinels a year ago, but I remember seeing pictures of him and Austin together on social media. They were close

before the man left. “Really? You didn’t let your former captain have it for old times’ sake?”

“Never,” he says fiercely, sliding his own elbows on to the table and getting comfortable as he leans forward. “What other mistakes do you think I made this season, then? Let’s hear it.”

“Oh, uh.” Shit. “I don’t know, actually. That was the only game I caught. Sorry.”

He scoffs. “Come on, I’m giving you permission to rip apart my performance here. Or to try, anyway. But you were wrong about that first one. I didn’t let him have it. He just took advantage of a second when I was distracted.”

“Maybe, but I still didn’t see any of your other games.”

Austin’s eyes narrow on mine, then his head shakes and he laughs. “You used to love ripping apart my performance and you never missed a game.”

“Sure, but that was only because of how much I loved ripping apart your performance. It made you a pretty damn good player, though.”

“You’re taking credit for that now?” His eyes widen, voice ringing with incredulity and humor. “You can have some of the credit, but not all of it and only if you admit that you still don’t miss a game.”

I sigh, but the ice is broken and even though I wasn’t planning on admitting this to him, I nod anyway. It just feel wrong to lie after he was so honest before. “Okay, yes. I still never miss a game. I can’t.”

He presses his palms together, the muscles in his forearms rippling as he smirks at me. “I knew it. You’re as much of a junkie as I am.”

That, I am. I am a junkie. Seeing them on TV always hits me like a sledgehammer. Just like it did the day I found out they were coming home, but even despite the pain, I’ve never been able to bring myself not to watch.

Or listen when I’m not in front of a TV.

Before I even know what's happening, we're talking like it's the old days and I'm still just his best friend, giving him pointers and telling him things I'd noticed that no else did. Austin starts talking to me about the townhouse they share in Denver, their friends, and their lives, and I get so immersed in listening to the tales of what his life is like now that time passes by in a blur.

By the time I remember to check my watch, it's late. My heart jolts when I see the time and I push my chair back immediately. "I'm so sorry, Austin. I have to go. The buses are going to stop running soon."

"We'll take you home. Don't worry about the bus."

As I think it over, knowing I have no real reason to say no, I tilt my head at him. "Only if you tell me the truth."

"About what?"

"Did you mean it when you said you used to have a crush on me?"

Austin snorts down a laugh, shaking his head as leans forward again, so far this time that I feel his breath feathering across my skin. "I didn't just have a crush on you, Amaya. I was gone for you. Head over heels. So was Brooklyn."

I don't even know how to feel about that. My skin goes hot and cold at the same time, my chest aching but joyful simultaneously. Aching for me, but joyful for them, because who knows how their lives would've worked out if one of them had asked me out.

Either way, I simply sigh now as I stare into those blue eyes that used to be half my universe. "You sure had a funny way of showing it."

"We were young." He shrugs a shoulder as he sits back again, digging his wallet out his pocket before he looks back at me. "We didn't know any better."

"And now?"

Austin eyes land squarely on mine as he says, without any hesitation whatsoever, "We know better."

CHAPTER
EIGHTEEN

AUSTIN

Lying in my bed at the hotel, I can't stop thinking about Amaya. The drapes in my windows are still drawn, but I know it's damn early because of the way the morning sun isn't even casting a glow against the curtains just yet.

It's definitely too early for Amaya to be in the hotel. If she's even got a shift today. A big, very hard part of me wishes she was here, though. That girl has climbed right back into my brain and nothing I've done so far has been able to get her out.

It's driving me nuts. I don't do this. I don't lie in bed at the crack of dawn, daydreaming about a girl and wondering what she's doing right now. The last time I thought about a woman so constantly was when I was eighteen.

Just before we left here.

It was the same woman, though. It's always been her. She invades my thoughts like a conquering army and then she just refuses to leave. Took me a long time to stop obsessing over her back in the day.

Eventually, I realized that I'd never move on if I didn't just move the *fuck* on. I couldn't keep seeing her face and hearing her voice, knowing that she was so fucking far away *and* that she'd never be mine. So I quit her like she was a bad habit. I'm not proud of it, but I did it for the sake of my sanity and I can't say I'm sorry.

I wouldn't have made it as far as I have with my head where it's at right now. After we got drafted, Brooklyn and I were so fucking new to *everything* and it was a welcome

distraction, so I let myself get absorbed in my new reality. It allowed me to focus on my game and my future instead of the girl we'd left behind.

New and desperate to prove myself, I'd thrown everything I had at the Devils, but for the longest time, Amaya was just too hard to shake, but life was carrying on and getting busier by the day. Brooklyn and I settled into our new city, with new friends, teammates, and lives. Eventually, once I'd forced myself to stop calling her every spare minute I had, I woke up one morning and she just...wasn't in my head all the time anymore.

Do I regret hurting her? Of course.

But now, I'm wondering if this is the universe pushing us together. It's probably stupid, but I can't help wondering if we're here for a reason—and not the dinner.

For the first time in my life, I'm also wondering if it might be time to slow down. Not on the ice, but in life. I've been going at it full-speed, flat-out since I was kid but now that I'm back here, with her, I'm enjoying the slower pace a lot more than I expected.

These last few months, I've been having all kinds of issues. We still had a damn good season, but off the ice, I was slipping and I didn't know what to do about it. It got to a point where everything felt off and nothing felt right.

But being back here, giving pointers to the kids yesterday and then having dinner with Eli and Amaya after? It felt good. Too fucking good.

It feels like it's already changing me and I don't know if I'm supposed to embrace it or to run for the fucking hills before it sucks me in and keeps me here. The fact that right now I'm not vehemently opposed to the thought of *letting* it suck me in makes me want to run for the fucking hills, though.

We're only here for a couple more days, thankfully. Putting this place in our rearview mirror isn't going to be easy, but it was hard last time too and we managed to survive that. We will survive again.

Somewhere in the back of my mind, a voice revolts against the thought and I exhale deeply, groaning as I burrow into my pillow. I can't actually believe how fast it's happened, but being home has definitely brought all those old feelings for Amaya back to the surface.

Worse, even, because realizing how hard she's had it since we left and knowing how she's been hustling just to keep their heads above water has put a whole new dimension to those feelings. Amaya as a kid was great. A loyal friend who shared our interests and was always fun to be around.

Amaya as a grownup, however, is a woman to respect. A woman who still feels like my best friend, which is a feeling I haven't had for years, but who also knows what it is to work hard. To fight for what she wants. To look adversity right in the eyes and then send it a great, big *fuck you*. All of those are qualities I happen to admire in people.

My heart thuds in my chest as I stare up at the dull white ceiling. Last night when she said we used to have a funny way of showing her that we'd loved her, I told her it was because we didn't know any better, then I told her that we do know better now. Because now, we do know how to show her that we—or I, at least—still feel that way.

Deep down inside, I can feel it coming. One of us, or maybe even Travis, is going to make a move on her. For me, it's probably because she's got an uncanny ability to make me feel grounded, to treat me like the person I am rather than the guy the press has put up on a pedestal. It's nice to be able to be real for a change and not feel any pressure to live up to expectations.

On the other hand, I *choose* to live up to said expectations. Brooklyn and Travis don't give a shit and they're doing just fine.

Maybe it's just time for me to make a change when we get back to Denver, but just like it did a minute ago, that voice in my head revolts at the idea of leaving here. Of leaving Amaya behind all over again.

At least not without getting a real taste of her first.

As soon as the thought hits, I scoff out loud into the silence of the room. My brain is so conditioned to think that way that *of course* it fucking went there, but I already know that isn't what this is about.

It's not about finally getting to taste her. It's about that sense of *realness* I feel when I'm with her.

Something about it is a lot more enticing than I might've thought it would be. Being myself. Laughing with a woman and not dragging her to my bed after. The constructive criticism rather than overwhelming praise that has lost all meaning to me at this point.

I have no idea what's going on with me or why I'm loving the thought of all that as much as I am. But I *am* loving it. So much so that my morning wood has turned into a raging erection and I wasn't even thinking about her naked.

Aaaand now I'm thinking about her naked. Fuck.

This is far from the first time I've wondered what all that creamy skin of hers looks like when it's not covered up by her t-shirts and shorts. It's definitely not the first time I've thought about all those full curves on top of me. Under me. In front of me. Not the first time I've imagined having my hands on her big, heavy tits or running my tongue along the curve of her thick thighs.

The women I've been with have never looked anything like her. Where she's got all those voluptuous curves, I've stuck to the super skinny types. The women with hardly anything to hang onto at all. It was by my own design, though.

A way to try to *not* think about her when I fuck other women.

But shit.

Whenever I'm by myself, *this* is what I fantasize about. Full curves. Soft flesh. Tits that actually fill my hands for once. An ass that jiggles when I'm taking her from behind.

Now that Amaya's face is back on the body I always envision when I jerk off, the fantasy is so much hotter. It's

been a long time since I've let myself go there. Think about her when I'm horny.

And right now, I'm legitimately hornier than I have been in months. *Issues, I told you.*

My cock strains against the sheets and I'm suddenly wondering if she put them on this bed. If her hands have touched where my skin is right now. My nipples go hard and my muscles start tensing. I consider rolling out of bed and grabbing a cold shower, but I don't follow through, dismissing the idea almost right off the bat. The images in my head are too insanely sexy and I'm enjoying having them there too much.

We have to pick her up in a couple hours to go shopping for a dress. I was planning on hitting the gym until we had to leave, but now...shit.

There's no way I'm getting out of bed until I do something about this.

I've barely completed the thought when my hand starts sliding down my side. It feels so good that I groan out loud even though I don't typically make any sounds during sex. It really has been a long time since I've been this turned on, though. My muscles don't typically tremble with restraint either, but that's happening right now too.

Still, I drag it out. I've been looking for a way to get my mojo back and it looks like this is it. My eyes are wide open, but I'm not seeing the ceiling overhead. Instead, I'm looking at Amaya as she strips off those boyish shorts and shimmies out of them, letting them drop to the floor and standing in front of me in only a pair of plain cotton panties.

My breathing hitches as I let my gaze run over her imaginary thighs, taking in the wet spot that's already appeared on the light blue fabric of her underwear. Slowly, so fucking slowly, she hooks her fingers under the hem of her shirt and teases it up, giving me a view of her pale stomach and those curvy hips.

I've seen her in a bikini exactly once in my life—and it was for less than a minute before she put her t-shirt back on. She only took the damn thing off because Brooklyn told her she had a bug on her back—there wasn't one. I'm pretty sure he just wanted to see her in the bikini too—but that one glimpse has informed my fantasies since that fateful day at the river the summer before we left, and it does the same now.

As I'm thinking about it, my hand skates over the hard planes of my stomach, my chest, and even my thighs. I touch myself everywhere I want her to be touching me and then some, brushing the pad of my thumb over my nipple and groaning again before I move over to give the other one the same treatment. My cock jerks. I'm pretty sure I'm leaking pre-cum, but I won't give in just yet.

In my mind's eye, I imagine Amaya finally lifting that t-shirt over her head and undoing the clasp of her bra, tossing the garment at me where I'm lying on this very bed. My heart is pounding as I stare at those round, gorgeous tits and the hard, pinkish nipples I've never seen before.

Amaya gives me a teasing smirk as she plants one knee on the mattress, the other foot staying firmly on the ground. She runs her hands along her body much like I'm doing right now, but when she reaches the waistband of her panties, her fingers dip into it and I see them moving in slow circles around her clit.

Her eyes darken, her head falling back as she catches her lower lip between her teeth and moans. And then Travis appears behind her, wrapping one inked arm around her waist while his free hand dives into her panties to join hers.

As I look at the picture the two of them cut together, with Travis's blond hair to Amaya's dark brown, his tattooed skin to her unblemished, and his eyes on where he's touching her, my dick pulses. Trav and I have done a lot of ridiculously hot things together over the years, but this is the hottest.

By a mile.

I don't even care that it's not really happening. It still wins.

As I watch, his hand speeds up, her body starting to quiver as she drops her head against his shoulder, leaning into him and letting him do whatever the hell he wants to her. Brooklyn suddenly appears in the scene too, kneeling down behind Travis and doing something that makes my friend curse and groan, but I'm not paying much attention to them.

I'm too fixated on Amaya as my own hand finally runs down the length of my torso and I wrap my fingers around my shaft. I can't drag it out anymore, not when I can see that she's about to come.

Her eyes are open and on mine as he fucks her with his fingers, pulling the panties away to give me a view of her bare pussy. It's swollen and so fucking wet that I can see her juices shimmering on her skin in the low light of the room.

I stroke harder, hissing as I drag my thumb over the tip of my dick. My legs tense, my entire body on edge as Travis's moans get louder and Amaya's eyes remain locked on mine. Her nipples are so hard now that I can't ignore them anymore. In my fantasy, I sit up and wrap my lips around one.

She gasps my name and I have to bite the inside of my cheek in reality not to shout at the pleasure that races through me when she says it while she's so close. I suck harder on her nipple, my hands on her hips and sliding back to grab her ass and hold it tight.

The backs of my fingers graze against Travis's cock as I hold onto her, but it doesn't bother either of us. When you're doing the things we do together, incidental touching happens. There's no way around it.

Brooklyn's hands are down there too, and I feel Trav's dick moving as my brother jerks him, but again, it's not them I'm focused on. It's Amaya and the way her fingers are now tugging at my hair, her body shaking against mine.

"Are you going to come for us, Amaya?" Travis asks roughly, a hitch in his voice that tells me he's getting close too. Just like her. And me. "Are you going to coat my fingers in your cum so I can feed it to Austin? Give him the taste of you he's always wanted?"

All she can do in response is to moan and jerk her head in a nod, and then she's coming and so am I, ropes of hot cum covering my chest and the sheets around me. My body spasms, the orgasm sucking me dry and leaving me panting in the aftermath.

I blink my eyes open, not even sure when I closed them, and grin as I fold my fingers around my cock. I can't remember the last time I came that hard, but it definitely wasn't with any of the puck bunnies I've spent the last few years fucking. That much, I'm absolutely, one hundred percent sure of.

CHAPTER
NINETEEN

AMAYA

I'm stupidly nervous about going shopping. For starters, I don't have any money for a dress and I don't want them to buy it for me, so I'm hoping I'll be able to convince them to go to the thrift store instead of the mall.

Since it's my day off, I'm also not wearing my uniform or clothing I happened to have found stuffed in the bottom of Eli's locker. They wouldn't have expected me to look nice on the ice. Probably even accepted that I just kept really old clothes there, but today is different.

Today, they're picking me up from my house. On my day off. So I've had time to make myself look a little bit nicer. I just don't have any nicer clothes to achieve that with. I'm wearing denim shorts and a t-shirt, both of which are so old, I'm pretty sure I've had them since before they even left.

They're also some of the only casual clothes I own that don't have any holes anywhere, though. *So fuck it.*

The superstars are just going to have to deal with being seen with me the same way I've always been. Plain. Doesn't mean I'm still nervous about it, though.

I'm so nervous that I'm standing at the door waiting, my mother's old, brown leather handbag—the best one I've got—hanging over my shoulder. As I'm peeking out through the window for at least the tenth time since I came to stand here five minutes ago, their black rental rolls up outside and my stomach starts bouncing around.

Oh, dear god. This is happening. It's actually happening. They came. I had no reason to doubt that they would, but I still couldn't help but wonder if they were going to show up. Now here they are, and that means I'm going to be spending time alone with the three of them all afternoon.

I pull back so they won't see me spying on them through the window like some weirdo who's spying instead of just going outside, and as I do, I hear their doors slamming. *Holy hell. Why did I agree to this again?*

My palms are clammy, my stomach still jumping, and I'm pretty sure my heart will explode if it keeps pounding the way it is. Their voices filter from the quiet street, easily breaching our worn wooden door and flowing in through the open windows.

"I'm gonna go say hi to Mom and Dad real quick," Austin says. "She's been texting me, so I just want to let them know that we're okay and that we'll see them tonight."

"Want us to come with you?" Travis asks. "I'm sure Amaya will understand."

That, I will. In fact, they should all go over to Mr. and Mrs. Ryker's and forget all about our shopping trip and taking me to the party with them, but Brooklyn quickly dashes my hopes of that happening.

"She would understand, but we're seeing them later. Let's go grab her while Aus checks on them."

Damn it. A shopping trip with those three men should be a dream come true. In some ways, it is a dream come true, but I really don't have any money and I desperately don't want them to know just how little Eli and I get by on.

Undeterred by my mental pleas for them to change their minds, Brooklyn and Travis come up to the door, their footsteps falling almost like they're walking in sync until they stop. Then a loud knock comes at the door and I hang my head, dragging in a deep breath and working on mustering a smile before I open it.

“Hi,” I squeak when I see them, then I clear my throat, my cheeks heating when I realize that they’ll know exactly how nervous I am if that keeps happening.

At the same time, however, I forget all about my nerves when I finally remember to lift my eyes away from the floor and I see the picture they made standing at my door. I suck in a breath involuntarily, hoping like hell they somehow didn’t hear it, but shoulder to shoulder, Brooklyn and Travis are an incredibly striking pair.

Both of them are clad in cargo shorts and tight fitting t-shirts, showing off not only their muscles physiques, but also their tattoos, Travis’s too many to count and Brooklyn with only some tribal looking ink on one bicep.

Standing just an inch or so taller than his boyfriend, Brooklyn grins and takes a step forward, enveloping me in another one of his bear hugs as he pulls me close. My brain short-circuits, my body humming with pleasure at his tight, warm embrace.

“Amaya! You’re home. I was wondering if you were going to blow us off or if you’d actually be home.”

“I, uh, here I am.” My voice is still squeaky, but a little less so now than it was before.

When he pulls away, I’m still a little bit dizzy, but Travis gives me a quick hug next, his torso just as hard as Brooklyn’s but his arms somehow stronger.

“Hey, Amaya. We’re glad you’re home.” He nearly squeezes the life out of me for the seconds he holds me and when he lets go, I have to blink to regain my composure—and my breath. *How is blinking supposed to—*

My lungs finally fill with oxygen then when I remember I’m supposed to breathe too, and the air makes my brain clear enough that I don’t waste any time getting down to business. “So, uh, I’m ready to go, but if it’s all the same to you, I was wondering if we could try Ruby’s first?”

“Ruby’s,” Brooklyn says slowly, like he’s searching his memory for the name, then his eyes flare wide open when he

remembers. “The thrift store? Oh, hell no. I was looking around last night online to see what was available around town and I found out Tiffany Bridges has a little boutique now.”

“Tiffany Bridges.” I wrinkle my nose. “Didn’t Austin used to...”

“Let her suck his dick when he was bored? Yeah, he did, but I called her this morning to make an appointment and she agreed to loan us a dress as long as we post about it being from her store on social media. Cool, right?”

“Super cool,” I respond unenthusiastically. It really is awesome that he can pull those kinds of favors now, but from *Tiffany? I’d rather have paid.*

“You don’t like her,” Travis says with an amused smile as I lock our front door while Brooklyn bounds over to greet his mom, who’s standing with Austin on their front lawn.

I offer Mrs. Ryker a friendly wave before I arch a brow at Travis. “Do I like her? Would you like someone who was sickly sweet to your face just because you were friends with them, and then used to talk shit about you behind your back?”

He shakes his head, but confusion mars his brow. “Austin really hooked up with her even though she talked shit about you?”

I sigh as I slide my keys into Mom’s purse. “I don’t think he ever knew about it. Those two were like gods by the time we got to high school. Evelyn isn’t nicknamed the *Hockey Haven* of Minnesota for nothing and they were already great. No one messed with them and by extension, no one openly messed with me.”

He thinks it over before he shrugs. “At least that means you probably didn’t get bullied, right?”

I snort. “Not when they were around, but I’m no snitch.”

Mrs. Ryker waves us off once we’re in the car, and Austin glances at me, smiling before he turns back to the road. “Hey, Amaya. Sleep well?”

“The best. Although, now that I know we’re going to see Tiffany, I wish I was still sleeping. Do you guys think she still offers blowjobs, or does she only sell dresses now?”

Austin lets out a long, deep groan. “Tiffany? As in Tiffany Bridges.”

“Your favorite,” I joke.

“Uh, no. Regular does not mean favorite,” he objects immediately, his face suddenly a little pale. “I really didn’t need to be reminded of her. Or to see her again.”

“Why?” I lean forward a bit, studying his tight jaw and that ashen face. “You don’t want her to offer again, or you do and you don’t know how to get rid of me while she measures you for...well, not a dress.”

He shakes his head, chuckling under his breath as he flinches. “I definitely don’t want her to offer again. She was terrible, but more importantly, I’m over that kind of thing now.”

