



BECOMING
Mine

ROXANNE TULLY

BECOMING *Mine*

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Book Cover by Bernadett Lankovits

First edition 2023

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Cor

Playlist

1. Nicholas
2. Cora
3. Nicholas
4. Cora
5. Cora
6. Nicholas
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8. Cora
9. Cora
10. Nicholas
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30. Cora
31. Nicholas
32. Cora
33. Cora
34. Nicholas

35. Nicholas

36. Cora

Epilogue

Thank you

Acknowledgments

Connect with Roxanne

Excerpt - The Roommate Deal

Also By Roxanne

35. Nicholas

36. Cora

Epilogue

Thank you

Acknowledgments

Connect with Roxanne

Excerpt - The Roommate Deal

Also By Roxanne

Playlist

True Colors (Cyndi Lauper)

Wild Heart (Daughtry)

Shivers (Ed Sheeran)

Black Velvet (Alannah Myles)

I Knew I Loved You (Savage Garden)

Playlist

True Colors (Cyndi Lauper)

Wild Heart (Daughtry)

Shivers (Ed Sheeran)

Black Velvet (Alannah Myles)

I Knew I Loved You (Savage Garden)

Nicholas

"WHAT'S WITH THE PINK hair, Cor? You got an audition for J the Holograms or somethin'?" My best friend and teammate, Jace, asks his kid sister Cora, when she breezes into the kitchen.

There's no other way to describe the way she flies in here when the us are working.

Okay, maybe working is the wrong word for athletes. More like plotting, eating, and drinking enough Gatorade for the entire league.

Jace is my alternate Captain for the Buffalo Blades and one of the v people in this world I trust. He's been my best friend since we met in hockey league when we were sixteen. And now, he's our most v player in the national league. I'm here quite often...and not just for the he's always got well stocked, but because it's easier for me to drive 1 minutes over than for him to leave his kid sister and meet me at the rin

Before we each got our own place, Jace and I lived together—and when Cora turned eighteen and wanted to live on campus, Jace overruled that as soon as it presented itself. Laying out all the dangers of living on campus for a girl as “fragile” as Cora.

He’d never say that to her face, because if there’s one thing in the world that scares Jace Knight, it’s upsetting the five-foot brunette he’d been raised by his father since their mother passed away.

But he had no problem pacing around our old living room telling me there was no way she was living alone. Or with a roommate that would potentially be toxic to her health, both physical and mental.

The sneaky result? We ended up agreeing it was time to be grown up, so each bought our own house in a new gated community development. She can “leave home” and live independently...in her big brother’s new house, but she’s still under his ever-so-subtle watch.

The convertible he got her might have sweetened the deal and Cora drove it in the summer before her freshman year.

My place is merely a five-minute drive further down the road. I spruce up the lake house, while Jace—who’s secretly afraid of reptiles—chairs the street view.

But it’s always easy to stop in—especially in the early mornings—when I’m running through strategies and drills for the team before practice or a game.

We work best as a duo—it’s why I recommended him as my alternative.

“It’s a streak. Don’t get your panties in a bunch over it,” the now twenty-year-old in the room bites out.

I don’t know why I remind myself of her age every time I see her or how long I’ve known her or become creepily lost in her presence.

“Is it the end of the month already?” he says with genuine curiosity.

d when I press my lips together but a part of me is instantly offended on her
that idea I expect her to turn pink as she would, but she deadpans him instead.

campus “And this is your only warning for the next three days.” She grabs
and heads for the back door.

e world “I can handle you any day of the month,” he calls after her.

helping With astonishingly good aim, Cora turns and tosses the bagel at hi
the six-foot-four pro hockey player with bulging biceps winces as he r
ie the shoulder.

entially I shoot him a look and he shrugs defensively. “Bagels are stale.”

“Maybe you do have your panties in a bunch. Lay off the girl,
lips and casually, in what’s become my continuous effort to get him off her bac

to Cora “Dude, I can’t with her lately. She’s testing me.”

house... “She’s also past the age of being your responsibility.”

Jace runs a frustrated hand through his hair, and I know exactly wh
moved feeling. His next words confirm it. “She’ll always be my responsibility

I want to explain the logistics of how wrong he is. But when my twi
ung for Nicole comes to mind, my twenty-seven-year-old adult sister, who
ose then ever stop looking out for, I bite my tongue.

But not for reasons that we both are protective over Cora—wh
—to run mother at a young age and needed to be looked after like no one els
her traumatic loss. Nicole’s situation was different. Nicole unfortu
te. inherited our mother’s addiction gene. So there’s no way I’d ever tell
almost brother that he’s being too protective of his sister.