It doesn’t escape my notice that both Brooklyn and Travis are suddenly shooting him puzzled glances, but they don’t call him out on it. I, however, do. “Bullshit. The NHL’s premier playboy is not just over blowjobs now that he’s back home.”

“I’m not over blowjobs,” he says playfully. “I’m over receiving them from random women.”

My heart starts thudding again. Between that and his comment last night about knowing better, whatever the hell that meant, I’m so damn confused but I’m not naive enough to think that it has anything to do with me. I’ve seen the women he’s been out with. The socialites and the honest-to-god supermodels. It’s a lot more likely that he’s just finally growing up.

While Brooklyn starts teasing Austin about Tiffany, I settle back in my chair, only looking up again when Travis’s phone starts ringing. He pulls it out of his pocket, a weird, almost constipated expression flickering across his features when he sees the name on the screen. He silences it fast, shoving the

phone back into his pocket and turning to face the window stonily.

It's on the tip of my tongue to ask if he's okay, but I don't know him well enough to pry so I leave it alone. His phone doesn't shut up, though. It rings once more before we get to Tiffany's store, then it rings again as we're climbing out of the car.

Travis's face keeps turning harder every time it rings, his body practically vibrating with tension by the time we're walking up to her door, but as much as curiosity is killing me, I still don't ask.

Instead, I let Austin guide me into the boutique with his hand on the small of my back as Brooklyn tells us they'll be right in. He and Travis stay outside, but Austin nods at them, not giving me any excuses to get out of this or even to put it off the bell jingles above our heads.

The first thing I notice about Tiffany's store is that it's full. Like, really full. *Damn, it's no wonder she's willing to loan us something as long as they post about it. She really seems to need the exposure.*

A perverse little thrill runs through me, and I know I shouldn't take pleasure out of the misfortune of others, but this girl is a real bitch. A real bitch who full-on squeals when she sees Austin, dragging my gaze away from the overstuffed rails and shelves of her store.

"Brooklyn!" she exclaims, a massive smile on the cherry red lips as she approaches us with a sway of her hips and a flick of her long, shiny blonde hair before she spreads her arms out to her sides. "It's so good to see you, baby. C'mere and give an old friend some love. I was so surprised when you called this morning."

Austin grunts, but doesn't correct her. He also doesn't go in for the hug she wants from him, and yet another little thrill runs through me. "Tiff. You remember Amaya, right? Thanks for offering to dress her for us for tonight. We appreciate it."

Her feet slam to a halt when she finally manages to tear her bright blue eyes away from his for long enough to look at me, and her mouth twists in disgust for just a moment before she schools her expression.

“Amaaaayaaa.” She says my name in that hesitant, high-pitched way of women who are about to let out a fake giggle to top off the fake enthusiasm. “Of course, I remember her. I just wasn’t sure she knew what a dress was.”

Ah. She really hasn’t changed at all. Except that she’s saying the mean things in front of him now. Well, she also doesn’t know he’s not Brooklyn, so there’s that...

Austin stiffens behind me and when I glance at him, I see that he’s got a look of disbelieving venom on his face. His eyebrows are high, chin low, and his eyes are shooting fire. *This version of him, I’m familiar with again. That look hasn’t changed since he perfected it when we were ten.*

“She knows what a dress is, Tiff. She just doesn’t need them to look beautiful.” The sharp comments shut her up immediately, but her eyes narrow on mine even as she nods.

Then she looks back up at him, all cheery again with those eyes wide and bright, and shoots him a seductive smile. Which says she really is still the same, considering that she thinks he’s his brother.

“Oh, sure, Brooklyn. I was just teasing.” She winks at him over her shoulder as she leads us further into the store. “What did you guys have in mind for tonight? I’ll admit, I pulled some options for you earlier, but I didn’t realize your date would be quite so...curvy.”

Austin blows out a heavy breath, then he takes my hand and leads me past the bitch, making another little tingle of joy shoot through me. “We’ll find something. Thanks. I’ll call you when we’re done.”

He doesn’t wait for her to join us, completely dismissive of her even though it’s her shop. Still holding my hands in one of his, he doesn’t even ask for my size before he starts asking about my preferences in terms of length and color. I appreciate

that he's not trying to make the decision for me, so I cooperate.

“Blue. Or purple. And long. Floor-length if we can find it. Just something that covers all of me properly.”

Tiffany snorts, probably still watching us from someplace close by, but Austin ignores her, simply starting to hand over dresses—in the right size—that I might like to try on.

As smug as I'm feeling right now though, I know it won't last. The Rykers have always been protective of me, but when push comes to shove—or blowjobs are offered—Austin has loyalties, and they've never been with me.

CHAPTER
TWENTY

BROOKLYN

Travis is about to follow Amaya and Austin into the boutique when I stop him. With my hand firm on his shoulder, I pull him back and call out the others. “We’ll catch up in a minute.”

Austin glances at me and nods before he puts a hand protectively on her lower back and leads her in. As they disappear, Travis spins around to face me. Mirrored sunglasses cover his eyes, but I can feel them on me even if I can’t see them.

“What’s up?” he asks, his voice a little lower than usual since it’s suddenly infused with concern. “You okay?”

I drop my gaze pointedly to his hand and the phone that’s still in it. A minute ago, as we were getting out of the car, it started ringing and he silenced it. Again.

It would’ve been fine. I would’ve thought it was just spam or something, except for the fact that I’ve *been* thinking that for the last few days. Ever since we got here, his phone has been ringing a lot more often than it usually does and he’s been ignoring the calls. He took one of them, disappeared for a few minutes, and then came back without saying anything about it.

Which is also fine. Nothing alarming about it, but the look on his face when he came back *after* that call is what made me take notice. There was a haunted look in his eyes and after, with every call he ignores, his reactions have been getting worse.

His fingers rolling into fists. His spine going rigid. The tense set of his jaw. This time, he even turned a little pale. *So yeah, I'm starting to think there's more to those calls than spam.*

“What’s that about?” I ask before I lift my gaze back to his face. “That thing has been busy lately.”

Trav’s eyes are still hidden behind those shades, but I see the back of his jaw ticking before he tries to shrug it off. “It’s nothing. Just someone I don’t really like talking to.”

My heart stutters, my own jaw suddenly tightening. “It’s not nothing. Since when do you lie?”

Since we’re in the middle of town and it’s just after noon, I keep my voice down. The last thing we need is to draw the attention of a fan right now. We’re both wearing ballcaps pulled low over our faces and I’ve got sunglasses on too, but none of that qualifies as a top-notch disguise.

“I’m not lying.” Travis keeps facing me but for a long minute, he doesn’t say a word. “I’m not cheating on you, if that’s what you’re thinking.”

“It’s not what I was thinking.” My heart rate speeds up even more as I stare back at him. “What I’m thinking is that you’re in some kind of trouble and if I’m right, I might be able to help if you tell me what it is.”

His jaw ticks again. “You can’t help.”

“So I *am* right.” Dread turns my blood to sludge and I have to force myself not to reach for him right now.

Sometimes, not being able to touch in public really is a fucking drag. “What is it, Trav? What kind of trouble”

He tips his head back toward the sky, shaking it before he motions to the car. “If we have to talk about this right now, we’re not doing it out here.”

I frown. *That means it’s bad, right?*

My chest suddenly feels like a rhinoceros is sitting on it. Trav opens the car door and climbs into the backseat, but my movements are slower, sluggish as shock ripples through me. I

don't even know what this is about yet, but I do know it's going to be bad.

No doubt.

If not, he'd have broken it down for me on the sidewalk real quick. The fact that he's not, that he's gone to the car and that it requires an entire conversation, that means it's something fucked up.

My pulse pounds under my jaw as I climb in after him and shut the door, thanking the good lord for having given mankind the brains to invent tinted windows. "What is it?"

Travis slides his sunglasses off slowly and when I finally see his eyes, that shock I was feeling turns into panic. Those greens are filled with something I've sure as fuck never seen in them before: fear.

And not just a touch of it. Not just being a little scared of a spider that was in the corner of your room a minute ago and is now gone.

The fear shining in Travis's eyes is the intense kind. The kind of fear that wraps itself around the core of your being and paralyzes you. Fear so real that it takes control of your very heartbeat and never lets go.

The blood drains from my face at the sight of it. "Oh, god. What happened?"

His tongue darts out and he wets his lips before he drags in a deep breath, unlocks his phone, and hands it over. It's open to his call log and when I look at it, I see only one name outside of my own.

Clyde.

Confusion rattles through me. "Who is he?"

Travis glances at the window, shoving a hand into his hair and closing his eyes as he lets out a deep sigh. My boyfriend is an insanely private person. I'm not sure if it's a product of his upbringing or if it's just his personality, but the point is that his need for privacy is almost like a compulsion. It was a way of life for him growing up. A necessary tool for survival.

It made it difficult to get to know him at all, but now that I do, I also know that there are so many sides of him I've never seen before. A lot I don't know if I'll ever see, and I'm okay with that. Because I have to be. The parts of him I do know, I love. It's that simple.

But whatever this is about, it's clearly not something he wants to talk about. He's obviously planning on telling me since he asked to talk about it in the car, but I can see how hard it is for him.

Revealing parts of himself goes against the grain and I get it. It's not easy for me either, but it's definitely easier for me than it is for him. Eventually, he opens his eyes but he keeps them on the window instead of looking at me.

"Clyde Baxter is one of my former foster brothers," his voice is flat and devoid of emotion, which means it's taking everything he's got just to get the words out. He gets like that sometimes, especially when he's talking about his past. "I didn't want to tell you about it before because it's not your problem, but it's gotten to a point where what he's saying might affect us in the long run, so that's why I'm telling you now."

Us? How? I don't ask, though. I'm pretty sure that as he glares out at the pedestrians strolling by the car, he's trying to figure out how to give me those answers.

Eventually, he decides to start at the beginning. "When I was fifteen, I was in a group home and it wasn't one of the good ones. The kids who went there were like me. We were the troublemakers. The fighters. The angry ones who lashed out at anyone who even breathed in our direction."

"Shit." The word comes out even though I didn't mean for it to, and Travis shrugs as he nods his agreement.

"Yeah, shit is right. That's exactly what the place was. Shit. Hell. A hellish shithole. Take your pick, but it all means the same thing. It was a terrible place to be and the kids weren't any better."

"But *you* were there."

Another shrug as he keeps glaring out the window, his back as straight as a rod and his hands clenched into white-knuckled fists in his lap. “Exactly. Back then, I was just as terrible as the rest of them.”

I can’t imagine him ever having been terrible, but I know how angry he was even when I met him. Add teenage hormones and abandonment issues to the mix, and I’m pretty sure the space he was in emotionally wasn’t pretty.

As he sighs, he leans his head back but his eyes are still on the world outside, almost as if the only way he can get through this is if he pretends I’m not here at all. “That’s where I met Clyde. He had the bottom bunk. I had the top.”

“Well done.”

He snorts. “I broke his nose for it, so thanks.”

I blink hard, but I doubt the truth of what he’s saying. I guess I’m just surprised that at fifteen, he was breaking kids’ noses over where he slept while Austin and I each had our own bedrooms by then and my biggest worry was whose bedroom Amaya was going to choose each night.

“We had a rough start, him and I,” Travis continues, his voice gravely and thoughtful. “Eventually though, we became friends. Or something like it anyway. In our world, that meant fighting together instead of against one another.”

At fifteen, I got into a few fights myself, but they were always about normal stuff. Someone talking shit about me, my brother, or Amaya. Some jackass that didn’t know his place. A teammate with an attitude as bad as mine.

None of my fights ever led to broken bones, though. Hardly even drew blood. Without fail, before it could come to that, Austin was there to remind me that the next punch I threw could be the one that ended my career before it even started. *Annoyed me to shit, but it worked.*

I have a feeling Clyde didn’t do that for Travis. I also have a feeling their fights were nothing like my own.

“What does he want from you now? Are you guys still friends?”

Travis shakes his head, finally looking at me but it's only a glance before he closes his eyes again. "We got into a lot of trouble together. He'd been in the system much longer than I had and he'd made a lot more friends. Mostly older guys. He brought me into their group, and I didn't have anything better to do, so I tagged along."

He exhales heavily. "We got arrested together a few times. Mostly for stuff like shoplifting and theft. They never caught me with any of the stolen property, but they arrested me because I was there. I managed to avoid getting a record because of it. They thought I was just hanging out with the wrong crowd. Clyde wasn't so lucky. He'd been running with those guys for a long time and he hero-worshiped them. Did anything and everything they asked."

"So he got locked up?"

He nods. "Did his first stint when he was sixteen. It was while he was gone that I discovered hockey. Anyway, this is where it ties in with what's going on now, but it turns out that he discovered a few things himself on the inside."

"Like what?"

Travis doesn't answer me immediately, his broad chest rising and falling fast for a few seconds before he manages to drag in a deep, calming breath. "Like that there's a lot of money to be made in the adult film industry."

My heart skips and turns to ice in my chest as disbelief turns my bones to jelly. "Porn?"

"One of the guys who was in there with him was our age. Told him that he was making hundreds a month just for letting people watch him jerk off."

Sick. I think I'm going to be sick. "Hundreds?"

He shrugs. "When you're a kid who doesn't have anything, hundreds of dollars sounds like a lot."

"Yeah. No. I get it. It's just..." I suck in a shaky breath. "There's a market that big for watching teenage boys jerk off?"

“There’s a market for everything,” he says flatly. “But yeah, there’s a market for that too. So when Clyde got out, he started doing it. Made a fucking killing. Or what we considered a killing, anyway.”

“Fuck.”

His head drops forward and he lets it hang. “He’s not the only one who started doing it, Brooklyn. I did it too.”

“You...” My throat closes up and I swear, my heart seizes. Struggling to breathe properly, I look at my boyfriend—my gorgeous, strong, *private* boyfriend—and I have no idea what to say.

Travis’s voice is rough when he reaches for my hand, wrapping it up in his as he scoots over. “I’m sorry, Brook. I...I was a kid. I didn’t know any better. I...”

Throat burning, I look up at him, squeezing his hand right back before sliding my other arm around his shoulders and pulling him into me. “Don’t fucking apologize. You have nothing to be sorry for. *I’m* sorry. I’m so fucking sorry that I couldn’t protect you from any of this.”

He leans into me, letting me hold him as he continues. “Clyde kept some of the videos. I...he...we made a few together and the rest, well, he knew where to look for them online.”

“Holy fuck,” I breathe when I finally realize what all those phone calls have been about. “He’s blackmailing you?”

“Since the day I got my first paycheck.”

Raw rage tears through me as I shake my head. “No. Fuck that. We can go to the police. You were a minor. He—“

“If I go to the police, he’ll release the videos,” Travis says hoarsely. “If I do anything other than give him the money he wants, he’ll release the videos.”

“Fuck.” My head is spinning, my mind racing as the urge to *fix this* courses through me like molten lava sliding down a mountain and destroying everything in its path. “Can he prove that it’s you? Is your face in any of the videos?”

“No. I might’ve been young, but I wasn’t stupid.”

“Okay. Okay, okay, okay. That’s okay, then. If he releases—“

“Some of my tattoos are visible,” he says, knocking the breath right back out of my lungs. “I got the first few with the money I made from doing it. I’ve added more over the years, trying to cover up those that might make it possible for people to identify me, but...”

Suddenly sitting up again, he picks up his phone from where I dropped into the footwell at some point without even realizing it. Once it’s back in his hand, he unlocks it, scrolls to something, and shoves it at me.

Bile races up the back of my throat at the image frozen on the screen.

Although it cuts off at his shoulders, I can tell that it’s Travis on the chair in some room that’s way too bright. It’s his build. His chest. His *cock* front and center with his long fingers wrapped around it.

My stomach bottoms out when I realize he’s right. I recognize some of the tattoos. The shaded, black and gray wilting rose on his hip and the falling stars scattered along the inside of his bicep.

These days, the wilting rose is part of a picturesque garden and the falling stars are hidden in an intricate cross, but they’re still there. Not as stark or as obvious as they are in the image on his screen, but if anyone looks close enough, they’ll see them.

“Fuck.”

“Yeah, I know.” He breathes out harshly. “Every time Clyde gets arrested, I get one of these. It’s always a screengrab from a different video. Like he’s trying to prove how many he has.”

“So he’s using them to get you to bail him out.”

Travis pushes his fingers into his hair as he nods. “Bail him out. Pay his legal fees. Whatever he wants. Last year, I

bought him a new car.”

My jaw works its way open. “Are you serious?”

“Sadly, yes.” The expression on his face is drawn and grave as he deletes the image and slides his phone back into his pocket. “No one else knows about this, Brook. It’s me, you, Austin, and Clyde.”

“Aus knows?” My voice cracks like a whip on that last word, but holy fuck. “He knows and neither of you told me?”

His features harden, eyebrows lowering as his eyes narrow. “This isn’t something I tell people, Brook.”

My chest caves, pain and disbelief searing my insides. “I’m not *people*. We’ve been together for six fucking months, Travis. For the last two, we’ve been saying ‘*I love you*’. I’m not *people*.”

“I know.” He reaches for my hands, but I don’t give them to him. Instead, I pull back, moving over as far as I can until my back is pressed to the door. “How long? How long has he known?”

“About a year.”

My eyes fly wide open. “A year?”

Shame and regret flicker in his intense gaze before he blinks it away, going back to just shoving it all down and sounding like an emotionless drone. “When Clyde asked for the car last year, he sent me another picture. Austin saw it by accident. We were leaving practice together when the text came through.”

Heart still slamming in my ears, I shut my eyes and breathe through what feels a lot like a big fucking betrayal. “My brother already knows your deepest, darkest secret.”

“Yes.” Just that. Just that one fucking word. Silence stretches between us for so long, I’m pretty sure we’ve missed the entire shopping trip, but right now, I don’t give a shit. Austin can help Amaya find a dress. Doesn’t matter much to me what it looks like anyway.

“Are we okay?” he asks finally, his voice still stony and dispassionate. “If not, if this is too much for— “

“It’s not that it’s too much for me,” I snap before I pull in a deep breath through my nostrils and try to use the oxygen to calm myself the hell down. “It’s that Aus has known for a whole goddamn year and I get why you didn’t tell me then. I even get why you didn’t tell me after we started dating. What I don’t get is why you still didn’t tell me after you said that you *fucking* love me. I thought you trusted me, but clearly —“

“I do trust you, Brooklyn. This just wasn’t your problem. It wasn’t relevant to us or what we were becoming to one another. It’s not like I *told* Austin. He found out. I’ve never willingly told another soul. Except for you.”

Some of my anger melts under the desperate edge in his voice and I look at him again, taking in the strain around his eyes and the worried twist of his mouth. I fucking hate seeing him like this. Fucking hate seeing the turmoil churning behind those deep greens like he’s already preparing to distance himself from me.

God, this is fucked up.

But I don’t want to lose him and I know that right now, he’s thinking that I’m going to walk away. That I won’t be able to get past my twin having known about this when I didn’t. That I’m going to leave him and never look back.

Travis, for all the muscles, tattoos, and scowls, is in a near-constant state of fight-or-flight. Deep down, he’s always trying to prepare himself to be traded. Dumped. Left.

I don’t want to contribute to that. I can’t.

“Look, I don’t know how to be okay with this, but we, you and I, we’re okay, Travis.” I finally slide away from the door, not stopping until my legs are pressed up against his. I put my hands on either side of his neck, bringing my forehead to his and breathing him in as I wrestle with the urge to keep arguing. Keep pushing.

This whole relationship thing...I know I don’t want to hurt the man I love, but *fuck*. I’m not used to being a peacemaker.

A source of comfort. It's really hard to accept everything he just told me and then put all my feelings aside to reassure him.

But if I don't do that, he will be in pain until I do, and this man? He's had enough pain for this lifetime and the next. "I love you, Travis. I love you so fucking much, but you have to let me help you, okay? I don't know how yet, but maybe we just should break the story to the press. Take away Clyde's power."

Travis stiffens in my arms, pushes me off him and shakes his head, his eyes hard as he stares at me. "All I want is to live my life, and this could ruin that *and* my career if it comes out. I'll keep paying him forever before I let him wreck everything I've built for myself. I won't do it, Brook. I just won't."

I nod. I still think it's probably our best bet, going public with everything and facing the repercussions together, but it's not my call. If that's not what he wants, then I'll take this secret to the grave. And I'll throw all my considerable resources at Clyde to make sure he does the same fucking thing.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-ONE

AMAYA

When I come out of the changing room in what feels like the tenth dress I've tried on, Brooklyn and Travis are suddenly there, but they're both looking pale and withdrawn. I frown, watching as Tiffany mistakes Brooklyn for Austin now and tries to come onto him, dragging her nails down the length of his arm as she smiles demurely at him.

"Want to come check out my stock room, honey? I've got so many dresses back there."

Brooklyn scowls, streaks of red flaring up his neck and flushing his jaw as he shakes her off. "You're barking up the wrong tree, *honey*. Fuck off and keep your hands to yourself."

Tiffany blinks hard, stumbling back as she tries to recover from the mistake I know she's just realized she made. She was one of Austin's puck bunnies for almost two years, and she still can't tell them apart.

Not until Brooklyn treats her like that, anyway.

Austin sighs, glancing at her and shaking his head. "You know, Tiff. After all these years, you'd think you would be able to tell us apart."

He looks at me then, strangely deep emotion in his eyes as he smiles from where he's sitting on one of Tiffany's overstuffed chairs in the waiting area. "Did you know that you and Travis are the only ones who have never gotten it wrong?"

As I stare back at him, I know how loaded that statement is. I know that it's a huge thing for them, and for the entire

multiples community. The fact that I still haven't ever gotten it wrong warms my soul with a recognition of how very different they are and how much they deserve the acknowledgment of *someone* knowing that.

I glance at Travis, whose still pale, but he dips his chin at me, the slightest smile on his lips as our eyes meet. Tiffany, on the other hand, has shrunk into herself, her shoulders caved as she flicks a glance between them and opens her mouth to say something.

Still fueled by that knowledge that even after all this time—and never having sucked either of their dicks—I still know them better, I smirk and beat her to it. “You’re both assholes, but you’re different kinds of assholes. Of course, I can still tell you apart.”

I take a step forward, feeling a badass bitch for once in my life as I do a little twirl in the vibrant, violet creation I’m wearing. “What do you think? Is this the one?”

Travis smiles, but he tries to hide it by ducking his head. Austin is still shooting a venomous look at Tiffany, but Brooklyn blinks like he’s only just noticed what I’m wearing.

“I didn’t see any of the others, but that’s the one,” he declares easily, his gaze dragging up and down the length of my body and setting me on absolute fire—with his boyfriend right next to him.

Down, girl. Behave yourself, for fuck’s sake.

“As it happens, I agree with you,” I say instead, putting real effort into making my tone sound conversational. “It’s uncomfortable, but they all are. This one is simply less uncomfortable than the rest.”

Travis glances at Austin, reaching out to put a hand on his friend’s shoulder. “Want to help me hunt down some shoes for her? She can’t go in sneakers.”

“Sure.” Austin still looks distracted, but when Tiffany follows after them, I sigh.

He’s never been her greatest fan. This is *not* the first time I’ve seen him deeply annoyed by her and yet, in the past, he

always wound up calling her anyway and she was always there to deliver. A lot of things have changed, but a lot has also stayed the same. I'm pretty sure that as irritated as he is with her now, he's at least going to get her number while they're out of my sight.

Brooklyn's gaze follows mine, his voice soft as he steps closer to me. "He's not that guy anymore."

My eyebrows twitch as I finally look back at him. "Does that mean it's *you* in all of those tabloid pictures then? Have I, and the press, finally gotten it wrong after all?"

Brook grins and shakes his head. "No, but he's changing. I don't know how and I don't know why, but..."

"Twin-tuition?" I guess.

He shrugs, coming over and draping an arm around my shoulders. "I guess it never goes away."

"It shouldn't. You will be twins until the day you die, so it makes sense that it would stick around." I study his white cheeks and notice that the color still hasn't returned to them. "Are you okay?"

"No, but I don't want to talk about it here. You?"

"Nope." My skin is buzzing from his touch and I *know* it shouldn't be, so outside of being jealous of Austin inevitably getting an old flame's number, there's that.

It might've been easier if his boyfriend wasn't so freaking nice.

I shove it all down as Austin and Travis come back—without Tiffany—and drop at least a dozen pairs of heels in front of me. Travis smirks. "We wanted you to have options. You're about a six, right?"

"Right," I say slowly, eyeing the torture devices and shaking my head. "I'll try them on, but I'm not walking in them unless they're a serious option."

A frustrated huff sounds from somewhere behind a rail full of taffeta skirts and I roll my eyes. *She really just can't help herself.*

Travis hides another smile, but he's still pale too and the corners of his eyes are tight. I glance between him and Brooklyn, wondering what the hell happened while they were outside that upset them both so much.

Austin swipes up a pair of pretty silver heels. They're dainty, with thin straps around the ankles and crossing over the toes, and they're medium height. If I fall in them, I'll definitely sprain an ankle but it won't break—hopefully—so I take them from him and hold onto Brooklyn as I slide them on.

When I wiggle my toes, realizing that they even have a touch of breathing room, I nod. “Okay, I think I'm ready. Unless there's anything else?”

Travis's gaze travels to my handbag, currently lying in a heap in the corner of the changing room behind me. “A purse, maybe?” He suddenly looks around. “Where's the owner? She might be able to be of some help here.”

Brooklyn, Austin, and I all turn glowering stares on him, but since he mentioned her, she appears. *Jesus. Even Bloody Mary makes you say her name three times, but not Tiffany.*

I sigh. She strides over to us with her hips popping on every step she takes, a fresh coat of shiny red lipstick gleaming on her lips as she smiles. Not even pretending that she wasn't listening to us, she nods at Travis.

“A purse and jewelry.” Those bright blues survey me critically, slowing running up and down the length of my body. “I'd also recommend a trip to the salon. There's one just down the street. They have a hair stylist and a makeup artist there that might be able to help get her ready. Oh, and a wax. Eyebrows, honey. They should have a shape.”

Austin narrows his eyes at her, but she shrugs, still smiling as she sidles up to him. “So, uh, who else are you taking to the party? All three of you can't possibly be taking just one woman.”

“We are,” he says, wrapping his fingers around her wrist and gently removing her hand when it lands on his arm again.

I want to laugh out loud, but I'm just not that mean. Travis watches what Austin is doing with a flicker of mild interest in his eyes, but Brooklyn is the one that comes right out with what we're all thinking.

"If you're going to offer to blow him again, you should do it now. We have to go."

Laughter rises up within me, but I push it down and only a soft snort escapes. Brooklyn winks at me before he offers me his arm. "Right. Well, we'll return all this tomorrow. Pictures will be posted. We'll hold up our end."

"What about the jewelry and the purse?" Travis asks when he falls into step besides us as Brooklyn leads me the short distance back to the changing room.

He glances at me. "Do you want any of those things?"

"Nope."

At my response, he smirks at his boyfriend, but it's almost like his heart's not in it. *What the hell is going on with these two?* "See? We don't need it. Amaya is low maintenance."

Travis's green eyes linger on mine for a moment before he shrugs. "Yeah. Okay. It's your call."

As he's looking at me, I swear I see pain in his eyes. And fear. Which is weird. Downtown Evelyn is not exactly a scary place to be. *Then again, he's a professional hockey player. Maybe it is a scary place if you're one of them.*

Either way, it's none of my business so I step into the changing room, sliding the curtain shut behind me. Murmured voices drift over to me, Austin and Tiffany talking, but I can't make out what they're saying as I put my own clothes back on.

Disappointment still rattles through me, though. Of course, I knew she was going to get to him, but now that it's happening, it really does sting. The low murmur of Travis's voice joins the mix, but I can't hear what he's saying either.

By the time I emerge, Tiffany is gone and all three guys are scowling. I meet their eyes in turn, my brow puckering as I

jerk my head toward the door. “Should we go? Being here doesn’t seem to be doing anybody’s mood any favors.”

Austin nods and takes off without backward glance while Brooklyn offers me his arm again, his eyes soft on mine as we walk. “Can you see smoke? Because he’s running like his ass is on fire.”

I laugh despite the twinge of jealousy burning in my gut. “Wonder why. It sounded to me like they were working out their differences.”

“Nah.” Travis runs a hand through his hair, his voice sure but his posture still kind of deflated. “He was telling her off. Not making plans to *get off*.”

“You think?” I ask. “I doubt it. Austin and Tiffany have always managed to find a way to work out their differences.”

“Not this time,” he says confidently, but he doesn’t know those two like I do. Obviously, he’s sticking up for his best friend and while I don’t really understand why he feels the need to do it with me, I know he is. He’s a good friend, but I won’t be easily swayed on this one.

Plus, it doesn’t really matter. We’re all grown up now and he’s single. Austin can do what—and who—he wants. I can’t stop him.

“We were planning on taking you out for lunch,” Brooklyn says as we walk out into the bright sunshine outside. “How do you feel about room service, though? I’m over reconnecting for the day.”

Austin nods his agreement and Travis glances between them, but doesn’t offer an opinion. As we climb into their rental car, he’s back to looking completely glum and Brooklyn is quiet too. Austin slides in behind the wheel, clearing his throat as he looks at me in the rearview. “What do you say? Room service, or will it be too weird for you since we’re living at your work.”

“It wouldn’t be too weird, but you can just drop me off at home and I’ll see you guys later. At the party.” None of them

appear to be the mood for company, but objections immediately meet my statement.

“No, Maya. Join us, please?” Brooklyn asks, twisting in the passenger seat to look at me. “I’ve really been looking forward to hanging out with you this afternoon.”

“So have I,” Austin says, his grip on the steering so tight that his knuckles turn white. “Look, I’m sorry about what happened back there, okay? I think Tiffany just regressed back to seventeen for a minute, but I didn’t. I’m sure she’s not like that anymore either.”

I make a noncommittal humming noise. Honestly, I don’t know her well enough these days to form an opinion, but I do hear the rumors around town and according to those, she hasn’t changed her ways. I won’t say it, though.

Looking into his eyes in the mirror, I gave him a small, tight nod. “Okay. Lunch sounds good. It’ll be nice to hang out together for a little while, but I shouldn’t stay too long. I’ll have to go home to get ready.”

Austin grins. “You’ll be the belle of the ball, even if you go in exactly what you’re wearing right now.”

I know he’s lying, but I can’t stop the warm and fuzzies from invading my chest and stomach. Regardless of what happened back there with Tiffany, maybe Austin has changed a bit after all. He certainly never said anything like *that* to me before.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-TWO

TRAVIS

Back in our hotel room, Brooklyn and I are constantly touching each other. Holding hands, brushing legs, sitting shoulder to shoulder. They're small, innocent touches, but they still make me want to drag him to my bed and keep him there until I know he's not going to leave.

I thought for sure it was over between us earlier. *Worst fucking feeling I've ever had in my life.*

Even now, I'm wondering if he's going to reconsider. If he's going to leave me after all. Unsettled and on edge, it's all I can do to stop myself from mounting him and fucking him into submission—until he understands that *he's* whose important to me.

I lean back on the sofa, my knees bouncing as I think about where I'll be if he breaks it off with me. *Austin will be gone too. That's for sure. He'll never choose my side over his brother's. He'll—*

“Trav?” Austin says my name, concern in those blue eyes as he cocks his head at me. “Are you okay?”

No. This is why it would've been better not to have let anyone in at all. People make us weak. They give us the biggest thing we can lose—their love.

“Fine.” I glance at Amaya, who's sitting on Brooklyn's other side, sounding like she's trying her best not to ramble as she speaks to him.

For his part, he's doing his best to pay attention, but I can feel how tense he is. His body is rock hard everywhere I'm

touching it, his muscles bulging and his responses to her clipped. I appreciate that he wants to try to help me and I realize it must be difficult to accept that I don't want his help, but I've been on this slippery slope with Clyde for a long time.

This time, he says he wants the money to get back on his feet, but I know that won't actually happen. He's still with that crew from our past and really, nothing has changed with them. Which means I'm going to have to keep paying him just like I told Brooklyn I would. I know he doesn't like it. I don't either, but I don't really have a choice here.

No amount of money will get Clyde to sever ties with those guys and as long as he's with them, he's never going to break out of the cycle he's in. And for as long as he's stuck in that endless loop of arrests, bail, stints in prison, only to get out and get arrested again, he's going to keep needing more money. Larger and larger amounts every time.

One of these days, no amount of money is going to be able to help him get out of it and I'm terrified of what he's going to do when that day comes. If I could, I'd have cut him off a long time ago, but I can't. I don't know how to do it without risking it all and right now, it feels like this is going to go on forever.

It feels like he won't stop until he's bled me dry and even then, he'll find a way to keep making me pay. Panic rises up from the depths of my soul as I imagine what it will do to me if those videos ever surface. I'm not stupid or naive. I realize he may release them even if I do keep paying him. I also realize that it might be what he's got planned as the final nail in my coffin once I can't pay him anymore.

Dude hates me for breaking his nose. Even after everything, I know he's still holding that grudge. Won't ever let it go.

I release a shaky breath and I can still practically feel Austin staring at me, so I blink myself out of my thoughts, desperate for a distraction. While it's great to sit around, pissed at myself for ever letting the Rykers get close enough that it'll hurt if they leave, the fact is that I've already allowed it. I can't just...stop.

As for Clyde's endgame, there's no point obsessing about that either. Talking to Brooklyn about all this has simply scratched open a lot of old wounds and made a lot of old fears resurface.

But it's time to put it all back in the cage.

To do that, I need to focus on what's happening right now. Where I am. Who I'm with. And the fact that Amaya keeps darting glances at where Brooklyn and I are pressed up together. At our joined hands and the way Brooklyn's thumb keeps stroking over the side of mine.

She's been doing it since she got in the car with us after the shopping trip. Honestly, I want it to be annoying. At least that would've given me a reason to lash out at someone—for something—instead of keeping all this shit bottled up instead with no way out.

But it's not annoying me.

Because I get it.

She's curious. Maybe even a little bit intrigued. None of that could ever annoy me. Not coming from someone like her who's obviously not judging. I haven't seen a single trace of judgment from her since she found out, so this is genuine curiosity, which I can't lash out at her for.

Fuck.

"If there's something you want to know, you can always just ask," I say, the words coming out harsher than I intended for them to.

Amaya's eyes flare wide open and she blushes to the roots of her hair. "Me? I...No. What?"

Brooklyn arches an eyebrow at her, chuckling as he shakes his head. "No, huh? Are you sure? You seem pretty damn flustered for someone who doesn't have any questions."

"I..." She drops her gaze away from his, suddenly fidgeting with her fingers in her lap before she sighs and sneaks another peek at him. "I should go."

Scooting to the edge of her chair, she flashes him a quick, embarrassed smile. “What do I owe you for the grilled cheese?”

“You mean the one you haven’t had yet? Nothing.” He leans forward, some of the tension that’s been tightening his features since we talked easing as he gives her a soft smile. “Stay, please? You don’t have to ask anything if you don’t want to. It was just an offer. You used to want to know everything, though. Don’t get shy on me now.”

Amaya’s shoulders relax, but she stays right on the edge of the chair for another moment before she suddenly glances up at him again. “Okay, fine. I’m curious, but if I’m prying, just tell me to butt out.”

He grins and Austin chuckles, leaning back on the sofa he’s on and hooking his ankle over his knee. “This is about to get interesting.”

She rolls her eyes at him, but then she settles back in too, those bright bluish eyes sweeping across our hands again, but openly this time. Studying our entwined fingers with an almost childlike curiosity. “When did you first know you were bi? I mean, Travis, please don’t take offense to this, but—“ she looks back at Brooklyn, “— you used to sneak away with even more girls than *he* did.”

As she says it, she tips her head toward Austin. He groans and she blushes as he covers his face in his hands. “Okay, let’s get one thing straight, Amaya,” he says into his hands, “we’re talking about them here, not me, but there was a reason for that.”

“Yeah, the reason was that you liked the cheerleaders and the girly-girls.” She purses her lips as she brings her gaze to mine. “Were you like that too?”

I shrug. “Worse, I’m sure, but we’re not really talking about me right now either.”

Teeth sinking in her lower lip, she nods and looks everywhere but at Brooklyn before she finally sighs. “So?”

He flashes her an amused smile. “I would say I was about fourteen. Somewhere around there. I knew before then, but I accepted it around then.”

Her jaw grows slack as she frowns at him. “But you told me back then you only lost your—“

“Yeah, I know.” He lets out a long sigh, lips tilting up at the corners as he pumps his eyebrows at her. “Janey Allen. Sixteen. And I wasn’t lying.”

“Okay, so then...” she trails off for a minute, turning beet red again. “Did you like her?”

“I liked *you*.” He emphasizes the word slightly before he shrugs. “I just didn’t think it was ever going to happen with you, so I tried to move on. Janey was great. I liked her well enough. She wasn’t pushy.”

“Well, I mean, that’s nice, but...”

When she trails off again, I take pity on her and kick Brooklyn’s foot with my own. “Stop dragging it out, man. Just give it to her straight.”

Glancing at me, he winks as he kicks my foot right back. “I thought you liked a little teasing.”

“Sure, but unless you wanna take this to the bedroom, just tell her already.” At my mention of a bedroom, Amaya practically starts glowing.

Holy shit. It’s like I can grill a steak on her cheeks right now.

Brooklyn seems to realize the same thing and thankfully, he takes pity on her. “Look, I liked Janey, okay? She knew I wasn’t in love with her and she was fine with it. We had fun. It was just that I’d had some fun with Johnny Jackson too. He also knew I wasn’t in love with him, but he sure as shit wasn’t ready to admit just how much fun he had with me either.”

“Johnny Jackson?” Her eyes go wide. “Really? He’s married to Janey now, did you know?”

“Johnny and Janey Jackson?” Brooklyn’s eyes go wide too, then he snorts back a laugh. “Figures. The three of us had

fun together a few times our senior year.”

As he says it, it’s almost like I can see her trying to imagine the three of them together and then, curiously, her pupils dilate a little. She blinks it away fast, but still. It was there. *Curious*.

“So then what?” she asks. “You were with so many girls back then.”

“I was with just as many guys,” he reasons before bringing a hand up to his chest. “And ouch. You didn’t have to say ‘so many’.”

“The truth hurts.” There’s a slightly teasing note to her tone now as she finally seems to get more comfortable with the topic of conversation.

It’s weird, almost like I’m seeing them the way they were together back in the day, all three of them relaxed and honest as they go from one to the other. It’s nice though, seeing both the Rykers so...*happy*.

“Bro, it was ‘so many’,” Austin says with a slight smirk on his face. “Not as many as me, but I suppose you were doubling up, so you had an unfair advantage.”

Brooklyn scoffs, but then laughs as he turns his attention back to her. “Okay, what else do you want to know?”

“You’re not taking that bait?” she asks easily. “I would’ve.”

“Oh, please,” he jokes. “You would *not* have. Besides, my manwhoring days are over now. Austin can have at ‘em. I’m happy to be out of the running.”

Her gaze moves slowly to mine and another rosy flush colors her round cheeks. “You’re bi too, right? But you two are dating and you’re also both attracted to women, so...how does that work? Am I stereotyping? Oh, God. I should leave. For real. I—“

“You’re not leaving,” exasperation drips from Brooklyn’s voice as he reaches out and rests a hand on her forearm. “For fuck’s sake, Amaya. Everyone asks that fucking question. We

can take it, okay? Just stop trying to pretend that you're a shy little blossom and let us have it."

Her eyes lock on his for a moment and they flash with the acceptance of his challenge. "Fine. How does it work, then?"

Brooklyn grins at her and I shove my knee into his when I realize he was going to fuck with her again. He huffs out a sigh, pretending to be disappointed, but then he grows serious again, his gaze lingering on mine for a moment. Silently checking in with me, he keeps his eyes on mine until I nod, then he turns back to her.

"It works like any other relationship. Just because the candidate pool is doubled doesn't change how devoted we are to each other. I'm no expert at other people's relationships, but I don't think ours is any different to most others. Occasionally, if we want someone else, we'll talk about it and make the decision together. That probably makes us a little bit different, but we know each other's boundaries and we respect them."

"Being in any relationship doesn't turn off our ability to be attracted to other people," I add. "It's all about what you do with that attraction. In our case, we don't try to hide it."

Amaya's eyes take on an almost studious intensity as she nods. "Am I allowed to know what those boundaries are?"

Brook glances at me again, and to show him that I'm okay with it so far, I answer this one for him. "One of the biggest things for us is that if we're with someone else, we're with them together, but that's only because I've always liked sharing and it turns out that Brooklyn does too."

"Sh...sharing?" Her eyebrows sweep up as she stammers out the word, then she looks at Austin like she's expecting him to clear it up for her.

Instead, he gives her a knowing smirk and shrugs. "What? I'm into it too, if you were asking."