I’d give my life for mine. Heck, probably for both of them.

or think “Ready to head for practice?” he asks, eager to get his gear on and
e. ice.

“Yep.”

behalf.

a bagel

m. And

rubs his

” I say

ok.

that he’s

.”

in sister

o I will

o lost a

e given

imately,

another

hit the

Cora

Jace: *Be home by sundown.*

Cora: *Why? Are we suddenly holding sabbath?*

Jace: *No reason to be out later.*

Cora: *I'll find one.*

“Where’s your school spirit?” my friend Ava asks when she finds me stretching in the aerobics room in the Fitzgerald Gymnasium on campus. I’m not in uniform but I’m wearing leggings and a tank top and it will have

I hate all sporting activities—unlike my brother, who’s built for waking up at the crack of dawn every morning and running. Why anyone ever willingly run?

“I was too busy studying for my real classes,” I say but it’s not true. I grab my gym bag by the door when I raced out this morning, feeling like I was trying something different. I push the artificial color strands behind my ears self-consciously.

“It’d be a shame to lose that straight A average because you were so prissy to wear your uniform today,” she points out.

“I left it at home with my reason for caring.”

She leans in. “Is it the end of the month again?”

“The fuck is up with people?” I mutter as I stretch.

“Seriously you’re usually the first in uniform, ten minutes early to class. What’s going on?”

“Jace pissed me off today.”

Ava tosses her duffle bag down and sits beside me. She pulls her blonde hair up in a ponytail and stretches her freakishly long legs out in front of her. “What else is new?”

“I hate how he treats me like a child. Especially when—”

“When what?”

I sigh, knowing there’s no sense in hiding this little fact from the few friends I have. “When Nicholas is around.”

“Ugh, you know you’re the only girl I know who hangs around hot guys and players all day and is constantly miserable.”

“One of them is my brother and the other...might as well be.” I try to sound melancholic when I admit this.

“Well, you’re in your last year of school, you’ve got an awesome ride, you’re killing it at your internship at Tales for Tots, which is basically a dream job.”

She’s right. I’ve been interning since the summer at Tales for Tots v

e. I left a mental health center where children in foster homes come for counseling where needed. Not your everyday dream job, I know, but my first job. I do adolescent therapy, and talking to these children every day and feeling

I'm a part of what's healing them and making them feel normal here is too good for me. As an intern, I don't do much. I talk casually to kids in their therapy sessions, play with little kids as they wait to be picked up, and occasionally do some light paperwork. It's not paid, of course, but it's a good step in my long-term career goals.

My mentor, Julia, has mentioned my sitting in on some sessions next week, but just for observation, but there's a lot that goes into something like that apparently, including confidentiality, so I'm not taking my breath.

bleach- "So, what's with the streak, anyway?"

in front I shrug. "Trying something new. Maybe I wanted to piss off Jace."

"Just ignore him. I bet once you turn the big two-o, he'll back off and you can take that ridiculous color off your hair to prove a point."

"Don't count on it. If he treats me like an eight-year-old now, he'll suddenly realize I'm old enough to drink and have babies."

"Hope you don't plan on that in one night." Ava winces.

hockey "Who's having babies?" Angel asks, jogging up to us in her perfect, gorgeous body. Her dark blonde hair in a tight ponytail and her smile is not too bright as ever.

"No one," I answer promptly. I generally avoid talking about my relationship with Angel since the two of them have been having a war for years and it's really inexplicable. My luck, she'll use whatever I say against him on the next brawl. She's clever and sassy like that.

which is The two should just fuck and get it over with.

inseling I smirk to myself as I picture Jace and Nicholas hearing my foul
major isThen shiver at the thought. Angel could do way better.

ing like “Yeah,” Ava chimes in, ever in tune with my abruptness. “Caus
as beencouldn’t get a guy past Jace or his other half if her life depended on it.’

etween It is gut-twistingly true. If Jace is distracted or otherwise unavailabl
up, andis there to pick up the slack. It never fails when it comes to the sul
’s a bigkeeping me in a bubble—out of trouble, home by curfew, and as fa
from anything with a penis as possible.

; in the My existence isn’t embarrassing enough that my crush of almost te
es intois my part-time babysitter.

holding Angel nods with an understanding smirk. She scans me head to to
remember why she’s here. She’s the new gymnastics and yoga tea
North Buffalo State.

And I’m unprepared for her class.

f. Then I look up at her. She’s the first person all day I give a smile to
sheepish smile, but it works. She smirks back at me and holds out a h
e won’tme to stand.