I roll my eyes at him, but Amaya looks like we could knock her over with a feather. "You're bi too?"

"Nope. I'm just kinky." He pumps his eyebrows at her and out of everything, that's what seems to knock her out of her

stupor.

She blinks hard, dragging in a few deep breaths while she processes, but then she squeezes her thighs together. It's a small movement, almost infinitesimal, but just like with the pupil dilation before, it was definitely there. *Curiouser.*

If I didn't know any better, I'd think that the whole prospect of being with more than one person at a time is appealing to her, but then again, I don't know better. I don't know shit about what this girl likes in bed, but as Brooklyn keeps talking, I keep noticing small things that make me seriously suspect she's getting turned on.

Which turns me on, because *fuck*. She's hot. She's a lot like me. I enjoy her company and I already know Brooklyn wants her too. *Shit. This is...unexpected, but it could be a great fucking distraction after such a shit day.*

A loud knock on the door breaks the sudden tension in the room, though. Austin gets up and lets in a dude with a room service cart. While he's wheeling it in, Amaya tries to hide her face by tucking in her chin and intently studying the floor.

And curiouser. She doesn't want her coworkers to see her in our room.

Most people in her position would've owned it. Proudly. I know that because I've been here a few times before, watching people grin smugly at whoever sees them with any of us. But her...*Amaya is an interesting duckling, that's for sure.*

As we settle in with tomato soup and grilled cheese, Amaya finally looks at us again, but only once the room service guy is gone. "No one knows you're together?"

"Nope," Brooklyn says. "We plan on keeping it that way, too."

"But why?" She frowns. "How long have you been dating?"

"Seriously dating? Six months." He picks up half of his first grilled cheese and dips it into his tomato soup, groaning as he brings it up to his mouth.

The sound hits me right in the dick, but it's not like my mind was far from that anyway. I bite back a groan of my own as I watch him lick off a drop of soup that dripped onto his hand. When I glance up again, I find Amaya's gaze locked on him as well, and it doesn't help my situation at all when her teeth sink into lower lip for a second as she watches him.

What the hell is going on here?

Meanwhile, Austin seems to have noticed a few of the same things I did, because he's way too focused on her all of a sudden, that slight red streak appearing at the tops of his cheeks as he stares at her.

Well, shit. It looks like I'm not the only one who's noticed there's a whole lot of sexual chemistry crackling in the air now that we're all alone and relaxing a little bit. Or maybe I'm making shit up because I'm so desperate for the damn distraction. Real or imagined though, it's working for me.

"If it's been six months, why don't you just tell people?" Amaya asks. "Don't you want to be together in public? I mean, it's got to be hard, right? I know it'll be difficult to tell the truth too, but it'll blow over. You're both great players and that's all that really matters anyway."

"Neither of us wants to be a statement or an advocate," Brooklyn says, and the temperature in the room suddenly plummets again. "There's a lot of politics involved and we don't want any part of that."

Thank fuck. I don't think we'd have made it to that big dinner otherwise.

Amaya frowns at him. "Would you *have* to be one of those two things? Couldn't you just be...I don't know. In a relationship?"

"Nope, probably not," he replies after swallowing the bite he just took. "There's still so much homophobia in our line of work that some of the players in the league even refuse to wear their jerseys for pride night. Our team is generally good about everything, but it'll just take our focus off the game if

we have to keep fucking up whoever has something to say about it.”

My teeth grind as I nod. “I don’t like drama. I’m just not the type. It took me a long time to find a place where I feel like I belong, and I found that with the Devils. I’d rather not lose it just yet. Coming out could jeopardize not just our relationships with our teammates, but our sponsorships, our place on their team, our ability to get drafted by other teams, our livelihoods, and above all else, our actual, physical safety.”

“The bigots will be more uncomfortable than you, though,” she says lightly as she finally picks up her grilled cheese. “They deserve to be put in their place, but I get where you’re coming from. As someone who had a pretty shitty upbringing, which I’m sure you’ve heard all about, I wouldn’t want to rock the boat if I ever found peace and a sense of family either.” She glances at the twins then, her eyes shimmering before she drops her gaze back to her food. “I thought I found my family and my place to belong once. I know how much it sucks to lose it.”

“Yeah, I can imagine.” I can’t, really, but that’s only because I can’t let myself imagine what it would be like to lose these guys I think of as my family now. “It seems to me like you could still be part of that family you found, though. If you want to.”

Brook slings an arm around her shoulders and grins, speaking around his food until he finally swallows. “Families drift apart sometimes too, you know? But they always find their way back together.”

While I want to agree with him, I happen to know from my own experiences that it’s not quite true. Families that drift apart don’t *always* find their way back together. It’s true that she could still be part of their family if she wants to be, but just wanting it doesn’t make it so. They might’ve considered each other family once, but contrary to what Brooklyn just said, they haven’t quite found their way back together just yet.

And we leave on Monday.

Forty-eight more hours and we'll be gone, leaving her alone again. Somehow, that doesn't sit as right with me as did just twenty-four hours ago. I shudder to think what forty-eight more are going to mean for this strange reluctance I seem to be developing about leaving her in the rearview mirror again—and I haven't even had to do it once before.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-THREE

AMAYA

Blinding flashes go off when we climb out of Austin's car at the school. They've rolled out a literal red carpet and the flashes keep coming, making stars dance in my field of vision as a roar goes up from those gathered around the carpet.

It's a media frenzy, or what qualifies as one in our town, but before I can start hyperventilating or duck back into the car behind me, a strong arm takes each of mine and I blink, realizing that the twins have stepped up on either side of me.

They're decked out in fancy black suits that fit them like they've been painted on, and I'll admit, when I first saw them step out of their respective bedrooms wearing those, I nearly fainted. A man in uniform is always hot. Particularly a hockey uniform if you're from around here, but a man in a good suit that fits him well is a whole other level of sexy.

To mark their individuality, Austin is wearing a plain black tie while Brooklyn's is electric blue. He's also got on a belt buckle that says *It's All About Me*. I rolled my eyes when I saw it, but it's all part of this *cocky, don't give a shit* front he's putting on.

And I'm pretty sure it *is* a front. I've always wondered. *Maybe I'll get the chance to ask him about it before we leave here tonight.*

Austin's belt buckle, on the other hand, is a smooth, polished silver, and he's smiling at the media as they walk me

to the door. Brooklyn is staring straight ahead. Just marching me past the press like he can't wait to get it over with.

Travis is bringing up a rear, so I can't see how he's treating the people clamoring to speak to them while taking what feels like a zillion pictures, but my jaw nearly dropped when I saw him earlier. Like the twins', his suit fits him like a glove, but his is a deep, navy blue with a crisp white shirt underneath and that blond hair swept away from his face.

As Austin releases my arm to speak to the press once we're close to the door, Travis's hand lands on the small of my back and then he's next to me, ushering me in with Brooklyn on my other side.

Brooklyn reaches out to get the door, but Austin's the sound of Austin's laughter wafts through the air following me in as he starts asking questions. "Our date? Oh, she's an old friend. It's been real good to come home and reconnect with everybody."

After that, Brooklyn, Travis, and I are inside and I can't hear any more of what he's saying. Brooklyn nudges his shoulder into mine, his expression still closed off, but there's definite laughter dancing in those big blue eyes.

"You hear that? You're famous now. If you write a tell-all book about your date with all three of us, you might even make a few bucks."

A smile curves on my lips. He knows I'd never consider something like that, so I don't bother with denials. "You might be right. Maybe I'll even start it by saying how parched I was after all the stress of getting past the media and how not even one of my three dates offered to get me a drink."

"I should've brought my mother," he grumbles, then he winks at me and jerks his head toward the bar. "Beer?"

"Please." I glance at Travis, who nods his agreement.

"Same here. I'll keep her company while you go get it." He steps closer to my side, our arms brushing as he motions toward an unoccupied cocktail table in the hallway leading to the auditorium. "We'll be over there."

Brooklyn nods and takes off, and Travis wraps his strong fingers around my forearm, tucking me close to his side as he leads me over. I'm not a *tingles* and *butterflies* kind of girl, but jeez. I *am* human, and any girl being escorted by these three men would be suffering from the same affliction I am right now: good old horniness.

Hello, hormones, my old friends, I sing to myself as I try to process that I'm here, with all three of them, and actually enjoying myself. Despite the fact that my dusty libido was kickstarted in that hotel room earlier when we were talking about their sexual preferences, I've also really just been enjoying their company today.

Before they came to town, it had been so long since I've had any kind of physical reaction to a man that I'm more than happy to deal with it now. Sure, it's frustrating that I've been turned on for a couple hours and haven't been able to do anything about it, but at least it means my body isn't as broken as I thought it was.

Travis turns to smile at me when we reach the table, those green eyes alert but also seemingly amused by something. "Are you okay? You have a really weird look on your face right now."

Oh, great. So I'm thinking about how turned on I am and he thinks I look weird while doing it. That's...great. I shake it off though, returning his smile as I slide an elbow onto the table and lean against it to take some weight off my feet in these heels.

"I'm fine. Just not used to so many people taking my picture." I cock my head at him, ignoring the mental images I can't shake of *myself* between the woman the three of them share. "Is it always like that? I mean, when you first got here, there were so many people waiting for you outside the hotel, they were having a barbeque in the town square, and now they've turned our school into a movie premier. It's crazy."

He chuckles softly, his hand sliding forward on the table until it's so close to mine, I can feel the heat radiating from his fingertips. "It is crazy, I agree, but it gets a hell of a lot worse

than this. To be honest, the press here isn't even on my radar yet. It's tame compared to what we're used to."

I almost flinch at the mere thought of it. "Does Austin really enjoy that kind of attention? It's pretty clear that you and Brooklyn don't, but he's always making time for them."

"That's the job." Travis lets out a soft sigh, those eyes on mine as he shakes his head. "He doesn't enjoy it, but he's really good at pretending to. Most of the new guys take the pressure off him a bit when they first start out. They love being in the spotlight, but when they inevitably get a little worn out, he takes over again. He's our captain and someone's got to do it. Someone's got to be consistent about it, and that's him."

"So he falls on his sword for everyone else." My words are soft, my mind reeling as I try to process this information in the context of what I thought I knew about him. As a teenager, this was the life he wanted and I always thought that was why he's been living it up since he left, but now...

I snap myself out of it when Elijah comes over with a pretty little blonde on his arm. Instantly, all the heat that remained in my body turns to ice and my stomach tightens. A slight crease appears between Travis's eyebrows when he realizes it, then he straightens up and glances at Eli and the girl.

"You don't like his girlfriend?" he asks quietly, his lips breaking into a grin as they approach but his eyes contemplative.

"If only she was his girlfriend, then maybe she'd give a damn about what would happen to him if he fucks up this year. I've seen her hanging onto at least half the guys on the team."

"Ah," he says knowingly. "A teenage puck bunny. Got ya. It comes with the territory, though. You got any reason to be so worried about it?"

I drag in a breath through my nostrils, giving my head a quick shake. Elijah and the girl have stopped to chat to some

of the other high school players, but I'm pretty sure he's just gathering his boys and that they'll be here soon enough.

"Nothing earth shattering. Except that after we first spoke about him being sexually active, I bought him condoms. I know I shouldn't have checked, but I did, and the box is still in his drawer. Still sealed."

"Maybe he bought his own?" Travis suggests. "Some guys are weird about condoms. They only like to use a specific brand or type. Maybe you just got the wrong ones."

"Maybe, but the alternative is that he's not using them, which is idiotic and is guaranteed to ruin his future."

Travis nudges me as Eli, the girl, and his friends restart their slow procession toward us, like they're royalty—which, around here, I guess they sort of are—who are approaching visiting royalty.

I want to roll my eyes, but Brooklyn gets to us then, handing over our beers and smirking when he sees the kids approaching. "They're so damn cute. I'd have hit a grownup who said I was cute at seventeen, but man. Look at them. They think they know everything."

"As opposed to you, who truly does know everything?" Travis teases.

Brooklyn grins. "Of course. I'm just not so smug about it anymore."

"You're not?" I snort. "Someone should tell you not to be so smug about it, then. Especially because you most definitely do not know everything. We're not even that much older than them. I bet Coach Bax and all the other real adults around here think we're cute, too."

His nose wrinkles. "Way to bring a guy crashing back down to earth, Knox. Really, thanks."

I smile. "Always, and you're welcome."

He chuckles, but then the teenagers reach us and start fawning over the guys, raising their hands for fist bumps and

asking for their autographs on whatever they've got available. Which includes, it seems, one of the girls' bras.

All I can do is watch and ride it out, shaking my head as my brother holds court like he's some kind of superhero for having the balls to approach them. Eventually, relief skitters through me when Coach Baxter walks up to us.

The kids disperse like they've been pepper-sprayed, obviously afraid that Coach saw the flasks some of them were swigging from, and he glances at me first. "Good to see you, Ms. Knox. Elijah's been doing well. You should be very proud of him."

"Thank you. I am."

Baxter smiles before he turns to Brooklyn. "Do you mind coming with me for a minute? I was hoping to speak to you and your brother, but it looks like he's still outside and this concerns Mr. Oakley too."

Brooklyn frowns, but nods. "Sure thing, Coach."

Travis sighs softly as he leans in to whisper to me. "Duty calls. Will you be okay here by yourself?"

"I'm used to holding my own in these halls, *Mr. Oakley*. Besides, I need to have a quick word with my brother."

He chuckles, but inclines his head and then promises to be back as soon as he can. As he walks away with Brooklyn and Baxter, my gaze lands on Elijah a few tables away. Lifting my chin, I square my shoulders and stride over to him, sending his friends meaningful looks when they warn him I'm coming.

Hands move under the table—passing off the flask, I'm sure—and then Elijah turns to grin at me. "Sis! What's up?"

"I need to steal you for a minute." Without waiting for his response, I pull him aside, walking to a vacant spot in the center of the hallway that shouldn't be within earshot of any of the tables. "Drinking at an event like this is stupid, Eli. All your teachers are here. All the coaching staff. Most of the parents."

“I wasn’t drinking,” he objects, but the faint whiff of cheap vodka on his breath makes me arch an eyebrow at him. He sighs. “Fine. I was drinking, but only a little.”

“It won’t matter to anyone how much you drank. Only that you did. Alcohol has tanked many, many careers, Eli.”

He brushes me off, arrogance on his sharp features as he shakes his head. “I’m not stupid, Amaya. I won’t let it tank mine. We’re at a party. Lighten up.”

I narrow my eyes, staring into his bluish-green hazel and wondering how our features can be so similar when our minds are nothing alike. “Do you honestly think those people who have lost everything because of stupid mistakes haven’t said those exact words to someone in their lives? I don’t want you to be trapped in this town like I am, little brother. This could be your year. It could be the year that you change your own fate, but that’s not going to happen if Coach benches you for drinking here tonight.”

“He won’t.” Eli snorts. “I’m one of his strongest players.”

“Exactly. So don’t throw it all away by being irresponsible. He *will* bench you, Eli. Trust me. I’ve seen him do it.”

He shakes his head at me, dark brown hair falling into his face as he does. “Bullshit.”

“Not bullshit. Ask Austin if you’d like. Ask Brooklyn. And while we’re on the topic, if you’re going to take that little blonde of yours anywhere tonight, just be safe, would you?”

He groans. “I’m not talking to you about that. We had *The Talk*, okay? I’m fine. I know how it works.”

“Do you? Because *how it works*, Elijah, is that teenagers hook up. Sometimes even those of them with the brightest futures ahead. They fuck, they make a baby, and then neither of them get to go out and chase their dreams because that baby didn’t make itself and it, in turn, deserves the best life those kids can give it.”

Elijah groans again, then he sighs heavily and drags his hands over his face. “Would you please just relax? I bet you

never gave Austin these talks and I'm not doing anything he wasn't doing at my age. I've heard the stories."

"Kid, I am the last person who's example you want to follow where that's concerned," Austin's deep voice makes Elijah jump and twist to see that he's come in from outside.

I didn't notice him either, but as he slides in beside me, wrapping an arm around my waist and smiling down at me, I'm relieved to have him backing me up on this. To my surprise, after he smiles at me, he turns that same, warm smile on Eli and slips into an almost fatherly role.

Eli's still too shocked that he's here and has overheard our conversation to say anything, but hopefully, his damn ears are working. "Truth be told, the stories you heard about me probably isn't the half of it, but Amaya is right. If you're as serious about your career as she is, then you don't want to do anything stupid now."

My brother's mouth opens and closes, but not a word comes out. Austin grimaces a little. "Besides, it's really not all it's cracked up to be to live life the way I have. Trust me, four or five years down the line, you'll look back with nothing but regrets, feeling empty and sorry that you never tried for something more."

"That's unlikely," Eli says when he finally manages to speak. "I'm sorry it's worked out that way for you, but you and I are not the same person."

"Aren't we?" Austin keeps his gaze on Eli's, setting him straight without being condescending at all. "Will you let me prove that you're wrong?"

"Sure." He shrugs. "Do your best."

Austin nods slowly, dragging in a deep breath before his eyes dart over to the table where the high school team is still gathered, all of them watching us curiously but pretending not to. "You've all been drinking since this afternoon. A few of you managed to sneak in booze so you wouldn't lose your buzz while you have to be here. It's either in water bottles or cutesy hip flasks you think are really cool."

Eli's brow puckers, but when he doesn't contradict anything Austin has said so far, he continues. "As soon as you can leave, you'll be going to an afterparty. Somewhere without parental supervision. You've already decided which girl is going to be yours for the night and you're dying to get on with it. How am I doing so far?"

When my brother flushes a shade I've never seen on him, Austin nods. "Yeah, I thought so. Some friendly advice, Eli? Focus on the game. Everything else is just noise, but when all that noise gets too loud, it gets in your head and once it's there, it throws you off the only thing that should matter to you right now."

"The game?" he guesses.

Austin smiles. "Exactly. When you go back to your friends, tell them what I said. I'm under no illusion that you're going to pour the alcohol down the drain and send the girls home, but be careful. Be safe. Remember what's important and keep your focus where it belongs."

Eli nods, stumbling back like he's too stunned to walk, and I see his shoulders rise on a deep breath as he composes himself before he rejoins his friends. Since I feel like he's been set straight by the only person who could get him to take some sound advice right now, I turn to Austin instead.

"What did you mean when you said he was going to look back and regret not trying for something real?" I lock my eyes on his. "Why do have to keep saying such damn cryptic things?"

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FOUR

AUSTIN

Before I can respond to her, Brooklyn's hand lands on my shoulder. "Coach wants to talk to us." He leans past me, giving Amaya an apologetic smile. "Do you mind if we leave you alone for a minute?"

"I thought the days we had to listen to Coach Baxter were over," I grumble, but I'm already backing away from her, unable to resist the urge to go if the Coach is calling. I owe the man a lot and besides, the sooner I go, the sooner I'll be able to come back to her. "We'll be back as soon as we can, okay?"

Amaya's full lips curve into a knowing smile. "What you mean is that you'll be back when Baxter lets you come back. Go. I'll be fine, but in my next life, I want to come back as that guy. All he has to do is say jump, and every man in this town asks how high. I could have had some fun with that."

My jaw threatens to drop. Amaya has never been overtly sexual. She never used to make dirty jokes and whenever we did, she always used to blush like a tin of red paint had been dumped over her head.

I don't know if she meant for it to be a dirty joke, but to my ears, that's what it sounded like. Although, it could just be because things got weird for a bit back at the hotel. Almost like we all finally realized we were grownups now who could do whatever the fuck we wanted to and that what we wanted to do was each other.

Travis smirks when his gaze catches mine and I sigh, shaking my head at him. He's having way too much fun with

this situation we've got going on with Amaya.

Something is definitely going on with him too, though. Not just with her, but with something else. I just haven't had any time alone with him to talk about it.

For now, he steps up to Amaya's side and nods at me. "Go with Brook. I'll stay with her. I was with him and Baxter before, so I already know what he wants to talk to you about. I'm in if you want to do it, but if not, I'm still keen on the original plan too."

Original plan? The fuck is he talking about? As I frown at him, Brooklyn snaps his fingers in front of my face. "Let's go, Aus. Baxter's going to explain in a minute."

I nod, not liking that I've been left out of the loop. It makes me itchy, but on the other hand, Brooklyn and Travis aren't my teammates to lead right now and Bax isn't my coach anymore, so it's not like that.

As I turn and follow Brooklyn to Baxter's office, I feel like I'm walking back in time. To when these halls used to be my stomping grounds. It's like I can see the ghosts of who we used to be watching me, our old trophies calling to me from the elaborate glass case and our old team pictures beckoning to me to pay my respects to where we came from.

I haven't been back here since we graduated, but the walls are the same drab, yellowish color and the floors are still the same blue and yellow vinyl. The faint scent of Friday's meatloaf is still hanging in the air, combined with the smell of teenage stress over the pop quiz I'm sure Ms. Matheson still makes all her English students take every Thursday.

A soft chuckle slides out of me as I shake my head, dipping it back to the slightly flickering fluorescent lights overhead. I suppose it hasn't been that long since we left, but damn. Absolutely nothing about this place has changed.

And neither has the nerves that tighten my stomach as Brooklyn leads me through the gym to where Baxter is waiting in his office in the corner. Our former coach hasn't changed much either. The man is still hard as nails, his hair a little

grayer now and the lines on his face a little deeper, but he's got the same short red stubble on his jaw and the same determination in his eyes.

"Austin," he says as he steps forward and extends his hand, giving me a very rare grin. "Welcome home. It was good of you boys to accept our invitation."

"Are you kidding? We couldn't say no." I grin right back at him as I shake his hand, neglecting to mention just how badly we *wanted* to say no. "You guys went all out for us. Thank you. I can't tell you how much your support means."

He releases my hand after nearly crushing it and then waves for us to take the seats opposite his desk. The same seats we were in when he told us the Devils were sending a scout.

Fuck, if it isn't all coming back to me now...

"What's up, Coach?" I ask once we're seated, the curiosity eating away at me. "If you want us to take some pictures with the team, we're happy to."

"Of course." He nods, but there's something almost absent about the movement as he cocks his hip against the cabinet beside his desk rather than sitting down. "I heard about what you did for the boys at the rink yesterday."

Oh, shit. "We didn't mean to interfere, Coach. We were just having some fun."

To my surprise, Baxter grins again and even scoffs down a laugh. *I stand corrected. The man has changed. A lot.* "You're not in trouble, Ryker. Relax. It just got me thinking, is all."

I stare back at him, my arms already crossing as I wait for the other shoe to drop. "Thinking? Uh-oh. I know what happens when you think and it almost always means I'm going to have to work harder."

He laughs this time without trying to swallow it, but shrugs his agreement before he glances at Brooklyn sitting beside me. "I've already spoken to Brook and Mr. Oakley about it, but I was wondering if you'd be willing to do it again."

“Do what again?” My eyebrows shoot up when I realize what he’s talking about. “Go to the rink with the boys?”

He inclines his head. “The team had a hell of a season, but I think I can take them even further next year. With your help, that is. I haven’t seen them this excited about the game in a long time and if we can keep that energy going, some of them will get noticed for sure.”

“Some of them will get noticed anyway,” I say, not dismissing the idea of helping them out a bit, but trying to figure out where this is coming from. “You got the scouts here for us. I’m sure you’ll bring them out for these boys as well.”

“Always do, but I could use your help to increase their focus before our next season. If they go into it after spending some real time with a couple pros this summer, they’ll be unstoppable.”

“Some real time, huh?” I glance at Brooklyn. “So that’s what this is about? You want us to stay.”

Baxter nods. “I’m asking you to. I didn’t ask you to go to that rink yesterday, but I did see the difference it made to my boys. They’d really benefit from it if you’d be willing to help out for a few weeks.”

I suck in a deep breath, but he continues before I can tell him that we’ve already got plans for the off-season. “I saw you arriving with Amaya Reynolds earlier. It’s nice that you’re still friends with her. God knows, she needs it now more than ever. I didn’t know you’d kept in touch with her. Eli never mentioned it, but it makes sense you’ve been helping him with his technique behind the scenes.”

What? I lean forward a little, suddenly realizing that he’s got it all wrong. “We haven’t been helping him.”

“That’s what I said,” Brooklyn adds mildly, flashing him a grin. “We haven’t seen that kid or spoken to him since we were part of your team, Coach. Want to tell us why you’d think any differently?”

Baxter frowns as he flicks his gaze between us. “Elijah has something special. The same thing I saw in both of you. I

thought...” He shakes his head. “Either way, he’s one of the kids in particular that I think will benefit if you decide to help me out for the next few weeks. I’m sure you already know this, but his family situation isn’t ideal. Since you came with Amaya, you must know that Thomas took off a few years ago. Left her to raise her brother.” He exhales heavily, dragging a hand through his reddish-gray hair. “It’s been tough, but she’s giving it everything she’s got. Asked if she could pay off the fees for the camp at the end of the summer, so I didn’t even *suggest* the private coaching I think will get the boy to the next level. If you stay, though...”

“You’ve got my attention.” I sit up a little straighter, suddenly a lot less interested in the other plans we had before. “You think he’s got what it takes?”

He arches an eyebrow at me. “You played with the boy. What do you think?”

“I think he’s got what it takes.” I don’t even really have to think about it. The kid impressed me yesterday. He’s fast. He’s intuitive. And he seems to have that same natural feel for where the puck is going that Brooklyn has always had. “Why private coaching, though? We never had that.”

He gives me a blank stare. “You didn’t? I sure remember spending a lot of extra hours with you two. My knees won’t allow it anymore, but there are a few guys in the area I call these days when I think it’ll help. The problem is that Amaya is hanging on by a thread, but again, I’m sure you know that.”

“No, we didn’t.” I blow out a heavy breath, a few things occurring to me all at once.

So this is why her car is dead. Why she works at the hotel. Why she was so uncomfortable with them paying for her grilled cheese. Why she’s so worried about being on time to work...

Coach really did spend a lot of extra time with us. Back then, I didn’t even think about it. I figured he did it with everyone. That it was just part of his job, but fuck... As it dawns on me that the time he put in probably got us to where we are, I suddenly feel more indebted to the man than ever.

Which is no doubt what he was counting on, but that brings me to the second realization: If he can't do the same thing for Eli because of his health, then we owe it to him to do this. We owe it to Amaya too, especially if what he said about her dad is true.

"We'll stay," I decide out loud.

Travis already said he was in and if Brooklyn wasn't, he'd have spoken to me about it before we came in here. My twin-tuition says that means he's in. Plus... "I'll personally pay the fees for the camp for any boy whose family can't afford it."

As I say it, I look at my brother. These are his plans I'm fucking with too, but none of what we were going to do during the off-season was important. A lot of it was just us going to do shit that would get the adrenaline pumping off the ice for a change.

Brooklyn nods, proving once again that said twin-tuition is still as strong as ever. Once he breaks eye-contact with me, he turns back to Baxter. "Fuck it. We'll pay the fees for the camp for everyone. I think it's better not to single out some kids or make their parents feel like they need to apply for financial aid. We'll sponsor the camp."

I grin, happy that we're on the same wavelength. "Sounds good. We need to be back in Denver by August, so that gives us about six weeks to help you get these boys ready for their next season. We just, uh, we probably shouldn't work them too hard. They do need the break."

So do we. In fact, our current coaches, managers, agents, teammates, doctors, physical therapists and anyone else even remotely attached to our careers would probably suffer from a mass cardiac event if they find out what we're agreeing to right now.

"And we need to keep this quiet," I add. "As quiet as we can, anyway. We're just home for a break and if we happen to find ourselves shooting the puck around with the local team, then that's just us having fun."

“We’ll work it out.” Coach nods and pushes off the cabinet, coming over to shake both of our hands. “Thanks for this, gentlemen. Fuck. I can’t tell you how much of a relief it is. I’ve been praying for a miracle for Eli and a couple of the others, and it looks like you’re it.”

A flicker of something warm sparks in my chest. I guess it’s the realization of how much Baxter truly supports the kids on his team. How much he really did for us. It’s not something I’ve considered much before.

I’ve always been grateful, but this. *Shit... It’s a lot.*

As Brooklyn and I leave his office, my brother claps me on the shoulder and flashes me a smile. “Guess we better unpack our bags all the way then, huh? I’m pumped. This is going to be fun. Hey, will you tell Trav I’ll be back in there in a minute? I gotta go call Dax and cancel that trip to LA.”

Sliding his phone out of his pocket, he darts down the hall to call his best friend and I drag in a deep breath, stopping in front of the trophy case when I reach it. As I look over the sparkling, golden reminders of everything we achieved while we were here, I wonder if we’re about to help history repeat itself.

Is this really all it takes to help kids like us get to where we are? A few minutes of conversation between men who have the means and the ability to help and boom, you either make it or you don’t?

I swallow hard, processing that it also means that things so easily could’ve gone the other way for us. They didn’t, but... fuck. If that’s the kind of power we hold here, then we’re literally talking about *lives*.

Amaya’s life, even. Elijah’s. Those other kids the coach mentioned, and here I was before Coach explained, worrying about the plans we had to go get hurt somewhere else for a bit. I won’t lie. This whole thing makes me a lot more nervous than any game ever has, but it also matters almost as much as losing that damn Cup right about now.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-FIVE

AMAYA

Austin and Brooklyn come striding back in to join me and Travis, and although I'm happy they're back, I was also enjoying just getting to know Travis a little bit more. Honestly, he's the first person I've ever met who's made me feel right from the very beginning that I can talk to him about anything.

It's really freaking weird because I don't feel that way about anyone, but with him, words just seem to come out. Lots of words. All the words.

All those tattoos and the intense, deep green eyes don't hurt either. When he looks at me, it's like he sees who I am inside. Past the pitiful existence and right now to the girl I used to be, and I love it. I love feeling like there's at least one person in this world who knows that there's more to me than the damaged wallflower who doesn't have any friends and probably never will.

As for the tattoos, well, they don't hurt because they're lots and lots of fun to look at. Seriously, whenever I find myself getting sad about whatever we were talking about, I just focus on one of the swirls of ink on his skin and I forget all about being sad. Instead, I start wondering what inspired that particular piece. Like the blooming rose on the back of his left hand with the dome around it. Like he got it straight out of *Beauty and Beast*.

The twins are sidetracked by some people who converge on them now that they're back in the room, and Travis smirks

at me as he swallows the sip of beer he's just taken. "It is out of Beauty and Beast?"

"What? I...I didn't say that out loud."

He chuckles. "No, you didn't, but you didn't have to. I've seen enough people wondering about that one to know when the question is coming."

"Oh. Right." My cheeks heat, but I try to fight the humiliation. If he's so used to it, clearly it's a natural response and I have nothing to be humiliated about. "Why? I mean, it's beautiful, but why that?"

"A lot of people have asked me that question and usually, I just say it's because I liked the imagery." Those dark, forest greens lock on mine. "That's not completely true, though."

"It's not?" I frown, feeling spellbound by those freaking eyes. "What's the truth, then?"

"When was the last time you read that story?" he asks. "Do you remember any of the details?"

"I, uh, yes." I clear my throat. "I read to kids at the library after high school. It was a volunteer program. I thought I might get a job there doing it, but obviously, that didn't work out."

"You want to work with kids?" he asks, seeming a little surprised. "Why didn't you mention it the other day?"

I shrug. "We were talking about you, but yes. I'd love to work with kids. Particularly those like the kids who get dropped off at the library because their parents are still at work."

"Kids who need help," he concludes for me, and something flickers in his eyes that makes me all tingly in places I shouldn't be tingly.

Although, at this point, I have to admit that I'm pretty attracted to him. I know it's just another silly crush and that I can't have a crush on three different men anyway. But knowing that it's insane doesn't make it untrue. I'm crushing hard on Brooklyn and Austin all over again. I can't add

another unobtainable man to the mix and yet...it seems that's exactly what I'm doing.

Great. Hi, I'm Amaya and clearly, I have a problem. I'm attracted to three different men, two of whom are already taken. By each other.

As I'm thinking it, Travis suddenly leans in close. So close that I catch a whiff of his fresh, masculine cologne again. I almost moan out loud but thankfully, I'm not that far gone just yet. "Do you remember that if the last petal fell by the time the Beast turned 21, then he'd always be a Beast?"

I nod absently, truly intrigued by what he's saying but also just so damn distracted by his proximity. "Uh, yeah. Yep. I remember."

"When I got this, it was to serve as a reminder that if I was still who I used to be when I turned 21, I would probably stay that way forever too. It motivated me to work harder. To get better. To give it everything I had every damn day. I—"

He cuts himself off when Brooklyn slides in beside him, carrying new drinks for us all and with a happy grin on his face. "It's settled. I hope you like Evelyn, Trav."

Travis shrugs. "It's much better than where I come from. We're canceling the mountains?"

"It's already done."

I frown. "What are you talking about?"

Just as Austin plucks one of the beers out of Brooklyn's hand and passes it to me, Coach Baxter gets onstage to kick off the official program for the evening.

Although I'm burning with curiosity about what they were discussing, I turn to face Bax. Around here, the man is a legend. You don't speak while he's on stage unless you want to be burned at the stake.

I'm not really focusing on what he says until I hear the twins' names being mentioned. "Austin and Brooklyn Ryker have offered not only to sponsor our annual training camp this

year, but also to help me whip our boys into shape before next season.”

There’s a roar from the crowd and my jaw drops open, my tongue suddenly stuck to the roof of my mouth as shock reverberates through me. *If they’re sponsoring the camp, that means I can use the money I saved for Eli’s fees to fix the car.*

I almost squeal. It’s been years since I’ve heard such amazing news, and what’s better is that I don’t even have to feel bad about the fact that they’re paying because they’re paying for it all.

Which means I can’t exactly turn down the offer. Once I regain control of my eyeballs, I glance at Austin and he flashes me a megawatt grin in return. On instinct, my eyes narrow and a sudden suspicion creeps in that he offered to pay for everyone precisely so I wouldn’t be able to turn them down, but I’m too relieved and too grateful to care.

So instead, I toss my arms around his neck and hold him close, whispering against his neck. “Thank you. Thank you, thank you, thank you. You’re really staying? The boys are going to love that.”

He slides his arms around me, squeezing me tight as he nods against my head. “We’re staying, Maya. Bax asked us to and it’s the least we can do.”

“Oh, well, of course.” I roll my eyes playfully as he releases me. “If Bax asks, right?”

He laughs before he shrugs and usually, I’d have found it slightly annoying, but right now, I can’t. Because honestly, Bax made my immediate dreams come true this time when he asked them to stay. I used to think that man would only ever be responsible for stealing everyone I love right out from underneath me, but now...

I let out the fucking squeal I’ve been holding back because, why not? Bax has already announced that dinner will be served shortly and the music has started playing again, which means right now, it’s just them and me.

As the sound rips out of my lungs, I turn away from Austin to toss one arm each around Brooklyn and Travis, and the night becomes something of a whirlwind after that. People descend on the guys and I go ahead to our table for dinner, waiting to speak to them there but even then, there's always a crowd around us.

I have so many questions about how Coach Baxter convinced them to stay and why they're paying for camp, but I don't get the opportunity to ask, so I let it go. Probably because I'm also drinking a bit, which I hardly ever do.

I can't afford alcohol, hangovers, or the risk of following in my father's footsteps, but screw it. I'm celebrating and just this one night, I'm cutting loose. After dinner, Austin gets up and dips into a low bow beside me as he extends his hand.

"Dance with me?"

I giggle, the wine I had while we ate obviously in charge of my reactions right now. And I don't even care. I plant my palm in his, smiling up into those bluer-than-blue eyes. "I'd be honored."

"Don't be honored," he jokes as he pulls me into his arms. "Just dance with me."

I oblige happily, letting him lead me around the dancefloor with sure strides. Being so close to him, I breathe him in, trying to commit what it feels like to be pressed against his strong body, to feel the warm, dry grip of his hands on mine, and to experience a dance with him in all its glory.

There was a time I'd have killed for this. To be dancing with him in this very auditorium, but he didn't ask me to prom even though we talked about it. Back then, I thought I'd lost my shot forever. Now, however, he's holding me and I've never felt more like a princess.

God, wine makes me dramatic. I don't try to suppress it, though. It's way too much fun to get to let myself go for once, so I roll with it.

Mentally, I catalog every little thing he makes me feel. From the masculine, clean but spicy scent that makes me

slightly dizzy with need to the press of a definite bulge against my lower belly.

Desire speeds through me, so foreign before they came to town and yet, it's like it's muscle memory. Like my body knows how to react to him even now, after so many years, because it's been waiting for him all along.

Neither of us bring up the incident with Elijah. I'm hoping that Austin got through to him but for now, there's no use in trying to stop him. I suppose this is the point where I just have to trust that I've taught him well and that Austin's words will stay with him.

When Brooklyn cuts in and Austin huffs, but lets me go, I'm sad when he passes me over to his brother, but only until Brooklyn wraps his arms around me in a much gentler grip and I feel him smile against my cheek.

"You look happy. Are you happy?"

"So fucking happy." I have no reason to lie to him. "Thank you, Brook. I mean it. I don't know what I would've done without you guys."

"Ah, you'd have survived. You always do."

"Like a cockroach?" I tease, but he doesn't respond at first, simply tugging me closer and then pulling back to look into my eyes.

"Not like a cockroach. Like only a strong, resilient woman could. I'm in awe of you, Amaya Knox, and if anyone deserves some good news, it's you."

Tears suddenly well in my eyes as I sigh, smiling back at him before I rest my ear against his heart while he sweeps us across the dance floor with confident, practiced strides. Very much unlike when their mom was teaching them to dance in their dining room almost every night before junior prom.

Guess some of her advice finally stuck.

Once again, I'm surprised and a little sad to see him leave when Travis appears and holds out his hand to me. Brooklyn

spins me away from him, allowing me to land effortlessly in Travis's arms.

He takes over seamlessly from his boyfriend, surprisingly adept at dancing himself. I tip my head back to look into his eyes, glad that there's still enough space between us to be able to see him clearly.

"You can dance?"

He gives me a gentle, almost sad smile. "My mom ran out of time before she could teach me, but I remember how she used to get all dreamy when she was watching people do it in the old movies we watched together. It took me a long time to make the leap but eventually, I took a few lessons. No one knows, though."

"We'll keep it between us." I smile back at him before stepping up so I'm as close to him as I was to the twins and at this point, my entire body is a simmering cauldron of need.

With each one, I've gotten more and more turned on and right now, my breasts feel swollen and heavy, my nipples are hard, and I'm pretty sure my panties are damp. It's so damn inappropriate, but on the other hand, they did say they like sharing.

The mere thought that maybe they'd like to share me sets off an array of fireworks deep down inside, and for a moment, I just focus on Travis. On how his scent is so much fresher than Brooklyn's, who smells darker, more bitter, and somehow sweeter all at the same time.

Like one of those expensive salted caramel coffees.

I sigh, trying my best to put Travis's boyfriend out of my head. I have no business thinking of any of them the way I am right now, but Travis's body is so hard and his grip so strong on mine that there's no escaping it, the fantasies of how the way he dances might translate to what he's like in bed.

Austin takes over from Travis again, and it doesn't stop me from thinking about what it might be like to be with them all at the same time. Now that I know they're not only into it but have done it before, it's like my brain is glitching again.

Thankfully, before any of those fantasies can take root, Elijah sticks out his arm to stop us when we make our next pass on the dance floor. My brother grins at me. “I’m heading to the afterparty with the team now. I’ll be safe.”

“What time will you be home?” I ask.

At the same time, Austin says, “Call me if you need a ride anywhere. For the love of God, do not get into a car with any of your boys tonight.”

Eli’s eyes go wide as he studies us. “Sure thing, Mom and Dad. You don’t have to worry and you don’t have to wait up either. I’m crashing at Josh’s place.”

Worry washes over me. Josh’s parents are almost never home, but I know I can’t stop him. I also know that’s why they choose Josh’s place to party at.

Austin gives him a pointed look. “Just. Be. Safe. Trust me, bud. You don’t want to knock up a puck bunny and become a dad this year, alright?”

Eli jokingly salutes him before he gives me a quick hug. “Love you, sis. Seriously, don’t worry about me. It looks like you’re having fun for once, so just stay here and keep having it, okay?”

“Okay,” I promise dully, having to remind myself as he walks away that he’s not a child anymore and that he can make decisions for himself. *Now all I have to do is hope that he makes good decisions.*

Austin hooks a finger under my chin, gently applying pressure until he turns my head away from the direction Eli disappeared in and waits until I look at him again. “That kid has a good head on his shoulders, babe. You don’t have to worry about him.”

“Babe?” I blink myself out of my reverie about what it will do to him if he *does* knock up a puck bunny and become a dad in his senior year, and focus on Austin’s face again. “Since when do you call me that?”

“Since we’re not kids anymore and that’s what you are, you know. A babe.”

As I look into his eyes, I smile—and not because of the ludicrous nickname, but because he’s here and for once in my fucking adult life, I don’t feel as alone. “Are we going to dance or are you going to keep coming up with terrible nicknames for me?”