I feel bad for Angel. Last year, at only twenty-four, she had an acci
the ice and hasn’t gone back on since. She was an amazing figure skat
, toned,a part-time job as an ice girl cheerleader for the Buffalo Blades. Until
mile asa bad fall during a figure skating competition that ended it all for her.

No one knows if the ice burns on her calves healed, since she we
brotherwarmers all year round now.

and it’s With her ‘never look back’ attitude in full gear, she’s here in the gy
eir nexta permanent smile on her face, working toward what she calls he
dream’.

“Where’s the uniform, Cora?” she asks in spite of our little exchange

mouth. “It needs to be washed.” My response is dry and unconvincing. I w
believe me.

se Cora She nods then leans in. “Do you need a medical excuse today?”

’ I grunt. “I don’t have my period. Okay?”

e, Nick She jerks. “You do now. Sit on the bench.” She lowers her voice
object of can’t work out in that, and I don’t want you getting an incomplete for
ir awayclass.”

No uniform is an automatic incomplete for class so I know she’s
n years me out with the ‘medical excuse’.

“Sorry, Angel.”

e and I “All good. Hey, I’m not a stickler like my dad. The grump would t
cher at excuse to bark at his team.”

Did I mention Angel’s dad, who’s hot as hell for an older man,
coach for the Buffalo Blades? Single too. Angel’s mother is still
. It’s as sweet as honey, but according to Jace and Nick; Coach Collins and
and for wife clashed like wild wolves when they were together.

She’s had a rough year, but I’ve somewhat envied Angel for havi
dent on amazing parents—and no interfering older brother.

ter with “Thanks. I’ll have it for next class.”

she had She winks. “Thanks, kid. Don’t make me look bad around here, alri
Kid? I frown and shake my head as I take a seat on the bench.

ears leg Do I have it written on my face?

m with

r ‘new

e.

“It needs to be washed.” My response is dry and unconvincing. I wouldn’t believe me.

She nods then leans in. “Do you need a medical excuse today?”

I grunt. “I don’t have my period. Okay?”

She jerks. “You do now. Sit on the bench.” She lowers her voice. “You can’t work out in that, and I don’t want you getting an incomplete for today’s class.”

No uniform is an automatic incomplete for class so I know she’s helping me out with the ‘medical excuse’.

“Sorry, Angel.”

“All good. Hey, I’m not a stickler like my dad. The grump would use any excuse to bark at his team.”

Did I mention Angel’s dad, who’s hot as hell for an older man, is head coach for the Buffalo Blades? Single too. Angel’s mother is still around; sweet as honey, but according to Jace and Nick; Coach Collins and his ex-wife clashed like wild wolves when they were together.

She’s had a rough year, but I’ve somewhat envied Angel for having two amazing parents—and no interfering older brother.

“Thanks. I’ll have it for next class.”

She winks. “Thanks, kid. Don’t make me look bad around here, alright.”

Kid? I frown and shake my head as I take a seat on the bench.

Do I have it written on my face?

Nicholas

I PUT THE CAR in park and take a deep breath, calming myself before I blow a fucking fuse.

My sister Nicole has seen my temper lost more than either of us could and is likely expecting one today.

But I'm different now. I have to be. For her.

Don't want to set a bad example, do we Nick?

Nicole is being released from rehab today. A place I was forced to stay months ago when she finally hit rock bottom in her addiction and all my interventions and trying to care for her myself weren't enough. I knew it was time—and probably overdue—when she willingly agreed while crying in my arms that night I found her on the floor in her apartment.

In my opinion, ninety days wasn't enough. Or maybe, for her, it was too long.

Hell if I know what to expect from my twin these days. She could be a whole new person or she could be as big a cynic as me that this shit works for people.

My chest aches. God, I hope she's alright.

I hope she doesn't hate me.

I watch the revolving doors from the inside of my car. I would have gotten and gone inside if I thought I had a shot in hell of not being recognized by neither Nicky nor I need that kind of spotlight right now. I can't get a headline now;

NHL Buffalo Blades Center Picks Up Twin from Rehab.

It's her long dark hair I notice first when she emerges from the side door. Then her long legs that were a dead giveaway that I am looking at my twin. She's not as tall as me but noticeably taller than most of her friends.

of down I zero in on her eyes.

Is she okay?

in count She spots the big black jeep in the circular driveway.

Like me, she takes a deep breath before taking long strides toward the passenger side with her duffle bag.

end her That's all you need at this place. An average size duffle bag and my overstuffed suitcases with various outfits and shoes. No accessories. I remember being sent home with half the stuff I dropped her off with.

it was She flips her hair behind her shoulder and tosses her bag in the back of my car before jumping in. "Thanks for the help, douche."