He laughs, sliding his thigh between my legs as he starts moving again. Tiny sparks of pleasure zap through me at the unexpected, direct contact to my lady parts, but I’m not objecting. I needed some kind of friction and he’s giving me what I need without me having to ask for it.

Would you look at that? He really might just be a gentleman. I almost laugh out loud at the thought, but then Brooklyn is back, pulling me into his arms once more and fueling the fire within me without giving me that bit of friction I need so bad.

I have a feeling that with him, it’s because he enjoys the tease rather than the fact that he doesn’t know how I’m feeling right now. But I’d never ask, so I go with it, once again immersing myself in him until Travis cuts in again.

The night continues that way until eventually, the event starts winding down and Austin finally suggests we leave. Unlike me, he stopped drinking after the first couple of beers, which were hours and an entire three course meal ago, and he guides me to their car with his large, warm hand at the small of my back.

Electricity zings through me from his touch and against my better judgment, when we stop in front of my house, I can’t stop myself from leaning forward, addressing them by making eye-contact with them each in turn.

“How about a nightcap? We’ve got some beers in the kitchen and there might even be some cheap whiskey somewhere.”

“You had me at beer,” Brooklyn says immediately. “But hey, I could definitely go for some cheap whiskey too.”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SIX

BROOKLYN

A maya's house looks exactly the same as it used to. All the furniture is a little worn and dated, but it's always been that way. They've still got the same family pictures on the walls and even the same decorative pillows on the couches.

I grin as I settle back, taking Travis's hand in one of mine and wagging my eyebrows as I turn to face him. "Welcome to my teenage years."

He chuckles, looking a lot more relaxed after tonight than he has been since we talked about his foster brother. He leans against my side as we sit together on the couch positioned kitty corner to the one Austin and Amaya are on. She went to change into a t-shirt and shorts as soon as we got here, citing that the dress was too uncomfortable, and his gaze sweeps across them before he turns his head to grin at me. "Your teenage years, huh? You guys watched a lot of movies as teenagers?"

I shrug. "Amaya watched a lot of movies. We watched a lot of her."

She squeals with laughter as she shakes her head, taking another big sip of her beer. All the alcohol she's consumed tonight seems to have mellowed her out a bit, making her less adult-Amaya and more our Amaya. I like it. "Bullshit. You did *not* watch me."

"Uh, yeah, we did." Austin smirks at her, grabbing a crocheted blanket off the back of the couch and spreading it

across his lap. “This thing used to be my best friend. I can’t believe it’s still here.”

She glances at the blue and yellow wool on his lap and smiles. “I made that myself, remember? Of course, we still have it. Do you have any idea how long it took me?”

I do, but right now, I don’t feel like remembering all those hours she spent in the hospital with her mom, teaching herself how to crochet while she was making this thing. Everything has been so damn serious with her since we arrived and I, for one, am over it. At least for tonight.

Wanting to keep the mood light, especially since she’s still smiling and it doesn’t look like she intended to venture into talking about darker times, I decide to break my brother’s little secret to her. “Austin used it to hide his boners from you. That’s why it was his best friend.”

Her cheeks turn bright pink as her mouth pops open. At first, she rolls her eyes but when he doesn’t deny it, her chin drops and she stares right at me. “Seriously?”

“Seriously.” I grin as Travis laughs, eyeing the blanket on Austin’s lap himself for a minute.

“Is that what you’re doing right now, too?” he asks, clearly amused.

My brother scoffs, but the blanket stays exactly where it is. “Why would I hide it now? I’m not a teenager anymore. There are no parents or little brothers around, and Amaya knows the truth. If I was hard right now, I’d own it.”

Travis laughs again, shaking his head before he glances back at me. “He’s lying, isn’t he?”

“I think so.” I cock an eyebrow at him, wondering if I’m the only one who’s a little tipsy and a lot horny. All that dancing and along with all the talking about sex earlier has definitely revved me up and I’m curious to find out if I’m the only one. I don’t think I am, and it’s making me want to push a little bit.

We’ve all been drinking and Elijah’s not coming home, so why not have some fun?

I don't actually think anything is going to happen here, though. Amaya will probably draw the line long before it does, but we might as well get real with each other. I stare at her and Austin—both of whom are suddenly sitting super still—and sprinkle a little fuel on the maybe, could-be fire.

“Truth or dare.”

Amaya shakes her head. “No way. We're not playing that. Didn't Austin *just* say that we're not teenagers anymore?”

“Who cares?” I grin at her. “Humor me. I'm feeling puckish.”

“Puckish?” She laughs, but then sighs through her nostrils and takes another sip of beer. “Fine. It's been ages, so why not? Dare.”

“Ooo, Amaya's starting strong,” Travis jokes, getting comfortable against my side, so I think he's good with me pushing.

I turn my head to kiss the top of his, breathing in the Oceanic scent of his shampoo before I look back at her. “Grab the blanket and make him stand up.”

“What? No?” She rolls her eyes at me again, but Austin sighs and tosses the blanket at her before he gets up.

“Just like I thought,” Travis muses out loud. “That bulge wasn't so prominent before you sat down.”

“Fuck off.” My brother shoots him a grin. “This *just* happened. Do you have any idea how long I've been wanting to play this game with her without having to hide anything? It's an old dream come true. You can't blame me.”

“Never said I do,” Trav shoots back before he glances at Amaya, who's staring at Austin's crotch with her eyes so wide, he laughs. “Too much?”

She shakes her head, blinking hard before a devilish smile appears on her lips. “It's my turn, then. Right?”

“Right.” I'm curious about whether she's going to yank up the emergency brake yet and I watch as she thinks it over.

Unsurprisingly, her gaze remains on mine. “Truth or dare?”

“Dare,” I say easily. “Travis and I played *Truth* with you earlier, so I don’t think there’s any point choosing that.”

“Fair enough,” she agrees as her gaze darts to Travis before it moves back to mine. “I dare you to kiss him.”

“That’s what you want?” Austin groans as he drops back into his seat next to her. “Clearly, you don’t spend enough time with them. They don’t stop once they get started, though. Not unless they have to, so if you really want them to kiss, you might as well tell them which room they can use right now and pick a movie for us to watch once they’re gone.”

Amaya doesn’t skip a beat. “My room is in the same place it’s always been. Be my guest.”

I want to gape at her, but Travis has straightened up from leaning against my side and there’s a ridiculously dirty sparkle in those eyes as he pushes his fingers into my hair, stealing my attention away from the bantering of my brother and my former best friend.

The slightly calloused fingers of his left hand wrap around my neck as he leans forward, grinning before he tugs my lower lip into his mouth and nibbles on it. I groan, painfully aware that Amaya is watching as my mouth crashes into his.

“Told ya.” Austin’s voice filters into my consciousness. “Do you want to keep watching them or are you about ready to choose a movie yet?”

“I...” she trails off, her voice a little breathier than usual.

Travis commandeers my attention again when he bites my lip instead of just nibbling this time, following it up with a strong sweep of his tongue into my mouth. I fucking love it when he’s like this, all playful and...puckish. *Why is that word in my head tonight?*

Whatever the answer is, I give in immediately, already hard as hell as I wrap an arm around his neck and haul him closer to me. Austin was right when he said we don’t often

stop when we don't have to, but that's the thing. We almost *always* fucking have to.

We hooked up during our Christmas break last year and we've been together ever since, but during the season, we had very little time to just fucking kiss for as long as we wanted to. We're masters of the quickie at this point and now, whenever we can, we like to take our time.

He lets out a soft moan as his chest crashes into mine, his tongue diving into my mouth again and again, our kisses getting more fierce with every passing second. The world around me melts away, and not even knowing that Amaya's in the room breaks the spell he's putting on me anymore. God, it's been six long months made up of mostly waiting and denial, and we hadn't even been off for a week before we flew out here.

My hand drops away from his neck, my fingernails scraping along the length of his back as I hold him to me, giving him everything I've got. Somewhere in the back of my mind, as my hips arch and my cock aches, I hear Austin saying, "Just do it, Trav. You know you want to."

As if following my brother's command, one of Travis's hands wraps around my thigh and he jerks it up, tucking it around his hip as he pushes me down with his chest. My back hits the couch and I don't fight to sit up, too fucking relieved when Travis's hips come down to fit between mine.

With his tongue in my mouth and his hard cock sliding against mine, I realize vaguely that we're giving Amaya a lot more than she asked for, but fuck it. Austin warned her and she was okay with it.

Besides, my heart is pounding in my ears, my entire being focused on Travis's weight sinking into me and the taste of him in my mouth. Grabbing the back of his neck, I crush him to me, moaning when he starts rocking his hips and pleasure shoots through me.

"Amaya?" I hear Austin's voice again, but I'm still too focused on Travis to care much about what he's saying. "You

know you can tell them to stop, right? If this is making you uncomfortable—“

“No,” she cuts him off, her voice husky. “I...I don’t.”

He’s quiet for a beat. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, I...”

“You think it’s hot?” he says softly as if the revelation is just hitting him now. “Why are you blushing? Hell, even I think it’s hot. As long as I can’t see Brooklyn’s face.”

I release Travis’s back to flip my brother off, but when my palm finds my boyfriend’s body again, I slide it all the way down to his ass. If Amaya really is okay with this, then I’m not holding back.

Meanwhile, Austin keeps murmuring to her and Travis’s tongue keeps fighting for dominance with mine. Still, I hear her when she asks, “Do you really think it’s hot too?”

She sounds uncertain, but I’m sure Austin will set her straight. “Yeah, of course. It’s nothing to be embarrassed about, Maya.”

“But...they’re not animals in a zoo. We can’t keep staring at them.”

Austin snorts. “If they didn’t want us staring at them, they’d have gone to your room by now. They think it’s hot that we’re watching, baby. Well, Travis does. I’m pretty sure Brooklyn’s too far gone to remember we’re even here.”

I groan a loud protest, but then Travis finally slows the kiss, staying on top of me as he smiles against my mouth and whispers, “Want to ask?”

My eyebrows twitch, but I nod. “Fuck yes.”

He lifts himself up a little higher, looking at them over his shoulder as I seal my lips over the skin at the base of his neck and suck. “Would you like to join us?” he asks gently, even though I feel his heart racing and his dick throbbing against mine. “We don’t mind. We told you earlier.”

I don't stop kissing his neck for long enough to look at her, but it's like I can sense her hesitation. Moaning softly, I can't stop my hips from arching into Travis's, but it's her I speak to against his skin.

"It's my turn. I dare you to kiss Aus, Maya. Just do it. Now."

She squeaks softly and I finally stop kissing Travis for long enough to at least glance at her. What I see when I do surprises me, though. Her lips are so swollen it's like she's been biting them this whole time, her eyes wide and her pupils huge, her cheeks so pink it's like she's a kid who got ahold of her mom's makeup.

While I'm looking at them, Travis does too, his hands tightening on my hips when Austin turns to face her. He gives her an easy, surprisingly understanding smile. "You're in charge here. You don't have to listen to him."

"I know," she replies softly, scooting closer to him on the couch and swallowing hard as she looks into his eyes. "I've always wondered what it would be like, though. Do you mind?"

He snorts. "Fuck, no."

With that, my darling brother finally seems to find his fucking balls and he grabs her face, pulling her to him and slanting his lips over hers. My heart stops beating for a moment as I watch them, anxiously waiting to see how she's going to react.

At first, she freezes, going completely stock still, but then she lets out a moan that almost makes me come in my fucking pants and winds her arms around his neck, her mouth opening to let his tongue slide inside. Travis grins as he turns back to me, fire dancing his eyes as he lowers his mouth to mine.

"It looks like we're finally off to the fucking races. Consider this my gift to teenage Brooklyn, for all those birthdays I missed before I knew you."

My heart melts and my cock somehow gets harder as I lift my head and crush my lips to his again. God, I love this guy. I

love him so fucking much that it hurts, but at the same time, I have a sneaky suspicion that it's not just going to be only the two of us for much longer.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-SEVEN

AMAYA

Our eyes lock and for a heartbeat, the world stands still. My pulse throbs in my ears, a rapid drumbeat of anticipation. Austin's warmth envelops me as he bridges the gap between us, his hand gently lifting to brush a stray lock of hair away from my face.

That one touch, light and tentative, sparks something deep within me, a flame I've long tried to extinguish. Slowly, with a hesitancy that mirrors my own, Austin leans in. His eyes, deep pools of emotion, searches mine for any sign of reluctance. When he finds none, he slants his lips over my own.

A thousand fireworks go off inside me. I've wanted this for so long, and he doesn't disappoint. His lips are soft, but the kiss is firm. Confident. He tastes faintly like whiskey and beer, but also just like him. Like that musky, masculine scent that used to envelop me while we slept in his bed.

In the space of that kiss, time ceases to exist. It's tender, yet filled with the intensity of years of unspoken, pent-up emotion.

I can't get over how soft his lips are.

When his tongue darts out and licks the seam of my lips, trying to get me to open for him, I all but melt into a puddle on the floor.

I freeze for a moment, afraid that this is all just a dream. *I mean, reality can never top dreams, right?*

But then he moves closer to me, his body suddenly feeling like it's caressing mine, and he brings his hands on my face to

pull me even closer. An electric tension hums in the air, a feeling both foreign and aching familiar.

Austin is kissing me. *Austin fucking Ryker is kissing me.*

In my living room.

Somehow, I feel like teenage-me is watching. And she's squealing her head off. As in, *grab the pompoms and do a little cheerleader dance* squealing.

I'm practically shaking with excitement.

Of course, I've been kissed before, but not like this.

Not by a man who said he's been crazy about me for a long time.

A moan escapes me and on autopilot, my arms go around his neck, surrendering to the kiss. To all those feelings I've bottled up for so long.

When I open my mouth, he doesn't hesitate for a second before his tongue dives in, licking mine like he'll never get enough of me.

Oh my God, this is fucking amazing.

I've never really been into kissing. I've done it because it's a part of the dating process, but I've never enjoyed the kiss itself, just the potential it gives me to get to the sex. But I'm definitely feeling this right now and I don't want to rush it.

But I break the kiss anyway and Austin pulls away immediately, his hands still on my face as he looks at me with confusion clouding his heated eyes.

"You're gonna think I'm a total prude, but I don't know how to kiss like that."

A slow grin breaks out on his face as he murmurs, "I'll be your teacher then, baby."

My brain suddenly just stops working, and I'm stuck to the spot when he leans forward and places another tender kiss on my lips. His hands slide up to my hair, holding me in place, his gaze never leaving mine.

A little sigh falls out of me just before he claims my lips again and I moan. I had no idea kissing could be like this. His grip on my hair tightens and he pulls my head back a little, giving himself better access as he nips at my lip and kisses his way down my neck to the dip of my breasts.

“Austin,” I find myself whispering, unsure of what I want to say.

I better figure it out fast though, because he straight up to look at me, his gaze intense, yet soft. “I’ve been fantasizing about this moment for a long time,” he says softly, his voice a deep, resonant timbre that sends shivers down my spine.

“Me too,” I admit in barely more than a whisper.

A devilish grin spreads over his handsome face when he looks over my shoulder. After that kiss, I almost forgot that Brooklyn and Travis are still with us, making out on the couch. I turn to follow his gaze, sucking a sharp breath at what I see happening just a few feet away. Brooklyn is lying down, his jeans halfway to his ankles, his pants off and his boxers pulled down, and Travis is sucking his cock. One of his inked hands is on his boyfriend’s hip while the other is wedged between their bodies, so I can’t really see it, but *hot. Damn.*

A few seconds, I was so into that kiss that Brooklyn and Travis had faded away, but now, I find myself staring at Brooklyn’s body, his muscles, his rippling and his broad chest. His black hair is spread out on the cushion and his eyes are closed, his head thrown back with his lips parted.

Travis’s eyes suddenly open like he feels me looking at him, and he glances at me with a mischievous twinkle in his eyes. Without a word, he continues to suck Brooklyn off, his strokes becoming harder and faster. I want to avert my gaze, but I can’t and Travis doesn’t seem to mind, his eyes on mine as he takes one of Brooklyn’s balls into his mouth.

“Damn, that’s hot.”

I blush when I realize I said that out loud, but then I feel Austin’s lips on my neck, his tongue flicking out, teasing me.

“You like what you see?” he whispers in my ear.

I swallow hard. “Yeah.”

I keep watching as Travis his head bobs up and down, his cheeks going hollowing as he sucks Brooklyn’s cock hard. My whole body is trembling with desire as warmth spreads through me, but I can’t move, completely rooted to the spot until Austin pulls me back to him, his erection pressing against my butt and making me shiver.

Travis and Brooklyn move together in perfect harmony, and my heart races as I absorb every moment of it. My mouth dries up as I witness them take pleasure from one another, and I can’t quite describe it, but it really is just fucking hot.

I’ve never seen a man suck another man’s cock. *Well, scratch that, I’ve never seen anyone have sex as a spectator.*

But the way my body is tingling all over as I watch them, I’m a fan. It feels intimate to see two people share something this intense. Suddenly, it makes complete sense to me that they like sharing. Even if I didn’t understand it at all just a few hours ago.

“It’s not so inconceivable now, is it?” Austin’s husky voice makes me drench my panties completely. “Why we like sharing...”

My hard nipples strain against the cotton of my bra and I nod, momentarily unable to form words. Austin wraps his arms around me, gliding his hands slowly over my belly and all the way up to my breasts.

“I love that you’re watching them,” he says as he pinches my nipples.

“Oh,” I breathe out. His hands feel so damn good that I arch my back to push deeper into his hands.

He lowers them again though, this time to grab the hem of my shirt and pull it over my head. Once it’s free, he throws it on the ground and unclips my bra in one smooth, practiced motion. The cool air flows over my already aching nipples and I moan, but he brings his hands back then, his thumbs flicking gently over my hardened peaks.

My knees buckle as desire pulses between my legs, my gaze still locked on Brooklyn and Travis as Brooklyn groans, his eyes still closed and his brow now furrowed in concentration, his hips thrusting into Travis's mouth.

“You like that, baby?”

I bite my lip and nod again, apparently still speechless as I keep watching Brooklyn, the way his muscles are flexing and hear his breathing become more labored.

Austin's still making me see stars too, his hands never leaving me skin as his breath ghosts across my neck. “You have the perfect breasts. I always imagined they would be, but now I know.” He rolls both my nipples between his fingers, making me moan—so much more loudly this time.

As I do, he pushes his hips forward so I can feel his hard length pressed firmly to my lower back and I swear, my knees really nearly buckle. He groans, sounding so much like Brooklyn in that moment but still, somehow not. “God, those sounds you make are going to haunt my dreams. Makes me wonder what you'll sound like when you come on my fingers.”

As if determined to find out, he lets go of my breasts and glides his hands down to the waistband of my shorts. He undoes the button deftly, the zipper quickly following before he pushes the garment over my hips until it falls to my feet.

As I try to kick the shorts away, he takes my hand, helping me to step out of them so I don't fall over despite how much my legs are shaking. I'm standing in front of him wearing only a damn thong now, though.

“Fuck, baby, if I had known that's what you were wearing under your dress earlier, I would have been hard all night.”

He slips a hand between my thighs, rubbing my clit over the fabric of my thong. I suck in my breath, sure he can feel how wet I am. He doesn't mention it at first though, playfully biting my shoulder before he pulls the front panel of my thong aside.

“Fuck,” he whispers, kissing my neck, and then licking the outer shell of my ear. “You’re so fucking wet, baby,” he says, his fingers rubbing between my wet folds.

I open my mouth to answer him, but Brooklyn lets out a strangled noise, shifting our attention back to the two men on the couch.

His breathing has become completely ragged now, and I can see the muscles in Travis’s arms move as he sucks him. “So close,” Brooklyn moans, his eyebrows pinched together as his hips arch.

Listening to the sounds of Travis’ lips on Brooklyn’s cock, their moans, and then feeling Austin’s hard cock pressed against my back, sends my body into overdrive. I feel myself getting wetter and when Austin pushes his finger inside of me, my pussy squeezes around it, trying to pull him deeper.

“God, Amaya, you’re so tight. You’re already milking my fingers and you’re dripping wet, baby.”

For a moment, I wonder if it’s just dirty talk or if he’s saying it for their information, but then he adds another finger and my knees go numb. He grabs my hips and holds me up, starting to draw circles around my clit with his thumb and suddenly, the pleasure is just way too much. I grip his forearms to hold my balance and his fingers are still moving inside of me, his thumb never stopping on my clit.

“Are you going to come with Brook, baby? He’s really fucking close.” I’m so turned on by the sounds of him and Travis that I’m squirming, moaning, my thighs starting to shake.