"You got this, Nicky."

was too "Yeah, I don't go by that anymore." She buckles her seatbelt.

"Oh sorry, *Nicole*," I stretch out.

"No. It's BadassBabe83."

ld be a I crack a laugh. “Can I call you BB-8 for short?” I joke, since Nico
it evenonly other Star Wars junkie I know.

Perhaps that’s the wrong word to use right now.

“No. That’s taken.” She moves her seat all the way back and se
comfortably. Once we leave the hospital grounds and get on the highw
parkedlowers her window and closes her eyes, breathing in the fall air.
ed. But I turn back to the road with a grin.

see the *She’s going to be fine.*

“Have you thought about what you want to do?”

“Not now, Nick. I literally just got in the car.”

le door. “You knew you were leaving for two weeks now, you haven’t t
y twin.about what you’re going to do?”

“Not all of us have an athletic talent people pay a lot of money fo
says bitterly. But my sister has always been the only one cheering me
whole life. Through injuries, through despair. We take turns being the
sibling for each other.

ard the I don’t mention her bartending as an option. That’s not exactly a
want her going back to right now. I wrack my brain thinking of anythi
ag. NoNicole might be good at. In college, she studied photography but it i
n fact, Ikind of thing that I could throw her back into.

“We’ll figure something out, Nicky.” My tone is casual, the way i
ick seatbe with her. But I hope she hears the promise.

On the drive home, I sneak glances at her every chance I get and h
doesn’t notice. There’s no denying she seems calmer, more at pea
ready for help.

My sister is a phenomenal liar. But she’s also a fighter and I s
commitment brewing in her.

le's the I convince myself I'm not imagining it. That I do in fact see the
ready for this. That she'll make the right decisions if opportunities
themselves. That she'll stay away from toxic friends. And if not for
ttles in that she'll realize she's all I have in this world and will do it for me.
ay, she I just hope I'm enough.



thought We pull up to my driveway twenty minutes later. I jump out of the
come around to open her door, but she's already stepped out and
r," she herself at me. I catch her without missing a beat.

on our "Nicky," I whisper into her hair.

"older" She tries to hold back but I feel the slight tremble and sob she releases.
I pull her tighter. "I'm so happy to see you."

skill I The physical affection she's showing is new for her, but not surprising
ing else was told by her therapist to expect mixed emotions for a few days,
sn't the weeks.

"I'm good. I'm good." She pulls back and wipes her eyes, avoiding
t has to and eyeing the perimeters of my house instead. "Jeez, a three-car garage."

What on earth for? You'll never drive anything but this stupid old Jeep.
ope she "Let's go inside." I bought this house three years ago. Nicky's on
ce, and away for a few months. I don't bother telling her she's been here before.
likely too high or wasted to notice anything.

see that

at she's I lead her through the double door entrance. My dog Max jumps presentimmediately and she laughs, bending to scratch him in all his favorite j herself, "Can I make you something to eat?" I offer, heading toward the frid

"No, I'm not hungry. I need to call my friends."

I turn and glare at her.

"Not *those* friends. My old friends. The ones...I guess the ones down, who think I've dropped off the face of the earth."

"I have your room all ready upstairs. You're staying with me for a w

I wait for her to argue. To tell me she can take care of herself an need to stop treating her like a child.

car and I'm mentally prepared for a fight.

lunging To my surprise, she doesn't argue. She shrugs and settles into my like it's home. "It's just as well. I'm pretty sure my landlord chang locks and donated all my stuff to Goodwill."

ses, and I cross my arms in front of me and lean against the wall, deba telling her this. But I can't have her thinking she's lost everything. "ising. I've been paying your rent and utility bills. All your stuff is in maybepromise."

"My plants?"

ig mine "Dead."

garage? "My cat?"

)." "You don't have a cat."

ly been "Bubbles is gone too?" She feigns a sob and I can't help but c out wasmoving to sit next to her. Max jumps between us and rests his head lap.

"Glad you still have your sense of humor."

There is a glimmer in her eyes, and I can't tell if it's gratefulness..

at her exhaustion.

places. But it's gone before I can figure it out. "Thanks Nick. Forgot
ge. loaded. You didn't have to do that."

"I'm not mom. Not trying to teach you a lesson on life the hard
letting you lose the little you have left."

I've let She shudders and her eyes turn dark. "You hear from her?"

"No. And we're not going to." I go to the kitchen counter and
while." drawer, retrieving Nicky's cell phone. "I'm monitoring this." I hold it
d that I her, keeping my tone sharp. "Don't think of it as an invasion of privacy;
of it as someone looking out for you." I take in a breath, ready for this
difficult.