“You’re close,” Austin murmurs, obviously watching me carefully.

“Oh, fuck,” I moan as the pressure inside of me builds and builds.

“Come for me, baby.”

The pressure explodes and my body clamps around his fingers. I throw my head back, my heart racing as the climax shakes me to my core.

“Fuck, baby, you feel so good,” he moans, lapping at my neck and continuing to rub my clit to prolong my orgasm.

“Fuck, somehow I knew you’d sound like every dirty dream I’ve ever had,” Austin says through gritted teeth.

My orgasm overwhelms me, making my ears ring and my toes curl, my entire body shaking as exquisite bliss, pleasure unlike anything I’ve ever felt, drags me into its grasp and doesn’t let go. I cum and cum, and I don’t even try to stop it, completely uncaring of who’s witnessing what right now.

It takes ages, but when finally I open my eyes, Travis and Brooklyn are watching me too. Brooklyn is still half naked, his dick still standing proud, still wet from Travis’s mouth. Both of their eyes are wide and wild, locked on me. Their breathing is labored, as is Austin’s behind me on the couch.

Damn. I missed Brooklyn’s orgasm. I really wanted to see that, but then Travis gives me something else for my future spank bank when he stands up and drops his pants. Like, no hesitation at all.

As his dick comes into view, he doesn’t hide and I can’t help it, staring at his cock like it’s a wizard that’s appeared right in the middle of my living room. The head is broad and shiny, already wet with pre-cum. He’s huge. At least 10 inches and his shaft is slightly curved. For a cock, it’s goddamn beautiful and immediately, I wonder how it would feel inside of me.

“I want you on your knees in front of us,” Travis tells me authoritatively, taking a seat next to Brooklyn on the couch.

His inked hand moves to his shaft and as I stare, Brooklyn’s does the same. I want to gape, but I can’t get my body to obey my commands. Like, not at all.

Both men are stroking their cocks slowly, looking at *me* while they do. I don’t know why, but I look over my shoulder to look at Austin. He just winks at me before he inclines his chin toward them.

Moving so slowly that I’m not sure how I’m doing it, I lower myself on my hands and knees, crawling over to their

couch. First, I go to Brooklyn, wrapping my fingers around the base of his shaft and lowering my head to lick the tip of his cock.

He shudders. “Fuck, baby, that feels so good,” he says as I let my tongue slide over the head. I take him into my mouth then, my lips stretched around him as I start to suck. He grabs a handful of my hair to guide my head up and down.

Vaguely, I hear Austin and Travis groan and it only makes me more eager to show them what I’ve got. It might not be much, but it sure seems to be working for them.

As I suck, I feel Brooklyn’s dick growing in my mouth, so I slow my pace and move my hand between his legs to grab his balls.

“Holy fuck,” he groans.

I keep my pace slow, swiping my tongue over him. His balls tighten in my hand and he starts thrusting his hips.

“I’m going to come if you keep sucking me like that,” he says.

I slowly lift my head, letting his dick go with a pop as I wonder how that’s even possible. He literally just came, but the way he’s looking at me with those smoldering eyes says he’s not lying.

My lips curve into a slow smile. “How about you watch me suck your boyfriend’s cock first?”

Suddenly, his eyes are sparkling with mischief as he nods. “That sounds fair.” His gaze moves away from mine to focus on something over my shoulder, a smirk appearing on his lips. “I’ll do you one better. How about I watch you suck my boyfriend’s dick while my brother fucks you from behind.”

A blush crawls over my cheeks at his words, making him chuckle out loud. “Don’t go shy on us now, babe.”

I give him a shy smile. “Okay. I think I can handle that.”

I shuffle on my knees to Travis, forcing myself not to think about how weird this probably is. They’re not acting like it’s anything to be ashamed of though and as much as I want to

overthink it, I just don't. I'm enjoying it way too much to let my brain get in the way.

When I move my head to Travis's dick, he slides his fingers into my hair to guide me. I suck him in slowly. "Fuck, baby, I loved watching you suck Brook. He feels amazing in your mouth, right? That cock was made to wrap your tongue around."

Travis moans loudly as I wrap my hand around his shaft, starting to stroke him in time with my mouth gliding down over him. I start when I feel Austin's hand on my ass, his fingers trailing over my skin. He pulls my thong over my hips before he takes it off completely.

Slipping a finger between my folds, he groans loud when he feels me now. "Goddammit, you guys should feel this. So wet. So silky. Fuck."

He pushes one finger all the way inside me, then adds another.

Brooklyn grunts, frustration in his voice as he grits out, "I promise you, bro, if you don't fuck her right now, I will."

"Grab a condom from my wallet," Austin says and sink my mouth down further on Travis as I feel the air shift when Brooklyn moves past me.

A moment later, the soft sound of foil being ripped open meets my ears, then Austin's hands brush my skin as he rolls the latex on. With his palms moving to my hips and his fingers flexing, he brings his dick to my entrance.

I moan, my body taut with anticipation as he holds onto my hips, pulling me backwards and filling me with a powerful thrust.

A pleased scream comes out of me, muffled by Travis's dick in my mouth.

"Dear lord, I'm going to come if you keep doing that." he tries to pull my head off him, but I'm not stopping.

The tip of his cock hits the back of my throat and he moans before he starts pulsing on my tongue, not quite there yet but

very fucking close. His hips start thrusting, his head now rolled back when I glance up at him.

“Fuck, that’s hot,” Brooklyn says, and I move my gaze to his, seeing him from the corner of my eye as watching me suck on his boyfriend while Austin finds a rhythm, pounding into me from behind, stretching me wide open and hitting all the right places inside.

It’s official, I’ve died and gone to heaven.

But I won’t miss seeing everything I can this time, so I keep looking at Brooklyn, noticing that his face is flushed, his bottom lip between his teeth as he watches. In a flash, his hand moves to his cock and he’s stroking just as Travis starts thrusting in time with Austin.

“Oh, fuck, I’m going to come,” Travis groans and jerks inside of my mouth.

And that’s all it takes for me to go over the edge. The second his hot cum hits my tongue, I scream my release around him.

“Fuck. Shit. She’s coming,” Austin roars, gripping my hips tight, and ramming into me.

My pulse thrums in my clit as another orgasm hits me, sucking his dick deep inside as I ride it out.

“Fuck, I’m going to come so hard,” Austin groans.

He tugs on my hair, pulling my mouth off of Travis dick. “Suck Brooklyn’s cock while I come inside of you, baby.”

I do as I’m told and take Brooklyn into my mouth again.

“I’m going to fuck you harder now,” Austin grunts, thrusting into me like he’s losing control. I love every second of it, matching his rhythm and his intensity on Brooklyn, then Austin growls, his body stiffening and his dick twitching inside of me. “Oh, fuck, I’m coming. That’s it, baby. Shit. Oh, fuck.”

Just the thought of him finding his release inside of me makes me cum again. I can’t stop myself from shaking, my

body still pulsing with pleasure when Brooklyn's hot cum hits the back of my throat.

Yep... official. I've died and gone to ice hockey-sex heaven.

CHAPTER
TWENTY-EIGHT

AMAYA

Waking up with three gorgeous, naked, professional hockey players is the stuff dreams are made of. As I look at them one by one, I blink hard, not really sure that isn't a dream after all.

There's Austin on my left, stretched out on his back, lying as still as he always used to but there's a serene smile on his face and all that tanned skin, dotted with a few tattoos here and there, is on full display. The sheets cover his nether region, but the cut V of his hips and all his stacked abs are right there, tempting me to lick them.

Before I give in to said temptation—and give him a reason to get a restraining order if he wakes to being licked—I roll over to look at Brooklyn and Travis on my right. They're spooning, with Travis being held by Brooklyn behind him.

Juxtaposed in the most beautiful way with their heads pressed together is their black and blonde hair, their tattooed and unblemished skin—for the part of Brooklyn I can see right now anyway. Even in their sleep, they're leaning into each other, gravitating together like they're bound by invisible magnets. And through it all, Brooklyn's leg extends past Travis's to rest on mine, his calf on my knee as if he's trying to include me too.

I take it all in, wondering how the hell this happened. I remember last night, of course. I didn't have that much to drink. Evidently, I only drank enough to eradicate my inhibitions without the alcohol taking my memories with it as well.

A double-edged sword, as far as I'm concerned. As I lie back, not wanting to wake them and not wanting to move too much at all so I don't risk shattering the peacefulness of this moment, I allow myself to think back to last night.

I already know I won't let these memories back in very often. Too soon, they're going to be gone again and then it's going to hurt like hell to remember what happened in my very own bed last night.

But I allow it now, even admitting to myself that it was the best night I've ever had. The best *sex* I've ever had. Not that I've had a whole hell of a lot of it, but they definitely know how to make a girl feel special. And how to make a girl cum.

All of them are insanely talented in bed. I'll give them that. As I think it over, I find my mind wandering to the next few weeks. According to what they and Coach Bax said last night, they're going to be sticking around. *Am I crazy for even thinking about this?*

The short answer to that is probably. I was literally just thinking about how much it's going to hurt when they leave me behind again after just one night again. *So why the hell am I suddenly wondering if they might be interested in a repeat performance or two? Perhaps even a dozen.*

I shake my head at myself for even thinking about it, but even as I do, I know I'm not going to stop thinking about it. Maybe it *is* crazy, but right now, crazy can go fuck itself up the ass.

Last night was the first time I felt alive in...I don't even know how long, but long. I'm not stupid enough to think anything is going to come of it if it happens again, but I'm tired of always being responsible.

Of never having fun.

Of always thinking about the next step when the next step is always just figuring it out how to survive.

I'm just...I'm ready to have a life. Even if it is just for a few weeks. I'm ready to break out of the mental prison cell

I'm in and live a little. Drawing in a deep breath through my nostrils, I make the decision to at least run it by them.

As I release the breath, I feel someone watching me and my gaze snaps to the right, landing on Brooklyn's open, amused eyes. He cocks his head toward the door, mouthing 'coffee?' At least, that's what I hope he's trying to convey so I nod, slowly rising so I don't disturb Travis or Austin.

Once we're out of bed, I grab my robe to cover up and Brooklyn puts on a pair of underwear, but he's not in any hurry. I even manage to get one last eyeful before black fabric covers his taut ass. A disappointed sigh escapes me before I can stop it and he suddenly glances at me over his shoulder, those blue eyes really dancing with amusement now.

Crossing over to me in two long strides, he stifles his laughter as he grabs my arm and drags me out of the room, using his free hand to shut the door gently behind him. With that done, the silent laughter starts spilling out of him and he tosses his arm around my shoulders, pulling me close and smacking a kiss to my temple.

My heart races, mortification flooding my senses as I debate between punching him and laughing with him. "What? Why are you laughing?"

"Because that was funny." He finally releases me when we get to the kitchen, heading over to the fridge and pulling out a carton of orange juice that he opens and practically guzzles down before turning to grin at me again. "Before I opened my eyes, I was wondering how much of a wreck you were going to be. Imagine my surprise when I finally look at you and you're wearing this smug, satisfied little smirk."

"It was *not* a smirk." I swat at the air in front of me, shaking my head as I lean against the kitchen counter. "And get a glass if you're going to drink that. We're not savages in this house."

"I don't know. Last night was pretty savage." He pumps his eyebrows at me, but reaches into the cabinet and comes back with a glass. As he fills it, he glances at me again. "Are

you sure you're okay, though? I mean, despite being aggravated by me putting my underwear back on."

"I wasn't aggravated." The protest rings hollow even to my own ears, though. Considering what we did last night, I suppose the truth is out and my brain seems intent not to even try to let me tell a convincing lie. "Fine. I wasn't aggravated, but I was disappointed. You have a nice ass. It's an objective fact. Do you know it even has its own Instagram page?"

His eyebrows sweep up. "It does? I did not know that. Show me."

"I don't follow it," I lie and this time, I manage it smoothly. *Take that!*

Brooklyn snorts, then he takes a sip of his juice, those cerulean blues still on mine as he mirrors my stance and leans with his own hip against the counter. "You still haven't answered my other question. The one about whether you're okay."

"I'm okay." I'm not sure I should be, but I am. "A little sore. In all the right places though, so I don't mind. Why? Are you not okay?"

He shrugs, his head tipping slightly as he sweeps his gaze across my face like he's trying to figure out if I'm lying. I'm not. Eventually, he must realize that because his lips break into another grin.

"Me? I'm peachy. Last night was awesome. I loved it. Why would I not be okay?"

"Because your boyfriend..."

"Came in your mouth?" he asks when he realizes I'm not going to say it, then he smirks. "I'm fine, Amaya. It was hot. We've already spoken about this."

"Yeah, but speaking about it and having it happen are two completely different things."

"Fair enough, but this wasn't the first time it happened for us, remember?" He pushes off the counter and walks over to

me slowly, almost like he's afraid he might scare me if he moves too fast.

Again.

It's reminiscent of those first few times we saw each other and I don't like it. For now. I'm over being fragile. I never liked it to begin with but now, it's like they loaned me some of their strength last night and I'm using it to power a whole new Amaya.

"I remember," I say, looking him right in the eye. "You're not going to scare me, Brook. These last few years have been rough, I admit that, but I'm still *me*. You can stop acting like I'm going to break."

"Aren't you?" he asks in a strangely quiet voice. "I would have. If I had been through half of what you have, I can guarantee I'd have broken a long time ago."

"Every once in a while, I crack," I tell him honestly, feeling weird compelled by that hushed voice. It's like it's creating this bubble where it's just the two of us and inside that bubble, I feel completely, utterly safe. "I'm surprised Travis hasn't told you. He's seen it a few times."

"Travis is good at keeping things private, Maya. You never have to worry about that with him. The only way he would've told me is if he was concerned about you, but you must have said something that convinced him he didn't have to be."

My teeth sink into the back of my lip as I ponder what he just said, then I remember we came out here to make coffee so I head over to the machine. "Or maybe he just wasn't concerned because he thought I wasn't going to be your problem. You guys would've been leaving tomorrow. Maybe you still are. The point is that he could've chosen to keep his mouth shut so you didn't have to feel responsible for me."

"We're staying," Brooklyn says without skipping a beat. "We promised Bax and right now, I'm promising you, too. We're staying for the next six weeks, and if you really think that we'd leave after saying we were staying, then you don't

know Travis very well. I know he'd like for that to change. The only real question is whether you do too."

I glance at him after setting two mugs down on the counter and starting the machine. "I don't think it's any surprise that I don't know him very well. I only met him a few days ago."

"And yet, you already know he wouldn't have kept it from us if he was concerned about you. That's just not who he is, which tells me you already know him pretty well after all." Brooklyn hops up on a stool behind me. "Either way, we *are* staying, so you'll have time to get to know him even better."

"Why am I getting the feeling that you're pushing your boyfriend on me?" I joke, but also, it's not a complete joke. There's definitely something unfamiliar lacing his undertone.

Brooklyn shrugs. "Maybe because I am. Well, not pushing him. It doesn't look like either of you need to be pushed. I'm telling you I know he's interested in getting to know you better and that I'm pretty sure you feel the same way."

"And you're just...okay with that?" I frown. "I really don't understand you two."

"It's all about boundaries and respect, Maya. We've got both of those things in spades." He pauses for a beat. "Okay, look. I'll level with you: I think he needs you in life. Not in the same way he needs me, but I think he needs someone he connects with on all the things I'll never be able to connect with him on."

I spin to face him then, leaving the coffee maker to do its thing. He's still sitting on the stool, legs spread wide and one arm resting on his thigh while the other is on the counter, holding his glass of juice in a loose, casual grip. Nothing about his posture says that he's bothered by anything he's saying at all.

In fact, his eyes are clear and serious, but completely at peace. "He'll tell you about it when he's ready, but the two of you are a lot more alike than you realize. I think it's comforting for him to finally be around someone who shares some of the same pain he carries around. Obviously, it's

because he wants you to have that pain, but it's there. In both of you, I think it makes him feel less alone."

"Alone? He travels with a whole team of men for at least seven months out of the year. I doubt he's ever alone."

"Doesn't mean he doesn't feel it," Brook counters easily. "Trust me, Amaya. That guy doesn't open up to just anyone and there's no one on our team with a history like his. Some that come close, but no one he's been able to relate to the way he does to you."

I'm still not sure I believe him, but it does explain the way Travis looks at me. The way he's kept my secrets. "Why are you staying?" I blurt out instead of arguing. "If I was you, I'd have wanted to get out of here as fast as I possibly could. Before this town sucks you in again and refuses to let you go this time."

"It won't," he says confidently. "We've got commitments back in Denver and we can't stay here forever, but for now? For the summer? Why the hell not? This town's support and that team gave us everything we have. We owe it to Bax and to Evelyn itself to stay and help however we can."

I blink slowly. "That's not what I was expecting you to say."

Humor flashes in his eyes again. "What were you expecting?"

"I don't know," I muse out loud. "You have a reputation these days. According to everything I've heard, you're the brooding bad boy with the terrible attitude and even your teammates are afraid you're just going to snap one day. I thought you'd just changed a lot, but that's just not who you are."

"No, it's not." He inhales deeply, his broad, smooth chest rising before he shoots me a sheepish grin. "I signed up to play hockey, not to give anyone out there all of me. So it's not who I am, but they don't need to know that."

I nod slowly as understanding dawns. "I think I get that. You guys live a super public life these days. I should've

known it was just a persona you were hiding behind.”

“Not hiding,” he insists. “Using as a shield. Like a strong, tough warrior in the midst of battle.”

Laughter slides out of me before I can stop it, and he pretends to be disappointed, his lips pursing and his head shaking. “Hush now, little one. Before a reporter overhears you.”

“A reporter?” I ask between laughs. “How is a reporter going to overhear me here?”

“I don’t know. They always seem to find out where we are and there’s nothing they won’t do to find out shit about us no one else knows.”

“Like the fact that you’re a relationship with Travis or that you’re a secret softie with a heart of gold who loves fucking around.” Realization dawns as I say the words. “Are you really going to stay at the hotel for the next six weeks? Because if what you just said is true, I feel like I have to warn you that the staff at the hotel don’t earn millions. A couple hundred bucks will get anyone into almost any room.”

He sighs. “Thanks for the heads up. I, uh, we haven’t really thought about it. Bax just asked if we’d stick around and we said yes. Austin has probably considered the logistics, but I sure as hell haven’t.”

In a moment of utter insanity, I make an offer that I know will make me so happy and will then break my heart completely once it’s over. “Why don’t you guys stay here while you’re in town? We’ve got a guest room and the master is available. I haven’t moved in there yet and it’s not like Dad is using it.”

I can see he wants to jump on that, ask all kinds of questions, but he doesn’t. Instead, a slow smile spreads on his lips and he nods. “That would be kind of perfect, actually. It’s across the street from my parents so we’d be able to see a lot more of them a lot easier. Plus, Travis and I will be able to share a bed, which we won’t be able to do over there.”

He keeps nodding until he fixes me with an intent stare. “As long as you let us chip in for your expenses. All of them.”

When I hesitate, he holds up a finger to stop me from saying anything else. “It’s only fair and it’ll still be cheaper than the hotel. We’ll pay you their daily rate per room, but we’ll be able to buy our food and drinks instead of living off room service and we’ll save because we’ll only be taking up two rooms instead of three. What do you say? Do we have a deal?”

CHAPTER
TWENTY-NINE

TRAVIS

I wake up when Brooklyn slowly moves the covers aside to get back in bed. Cracking open an eye, I drape my arm around his hips and tug him to me. “Where’d you go?”

“To talk to Amaya,” he says quietly, darting a glance at something behind me. I shoot a look over my shoulder to see Austin lying on my other side, still fast asleep with his hand resting on his abs and his breathing deep and even.

Amaya’s nowhere to be seen, though. I frown, suddenly worried about how we corrupted the poor girl. “Where is she? Is she okay?”

“She’s fine. A little shocked, I think, but no more than you’d expect. All things considered, I think she’s actually doing pretty well.” He slides his body in next to mine. “How are you doing?”

“Me? I’m fine.”

His dark eyebrows inch up, those blue eyes shiny with a little too much worry for my taste. “Are you really, though? This is the first time we were with a girl who’s not...random.”

“Yeah, I know.” I move in closer to him, running my hand up his side as I bring my forehead to his. “We’re good, Brook. I love you, but I think part of you has always loved her, too. Nothing we can do about that.”

“No, there isn’t, but I don’t love her like I love you.” He inhales deeply, his chest brushing against mine as it expands. “It doesn’t have to happen again.”

“But it will,” I say without any doubt in my mind. “If we want it to, and I think I do.”

I feel his eyebrows tugging together against my forehead. “You do?”

“I like her.” And after last night, I like her even more. There was something about the whole thing that just made me feel a lot more complete. Like the last piece of a puzzle clicked into place. It’s weird, but I think it’s because of her. Or more likely, because of how much she’s like me. She makes me feel...I don’t know. Less alone maybe. “What else? There’s something you’re not telling me.”

“Well, I, I uh, she asked me if we wanted to stay here while we’re in town.”

Austin groans on my other side. “Jesus. Have you ever heard of letting people sleep instead of just launching into a deep, meaningful conversation first thing in the morning?”

I don’t even think he’s opened his eyes yet, but he rolls out of bed and grabs a pair of underwear off the floor. “She really asked if we would stay here?”

Austin’s hair is a mess, standing up in all directions, his eyes still half-shut but they also somehow seem alert as he fixes his brother with a serious look. “I don’t think that’s a good idea, Brook.”

“Why not?” My boyfriend rolls onto his back and props himself up on his elbows. “It’d allow us to help out a little more and it’s only while we’re here. It’s not like we’re moving in with her permanently.”

“Yeah, but that’s the problem,” I say, glancing over at Austin and feeling like I can hear his thoughts. “If it gets out that we’re staying with her, a lot of rumors are going to start and when we leave, she’s going to have to clean up the mess.”

Brooklyn shakes his head. “She’s an old friend. Everyone in this town knows how close we used to be. It’ll be fine.”

“It’s not the people in this town I’m worried about,” Austin says. “Can you imagine what the press will do to her when

they find out? She'll be swamped, and not in a good way. I want to help her, but I don't know if this is the way to do it."

"I'm with him." I tilt my head in Austin's direction. "Let's think about it before we make any commitments, okay? We've still got our rooms at the hotel until tomorrow and I doubt it'll be an issue for them if we decide to stay longer."

"I need to take a leak," Austin mutters as he moves to the door. "Let's just wake up properly before we decide to do something that can destroy her life."

He leaves, and Brooklyn sighs as he turns back to me. "Do you really think this will destroy her life?"

"I don't know," I say honestly. "Her life is pretty damn fucked up as is, and I know it came from a good place when you spoke to her about it, but Austin's not wrong. It could cause a lot of extra trouble for her if we do move in here."

He drops his head back on the pillow, closing his eyes as he scrubs his hands over his face. "Fuck. Why does everything have to be so goddamn complicated? All I was thinking was that instead of paying to stay at the hotel, we could pay her. Help out with groceries and expenses and stuff."

"And maybe have a few more nights like last night?" I guess out loud.

He spreads two of his fingers apart and opens an eye to peer at me from between them. "Maybe, but it wasn't just about the sex. I was thinking about everything Coach said last night and I just..."

I nod when he trails off. "You're still trying to find ways to make it up to her that you left. I get that, but we need to remember that we're leaving again, Brook. Maybe not as soon as we thought, but we *are* leaving. We have to."

"Yeah." He lets out another loud groan and finally drops his hands away from his face. "We'll think about that, but let's talk about us before he comes back. You're sure we're good?"

Taking his hand, I wrap my fingers around his and bring them to my mouth to kiss his knuckles. "I'm sure. I can't

explain it, but with Amaya around, I feel like less of a third wheel.”

He bumps his shoulder into mine. “You’ve never been that with us.”

“Maybe not to you, but you and Aus...you’re twins, baby. You share all these experiences and history, and weirdly, it’s the same with me and Amaya. We may not have any shared history, but we do have a lot in common. It just feels like there’s a little more balance, you know?”

“Balance, huh?” He rolls over to face me again, a smile on his lips before he brings them to mine. “As long as you’re sure this is what you want.”

“For now.” I snake my hand down the length of his torso, wrapping my fingers around his cock and squeezing it over the underwear he’s got on. “This is what I want too.”

He’s always somehow semi-erect. I’ll never know how, but the guy seems to live right on the edge of being ready. For anything. A game. An adventure. A fuck. It doesn’t really matter. He’s just always rearing to go.

He grins as he leans in further, kissing me before he thrusts into my hand. “You better mean that.”

“You already know I do.” I slide my hand up to his tip, squeezing a little harder until I hear his breath catch. “Do you want to go call Amaya right now?”

“What?” he grunts before he blinks hard and shakes his head. “No?”

“And that’s why I’m okay with it,” I murmur against his mouth. “I know that no matter what happens, you and I will always make time for each other. We’ll prioritize our relationship when it needs prioritizing and we’ll stay in touch despite whatever other dynamic might crop up.”

Brooklyn’s lids are already heavy as he nods, his breathing getting deeper as his hips rock into my palm again. “No matter what.”

I chuckle. “You’ll also say anything right now as long as I don’t stop.”

He scoffs, his cheeks flushed as he pulls back a little and adjusts the angle of his hips so that my hand isn’t on his dick anymore. “That’s not true. I’m not just *saying* anything, T. I mean it.”

Sitting up a little, he pushes me back by my shoulders and bends over to suck at that fucking spot where my collarbone meets my throat. His lips are hot and soft, his tongue flicking over the sensitive skin between he nips it with his teeth.

“*You* are the only person who really gets every part of me,” he says as he hooks one of his legs around both of mine and keeps kissing a path from my throat to my chest. “*You* are the only person I’ve ever let inside of me.”

Those lips brush against my skin with every word he says and while I’m sure either Austin or Amaya are going to come back into the room any minute, I don’t give a shit. Brooklyn has a way of saying all the right things and he’s doing right now, unwavering in his determination to give me reassurances that I don’t need, but will never say no to.

His hand moves to my hip and he holds me down hard as he presses a kiss to my heart. “Whatever else happens, *you* are my priority, Travis Oakley. I will always want you. I will always need you.”

I moan as he drags the flat of his tongue across my nipple.

“You will always be my first and last thought of every day,” he continues, his voice a little hoarse now as he brings his mouth up to mine again. “No one will ever be like you. And that’s not being sappy or over-dramatic. That’s just the way it is. You took my heart but you gave me your soul in return, so I guess we’re even.”

“Brooklyn.” I can barely form the word. “Austin will be back any second.”

“Not any second.”

Releasing his leg, he settles back down on his side, but he doesn’t let go of my hip. “We have a few minutes.”

“Okay.” I kiss him again, swallowing the low growl coming from the back of his throat as his fingers dig into my waist. “I can give you a few minutes.”

“Good.” He bumps his nose against mine. “Now I want you to relax and just let me make you feel good. I promise you’re going to come so fucking hard by the time I’m done.”

I try to roll my eyes, but I can’t. My fucking eyelids feel heavy as I watch him crawl down my body, so I don’t even try to fight against the feeling of my muscles relaxing when he pushes my legs open and his mouth finds my cock. My head falls back against the pillow and my hips lift of their own accord, pushing my dick further into his mouth. My hand goes to his hair and I fist the strands at the nape of his neck, guiding his mouth back down to the base of my dick.

He groans around it as his hands slide up my legs, digging his nails into my thighs. He moves his hand lower, his finger flittering over my hole, teasing at the skin.

I’m done trying to fight it. I’m done trying to think of anything else. Amaya is in the next room. Austin is in the bathroom, but Brooklyn’s mouth seals over my tip again and I can’t think about anything else. He takes as much of my dick in his mouth as he can, his throat working as he sucks me hard and fast.

“Brooklyn,” I murmur, my tongue feeling weighted as my eyes fall closed.

He lets go of my dick, opens my legs a little wider and spits on my hole, putting a glob of saliva directly on my puckered star. He brings his mouth back to my cock before drawing his finger up over my ass crack and back down again to get more wetness.

I whimper as his finger breaches the tight ring of muscle, sinking into my ass as he works my cock in a steady rhythm. He makes a low sound of pleasure around my dick before he shoves his finger into my ass, his mouth now sucking and licking me in earnest.

His finger slips in deep as he finds that damned sweet spot inside of me. I'm not going to last much longer. My balls ache and my cock throbs. My legs shake. My chest burns. So I just hold on and let go. That's all I can do right now. I just let go and cum deep in his throat.

After he cleans me up, he slowly releases me from his mouth, pulls out his fingers, and crawls over my body to kiss me. I can taste my own release on his tongue and it's making me kiss him like a wild man.

"This is how it's always going to be with us." He kisses me again before he looks me in the eyes. "You're mine. And I'm yours."

CHAPTER
THIRTY

AUSTIN

“We’re really moving in with her?” I tighten my grip on the steering wheel, glad that the three of us have some time alone to talk about all this.

We’re on our way back to the hotel to pack and then we’re checking out tomorrow morning as planned, but I still can’t believe it’s happening that we’re actually going to be living with Amaya Knox. But we are.

I talked to her while Brooklyn and Travis were trying to break her bed and she’s good with us staying with her. Excited, even. Which is why I eventually agreed to get onboard with Brooklyn’s plan.

Glancing at Travis in the rearview mirror, I arch an eyebrow at him, wondering if *he’s* really okay with it. One night with her was one thing, but this is a whole other beast we’re saddling up. “We could always stay at the hotel. Or *you* could, and I could go live with her.”

Brooklyn snorts. “You wish. We’re coming, bro. Sorry. I don’t want to live in a hotel for almost the entire offseason. We do enough of that the rest of the year. Besides, this was *my* idea.”

“Yeah, I know, but I wasn’t talking to you. I already know where you stand on this.” I wait as he rolls his eyes before he finally looks at Travis.

My friend seems relaxed, but the guy is real good at masking his emotions. As he meets my gaze though, he nods and drags in a deep breath through his nostrils. “I’m good,

Aus. If it gets to be too much, I can always move back to the hotel. I doubt I'll have trouble getting a suite here. Something tells me they haven't been fully booked for years."

"I guess." I glance at him again, my gaze on his for only a moment before I move it back to the empty street ahead. On a Sunday afternoon in this town, there are never many people on the road. "Are you really fine with your boyfriend moving in with the woman he was with last night, though?"

I know how it works with them, but that also means I know that neither of them have been with anyone else for longer than a night since they started dating. Brooklyn is the type who rolls with the punches. He's always okay to go hard at anything, see what happens, and then take it from there.

Travis definitely isn't the same way. After everything he's been through, he's a lot more cautious. The only place he really lets loose is on the ice. In every other aspect of life, he's more reserved. More calculated.

Even now, he thinks it over before he finally nods. "We've talked about it, Austin. You don't have to worry about us. Frankly, I'm more surprised that *you're* considering this. You don't even like *seeing* the women you've been with again, let alone living with them."

"I don't know," I muse. "This is Amaya. That makes it different."

"Does it?" He leans forward, propping an elbow on either of the front seats as he tilts his head at me. "I mean, I know she used to be your friend and everything, but that makes it a lot more complicated. Are you actually interested in trying something with her?"

"By something, he means a relationship," Brooklyn explains with a shit-eating grin on his face. "Is that player who lives inside you finally ready to exit the game?"

"Maybe," I admit, surprising both of them so much that they suddenly shut up. I sigh deeply as I move my gaze from Brooklyn's blue to Travis's green. "What?"

“It’s just that this is...you.” Travis pulls a weird face at me. “Unless it’s not and you’ve been possessed by demons. Or aliens. All of which seems more likely than *Austin Ryker* being interested in a relationship.”

“Maybe,” I repeat. “All I know for sure is that I haven’t been feeling the random hookups so much these last few months.”

Brooklyn gives me a droll stare. “You could’ve fooled me.”

I shake my head, not needing him to explain what he’s referring to. “I didn’t fuck any of those girls I took back to my room toward the end of the season. I fingered one of them after she sucked me off, but even that didn’t really do it for me, so I’ve been letting them blow me and then booting them out.”

Travis lets out a low whistle. “That’s low, bro. Even for you.”

“I know, but I couldn’t help it.” I wince as I let myself think about exactly *why* I couldn’t help it.

I’m definitely not telling them the whole truth here. They can think I’m a dick, but I’m not letting them know that it’s because mine hasn’t been working properly.

Travis chuckles as sits back, spreading out on the backseat. “You couldn’t help it? That sounds like bullshit. What happened?”

I shrug. “Like I said. I just haven’t been feeling it.”

“And now you want to drag *Amaya* into not feeling it?” Fire shoots from Brooklyn’s eyes as he narrows them at me. “No.”

“No?” I scoff. “That’s hardly your choice, bro.”

“No, it’s not, but I’m also not letting you hurt her. If you’ve been kicking women out just because you *haven’t been able to help it*, then go *help yourself* somewhere else.”

I grit my teeth. “This isn’t like that. I’m not going to kick her out of her own fucking house. I like her. Maybe I want to

see where it goes.”

“More like get your rocks off with her for the summer and then be ready to move on when we get to the preseason.” He cocks an eyebrow at me. “We can’t hurt her like that, Aus. We also can’t *use* her.”

“*I* won’t hurt her, but how about you?” I give him a meaningful, sideways look. “I haven’t been able to stop thinking about her, which is why I think I might be ready for something more, but you two already have each other.”

“We do, but like Travis said, we’ve already talked about it and we’re good. You know we won’t hurt her.”

“Do I?” I ask as I pull into the parking lot of a little diner on the edge of town where we agreed to have lunch. “From where I’m sitting, if anyone is going to hurt her, it’s you. You two are all about each other. How does Amaya fit into that?”

“She’s someone Brooklyn has had feelings for since he was a kid,” Travis says. “I want her too, so we’re going to see what happens. Together. Just for the offseason, sure, but if anything does happen, we’ll make sure that she knows it’s not forever.”

“I may not know much about relationships, but even *I* know that’s a shit idea.” I lift both my brows at him over the top of the SUV as we climb out. “It sounds to me like a recipe for all of you to get hurt.”

“Maybe,” Brooklyn agrees as we head inside. “At least we’re talking about it to each other and we’ll talk to her about it, too. Meanwhile, you’ve been booting people out because you just couldn’t help it. The fuck is up with that?”

“Let it go, Brook,” I snap. “It’s nothing, okay? It’s not important and it has nothing to do with Amaya. I was fine last night. I was definitely feeling it then.”

“Yeah, but for how long?” he snaps right back at me. “What happened to the guy who always wanted to protect her? You used to be like a fire-breathing dragon when it came to her, now you seem more confused than ever about what you really want and she’s smack, bang in the middle of it.”

“She’s not,” I argue, the bell above the door jangling when we walk in. “I do know what I want. Do you? Because I want the same thing I’ve always wanted. Her.”

Brooklyn sighs, shooting Travis a glare when he gets between us and shakes his head. Trav looks at me as we sit down at a booth in the corner. The diner is empty outside of us, the cook, and a waitress, but he keeps his voice down anyway. “Holy fuck. You’re serious about this. She’s the reason you became a player in the first place. You fucked everyone else trying to forget about her, but now that you’re back, she’s the reason you want to stop doing it too.”

“Something like that.” I pause for a minute, inhaling deeply as I fix my gaze on his. “It’s always been her, man. Lately, before we even knew we’d be coming back here, I was getting tired of the same old thing and now that we’re here, I think it’s because I’m over it.”

“Shit. You’re finally growing up,” Brooklyn says, his eyes wide as he and Travis exchange a glance. Neither of them say anything for a long beat, then my brother sighs and focuses on me again. “Are we all going to try this together then, or what? We need to make a decision before we speak to her about it.”

“Or we could make a decision *with* her *after* talking to her about it,” Travis suggests. “I think that’s how this is supposed to work.”

“Fucked if I know,” I admit. “All I know is that I’m not backing off. I’m not just letting her go this time. I can’t and if we’re really moving in with her, it seems as good a time as any to take my shot.”

Brooklyn glances at Travis again before he nods at me. “So are we. I guess we’ve just made a decision, then.”

“Really?” I frown at each of them in turn. “Jesus. Maybe I should get myself a boyfriend instead if that’s how easy it is for you guys.”

“To be fair, we made the decision this morning.” Travis gives me a lopsided grin. “Makes it easier to make it again now.”

Brooklyn laughs, nodding his thanks at the waitress as she drops off our menus. We wait for her to leave, but she doesn't. Standing next to our table, she keeps gawking at us, blinking hard until I finally hold out my hand.

"Here. We'll sign whatever you want, so long as you bring us three Cokes?"

Nodding jerkily, she hands over the notepad she uses to take orders and then scurries away. I scribble my signature on the paper and so do Brooklyn and Travis, and when she gets back with our drinks, we hand over her notebook. "I'll give you a minute to decide what you want to eat!"

With that, she spins around, taking off toward the kitchen with her phone in her hand, already snapping pictures of the paper we signed. I sigh. "We'd better take our food to go. She's going to post that soon and then everyone is going to know where we are."

Travis nods. "Burgers to eat in the car?"

"Burgers to eat in the car," Brooklyn agrees before turning back to me. "While we're waiting, though, have you spoken to Kit recently? Dax told me he's considering joining him on the F1 tour."

My eyebrows shoot up in surprise, but I'm happy that he's dropping the subject of Amaya and what's happening between all of us. I need more time to get my head wrapped around it and we still have to talk to her anyway.

Thankfully, my brother doesn't dwell on shit. He just gets on with it and I've never been more relieved about it.

"I didn't think he was going to last a whole summer with his family." I grin. "I know he loves them, but that's a long time to spend with people you don't see so much anymore. I haven't spoken to him, though. I'll give him a call later. Find out if he and Dax are going to be painting an entire continent red. If it's true, I guess we better brace for the fallout. They're absolutely going to end up in the tabloids for all the wrong reasons."

When we get back to the hotel, that's exactly what I do. After Kit answers, he laughs when I tell him what I heard. "Yeah, I want to, but it'll break my mama's heart, man. She's been looking forward to having all her boys with her again the whole year. I can't do that, but we're going to be heading home from the lake a little earlier than we planned. I'll catch you guys back in Denver?"

Thank God. At least that means a media storm surrounding the Denver Devils isn't something I'm going to have to worry about after all.

"Uh, sure, we'll catch you back home. Only in a few weeks, though. We're going to be hanging around here for a bit longer."

Kit frowns, but once I explain it to him, he wishes us luck and we say our goodbyes. Now officially alone in my room, I strip off and grab a shower, but my head is still filled with thoughts of Amaya.

It's worse now than it's ever been before. I wasn't lying earlier when I said I can't stop thinking about her. It's like my brain has frozen like a broken computer and it's not like I can switch it off and back on again to see if that works.

Not bothering to get dressed after my shower, I wrap the towel around my hips, still thinking about her as I pack my stuff. I'm worried that she might end up regretting saying yes to having us live with her, but she doesn't seem to believe she will. Plus, we'll be right across the street from our parents and we haven't told them that we're staying yet, but I know they're going to be ecstatic.

I just don't know how to tell them why we're going to be staying with *her* and not with them. On the other hand, they've always known how I felt about her. I'm sure they'll figure out pretty fast that I still feel that way.

After tossing the few things I've unpacked back into my bag, I collapse in bed, switch on the TV, and fall asleep early with the movie I put on still playing in the background. I sleep like the dead, gone to the world, but not surprisingly, Amaya haunts my dreams and when I wake up, I'm hard as fuck.

Cracking open an eye, I glance at the windows, seeing that it's morning, but that it still looks pretty early, so I close it again. I'm so damn comfortable that—

I'm not alone.

The realization hits me like a truck, but when a hand lands on my dick, I smile. *There's only one person who would be able to get into my room at this hotel and want to wake me up like this.*

“Hey,” I mumble lazily. “This is a nice surprise. I missed you too, though.”

I groan when she starts stroking and roll over to face her, but as I suck in a deep breath, I realize it's not Amaya's scent that assaults my nostrils. This scent is sickly sweet and all wrong.

My eyes fly open and instead of Amaya, I find myself looking at *girl from the dress shop. She's lying on her side facing me with what I assume is supposed to be a seductive smile on her lips.

Shock paralyzes me for just a minute, my jaw the only thing that seems to be able to move as it drops open. *Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

And of course, as luck would have it, I'm still paralyzed when the door suddenly clicks open and Travis's voice drifts over to me. “Rise and shine, Aus. Look who's here to say good morning.”

My heart lurches into my throat and my spirits don't just sink, they crash to the ground and go up in a spectacular plume of flame. I haven't seen her yet, but I know exactly who he brought in here with him.

After all these years of doing whoever the hell I wanted and not giving a damn about being caught, this is the first time I've ever been completely innocent and completely uninterested. But it's also the first time that being caught might just jeopardize something I never even knew I wanted: a real relationship with a woman I think I may just have a future

with. A woman who's never going to believe that this isn't what it looks like.

Yeah, I really am fucked now.

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