7 couch Her eyes go wide. "I get my phone back? Yeah—I'm good with wh
ged the dude."

"It's a new number...one that *she* doesn't have." I say, referring
ting on mother.

Nicole, She nods. "Okay."

ntact. I "You have my number in here. Coach Collins, in case you can't reach
and a few other people I trust."

I see her skimming through the contacts.

"I deleted anyone I didn't know Nic."

She nods again. I see her taking it all in. Like I've just given her
identity and she needs to get used to it.

huckle, I change the subject. "I'm heading to Jace's to drive him to practice
on my car is in the shop."

She scoffs. "Like he can't just use his spare Maserati?"

I roll my eyes. "We're not cliché like that. Besides they don't make
.or just many of the model he's got. I'm surprised he's let it out of sight."

“Hmm...” She eyes me. “He’s the one with the kid sister who’s got you’re on you, right?”

“Cora? That was like seven years ago and she’s grown up.”
way by *A lot.*

I clear my throat.

“Maybe I can hang out with her? She seems like the type who would pull the judge.”

It’s up for She’s right about that. Cora would never judge Nicole. She’d likely, think every which way to keep Nicole distracted and then sit and plot ways to get pissing the two of us off.

It seems innocent enough, but for some reason, I don’t agree to it. Whatever, of Nicole with Cora is unsettling. Not that my sister would ever poison a young and innocent mind of someone who is like my kid sister, but for our reason, Nicole’s like the bad influence friend I didn’t want around my kid sister.

I don’t deny that it’s an odd thought to have and feel a little guilty about it.

“Maybe lay low from Jace’s kid sister.” I avoid calling her by name. Each me, little reminder I find quite helpful lately.

She frowns and I can tell I’ve offended her.

“For now.”

It occurs to me on the drive over that I wonder if Cora’s pink streak is a new tint or if Jace had made her get rid of it.

Oddly, I realize that I hope not.

ce. His

ake too

“Hmm...” She eyes me. “He’s the one with the kid sister who’s got a crush on you, right?”

“Cora? That was like seven years ago and she’s grown up.”

A lot.

I clear my throat.

“Maybe I can hang out with her? She seems like the type who wouldn’t judge.”

She’s right about that. Cora would never judge Nicole. She’d likely find every which way to keep Nicole distracted and then sit and plot ways of pissing the two of us off.

It seems innocent enough, but for some reason, I don’t agree to it. The idea of Nicole with Cora is unsettling. Not that my sister would ever poison the young and innocent mind of someone who is like my kid sister, but for some reason, Nicole's like the bad influence friend I didn’t want around my kid.

I don’t deny that it’s an odd thought to have and feel a little guilty over it. “Maybe lay low from Jace’s kid sister.” I avoid calling her by name. It’s the little reminder I find quite helpful lately.

She frowns and I can tell I’ve offended her.

“For now.”

It occurs to me on the drive over that I wonder if Cora’s pink streak is still intact or if Jace had made her get rid of it.

Oddly, I realize that I hope not.

Gora

“EIGHTEEN... NINETEEN... TWENTY. AND release.”
Jesus Christ. Ten wasn't enough?

“My limbs are starting to feel like they’ve been put on a torture stret

“That’s a bit dark. Even for you,” Ava mumbles.

“What’s her issue today?” I like Angel but she’s hell-bent on ben
through hell today.

It’s Friday and as promised, I’m in class properly dressed and n
break a sweat. It doesn’t take very long. The workout lasts nearly
hour and I’m in desperate need of a shower.

“Thank God this is my last class today,” I breathe out.

“Got plans tonight?”

I shoot her a pointed look. “You know I don’t.”

“Come on, you guys can do better...stretch those muscles like it’s
to the end of the semester,” Angel calls. I glance over at her and

stretching her limbs to the point where it can't be normal.

There's nothing but more groaning around me and I'm positive I've something.

Ava scoots closer to me. "Okay, so there's another class after this and I'm thinking of hanging around a bit to see if I can talk to this guy Ian. He and his friend Eric, who's also in this next class, are in a band. The other two band members graduated last year. Anyway, he said we should come see them. They're playing tonight," she whispers.

Angel glances over at us but ignores the chatter.

Ava lowers her voice. "Stick around, I'll introduce you."

"One more and we're done," Angel announces from the front of the class.

I release and move to the bench to catch my breath. "I think I'm sick. I'll take the shower and just going home."

"If I had your size shower, I would too," Ava says. "Oh, here he comes. Act cool."

"Speak for yourself," I mutter.

"Oh hey, Ian," She brushes her blonde ponytail to the side.

I scope the guy out as he makes his way over to us. He's okay, at least he has a punk look to him that's apparently my friend's style. I suppose I'm not ready to give up the charm.

"Hey Ava, you comin' tonight?"

She feigns a confused look. "Oh right your band is playing tonight. Where is it again?"

"Broken Glass. We're the last act. So probably around eleven."

"Broken Glass?" I ask, having no doubt that my expression reads like I just said the cemetery instead of a nightclub. Not just any nightclub; the kids don't hang there—grad kids maybe—but from what I hear, it's not the key to see her.

heavy metal, reject band city that play for free kind of place. And it
e pulled always ends up trashed. Since it's been raided like seventeen times in
two years, anyone under twenty-one doesn't dream of going.

and I'm But it sounds a lot like my friend here thinks we are.

and his "That's a great gig," I lie, pulling Ava lightly on the arm.

to band Ian's head turns and scans me in my shorts and t-shirt before saying
e them. should *both* come."

"We're not twenty-one," I say, also serving the purpose of reminding
certain blonde who won't stop smiling like a fool.

"Yeah, my friend Eric and I recently turned." He nods over to a guy
gym. light brown hair and bright blue eyes walking over to us. "He's
kipping drummer."

Eric's eyes land on me and stay on me as his friend introduces us.
comes. denying he's good looking. No comparison to a certain hockey player
been crushing on, but at least I had a shot with this one.

"I know a guy who'll hook you up with fake ID's tonight so you can
He does them in his van."

rest. He I break my gaze with drummer-boy with a light shake and turn
can see "Fake ID's? Um... I—"

"Can you give us a sec?" Ava pulls me to the side. "Cora. This
senior year," she hisses. "If you want to keep pretending you're in an
; right? boarding school, you go right ahead, but I like this guy and I want to
good time."

"I'm not. But you don't even know him or the people who will be
ke he'd place. I'm all for a good time out, but not *Broken Glass*. Also fake ID
collegeth you know if I'm caught with one, Jace will murder me. Not to mention
a loud, high profile athlete and this could be a field day for the media."

almost “You’re so dramatic. Look babe, you don’t have to come with me. I totally noticed the way the hot drummer was checking you out.” She says, “Let’s just say he’s the perfect candidate to give up your virginity— you know what I mean.”

My stomach twists. One of the things I regretfully told my best friend, “You this year was that I want to lose my virginity before I graduate. Part of the ‘things to do before true-adulthood’.”

What she doesn’t know is that I don’t think the perfect candidate is someone I’ll find on campus.

To be clear, I didn’t flat out set a goal to have sex, just that I want to explore new things. Do all the things that college kids do before they get all grown up. Sure, my brother plays a sport he loves for a living, but I’ve watched him have to give up a lot of the “fun” things in life because he has to be a responsible adult. Take care of his kid sister, make healthy meals, and whatnot. He almost never drinks and is completely uptight sometimes.

The last three years, I’ve been living his solid lifestyle instead of being a carefree college girl.

I’ve turned down frat parties, clubbing, smoking, drinking, all that stuff. It’s disappointing a brother who gave all that stuff up so I could have a role model—someone I can count on.

But to Ava’s point, I don’t see the harm in a little fun... and I have a list of things I plan to do this year.

I release a breath.

“True, I’m probably the only dry one left on campus. But it doesn’t matter if you want to lose it to some guy in the bathroom of a nightclub.”

She puts her arm around my shoulder and walks us back to the car, whispering in my ear. “Then you can use the back of my car.”

e, but I “Alright, we’re in,” Ava calls out. “So what’s the number for the g
e clearsthe hookup?”

card, if “Cora doesn’t need a fake,” a strong female voice comes from

“Thanks for the offer though.” Angel puts her arm around me.

earlier “Angel,” I start, forgetting she’s still in the room and wondering how
t of myshe’s heard.

She smirks. “Because she’s coming with me.”

date is “What?”

“A friend of mine is security at Glass. I’ll swing by and see my f
want tostudents rock out. That is if you can still walk after today’s work ou
have toraises a perfect brow at the guy who suddenly doesn’t look so co
g, but Icompared to the adult in the room.

e had to “We’re up for a challenge.” Ian shrugs and then turns back to Ava a
als and “See you ladies tonight.”

Ava hugs me. “Yes. I’m so excited. I’m going to hop in the showe
being ayou up at eight.”

“Angel, what was that about?” I ask when my friend leaves.

o avoid She runs her finger through the pink in my hair. “This is cute. You
: a roletto prove something to your brother?”

I push her hand aside. “This has nothing to do with him. Or anyone
maybeThis is just me changing things up.”

She shrugs. “No judgement here. But hey, I was going to go
anyway, why don’t you and Ava tag along? Then you don’t need to
mean Iyour money on fake ID’s. The bouncer already knows me. You can t
brother you’re with me.”

e guys, I raise my brow.

“Yeah okay. Bad idea. Tell him you’re studying late with Ava.”

uy with I scrunch my nose, feeling a little relieved Angel will be there. “I sh
fine. The guys have a game. They’ll be on the ice all night anyway.”
behind. Angel frowns briefly before pushing on a smile. “Even better.”

w much



I step into the house and toss my gym bag to the side, shaking my
favorite myself. Of course my first instinct would be to follow the rules. I’m a
it.” She in college, cute guys ask us to come see them play at a night club
confident basically say I’m *not allowed*?

Thank goodness Ava talked some sense into me. Otherwise tonight
and me, be another lonely night watching television or worse...watching my
play hockey...again.

er. Pick I estimate Jace will be home after midnight, which is typical for a
night game. I plan to be home way before then.

My nerves shoot up when I hear the guys in the kitchen. And I’m r
1 trying I’m ready to lie. I take a deep breath before entering and give m
peptalk.

ne else. *Yes I’m doing this. And yes, I’m going to drink. Hell, I might eve
more than one.*

tonight God knows I spent way too many college parties being the des
o waste driver because Jace would flip if he caught me drinking.

all your And then he’d tell Nicholas, who’d take his turn lecturing me until
blue in the face.

And that was no exaggeration. Nick has a temper that my brothe
angriest couldn’t compare to. It’s no wonder he’s team captain. No on

ould be across that guy.

I stop in my tracks in the hall when I hear him in the kitchen with Jace.

“So she’ll be staying with me for a few weeks. I want to keep her. Tonight, she’s having her friend stay over. They’ve been chatting in the babysitters club all afternoon.” I see him shake his head from where I stand.

“Hey man, you’re welcome here anytime,” my brother offers.

My chest clenches. Who is he talking about? A new girlfriend he’s head over heels for? Live with him now? Nick’s girlfriends never bothered me much. They were a senior too quick to disappear after a few dates. Sure, I used to be a little bit of a player and I know when I was in high school, when my crush on him was on steroids.

But at the end of the day, he always ended up telling me how it ended. It would be the same eyerolling response. “She went crazy. She wanted to drive my car. Her kid sister is weird.” He had a brotherly wink over at me and winked as he said that last one.

Friday After that, I told him to get a therapist—and try and decode what a breakup has in common. He had nudged my chin and said ‘thank you’ before dropping the subject of therapy altogether.

Myself As much as I loved hearing the breakup part of the story, it always made me wonder what they had that I didn’t.

My brother Older.

More experienced.

Ignited It’s weird crushing on a guy and seeing him with groupies season after season. They’ve been in the NHL for six years and players are known to have girls on each arm.

Some might stick around long-term.

Not for Jace though. He never stuck with anyone mostly because he has an obligation to give me all his attention.

Damn fool deserves it if he's going to raise me like a nun.

ce. But what's Nick's excuse? He doesn't have one. Except he claims his eye on temperament plays a factor.

like the He doesn't scare me though.

stand. I grin as I enter the kitchen and pull open the fridge for a mini Ga

“Finally settle down, Nick?”

having His grin back is a slow one, almost deliberate. “I've always been
y weresettled, Cora.” He waits a minute, eyeing me, or toying with me
jealousresponding. “I'm talking about my sister.”

Oh.

ed. And My eyes widen. “Oh. She's—I'm sorry, how is she?” I ask, feeling s

ted too He shrugs. “She's...well. I'm keeping an eye on her but tonig

lookedbasically kicked me out. Technically, I can go to her apartment but

got the full fridge.” He winks again.

ll these I hate it when he does that for me—to me.

is doc,' “Cor, you coming to the game tonight? We're playing Wranglers

Jace says. I can see the adrenaline already building in my bulky brothe

s made I look at Nick, who's jaw locks at the mention of the other team. H

heated brawl on the ice two weeks ago. Nick won but the guy was ask

it. Everyone knows Nick's temper gets wild to no limit during games.

“No,” I respond with zero hesitation, taking a swig of my lemon wa

on aftersweaty from the work out. “I've got studying.”

to have I feel Nick's eyes on me but do my best to ignore it. He's scann

with scrutiny, and I instantly regret not showering before I left campu

and I are going to Tower Diner then back to her place to study.” I am

felt animpressed at the fluidity in my voice.

“Study?” Jace raises a brow.

“Or watch a movie.” I nod.

is short *Nailed it.*

“Or put the game on if we’re in for a good laugh,” I add with a chuckle. Jace points a finger at me. “You be quiet. We’re going to win this tournament. “Is Dad going?” I ask, forgetting I have one more obstacle tonight.

my brother’s house, but Dad tends to come over unannounced—unless I have a pretty date, which is rare.

before “Said he is, after work. You know what, I should give him a call, I’ll be back.” He grabs his cell phone and disappears to the living room.

Nick glares at me with a scowl and I feel hot under it. I swallow down my anger. “Well, good luck tonight.”

ght she “Cora.” His voice when he says my name is both friendly and sinister. It sends a shiver up my spine.

“I need to hit the shower.” I reach for my bag by the entry and turn to go, but I suddenly halt when Nick slips in front of me, barricading the stairs.

again,” My eyes are wide and my confidence fades with every beat that passes. “What are you doing?”

Nick’s features suddenly aren’t as coy as they were a few minutes ago when he thought I might have been showing my jealousy card. He’s watching me like he can see everything going on in my head and I feel smaller—smaller—than I actually am against him.

ter, still I step back but he catches my arm. It’s not rough or demanding, but it’s brotherly actually, and I wish it was the other way around.

ing me “Where is it that you’re going?”

s. “Ava *No way.*”

ildly I have this lying thing down pat. I’m unreadable. Years of experience telling everyone *I’m fine* after my mother’s death.

He gnaws at the bottom of his lip and narrows his gaze.

I wipe my forehead self-consciously, then tilt my head and
Unaffected.

He steps toward me, his large frame meant to intimidate. “What
me.” studying?”

“You didn’t get an answer to your first question and you’re
he has another?”

His lips twitch at the side. “Wouldn’t you rather be out with
be righthaving a good time...than...studying?”

“What’s your idea of a good time?” I cock my head at him.
“What’s yours?” he asks.

“Astrophysics.”
I expect him to chuckle at that. But he hardens. “What are you
tonight, Cora?”

I roll my eyes. “Talking about boys.”
“You’re not fifteen.”

So you’ve noticed. “You’re right. Talking about dick. Better?”
“Cora.”

“I really need to hop in the shower. Angel was in one of her moods
—muchI wipe at my sweaty neck and his eyes trail down to my throat and h
up a foot, as if something caught him off guard.

Jace scoffs as he walks past us, completely oblivious to the throv
here. “When isn’t she?”

Nick continues to glare at me, waiting for me to speak.
I don’t.

Instead, I stare back. I likely resemble a deer in headlights right no
don’t try to hide it. Silently, I’m asking what the guy in the driver’s
going to do. Will he run me over or let me cross?

blink. I blink and find my tongue—or rather my teeth, because I bite back.
you knew my relationship with my brother, when I bite back—I bite h
are you “Shouldn't you be babysitting someone who actually needs it? Lil
own sister?”

asking He blinks and nods before backing up, giving me enough room to st
him. My heart sinks as I start up the steps because I know that was low
friends, The lowest.

“Cora,” he calls calmly, and I turn.

“If you need a ride back...or anything. Call.”

I turn back without acknowledgment and slam my door.

You're just full of ways to prove you're not a child today, aren't you
1 doing

today.”

e backs

v down

w but I

seat is

I blink and find my tongue—or rather my teeth, because I bite back. And if you knew my relationship with my brother, when I bite back—I bite hard.

“Shouldn't you be babysitting someone who actually needs it? Like your own sister?”

He blinks and nods before backing up, giving me enough room to shift past him. My heart sinks as I start up the steps because I know that was low.

The lowest.

“Cora,” he calls calmly, and I turn.

“If you need a ride back...or anything. Call.”

I turn back without acknowledgment and slam my door.

You're just full of ways to prove you're not a child today, aren't you, Cor?

Cora

I TRY ON FOUR dresses over the course of one hour and hate each
Too cute.

Too floral.

Too bright.

I officially hate everything in my closet.

Maybe no skirt. Finally, I remember something I received two ye
from an old friend and spend fifteen minutes digging it out of my cl
pair of black leather pants. Back then, I laughed because I'd never be
dead in tight leather pants. Or black anything.

I hate black. Always have.

It's a depressing color.

Until I try on the pants and check myself out. Who could be de
wearing something like this? They seem to transform me into Jessica
I feel taller, sexier...confident.

“This is more like it, Cora,” I mutter to the mirror.

For the top, I find a front zip leather crop vest that I previously wore white button-down. It’s low cut and has a V-shape opening on the side.
Perfect.

I add volume to my hair and touch up my lips with a berry-colored s

“Look at you,” Ava says when she picks me up. Angel opts to drive so we don’t stop to pick her up and agree to meet her at a side entrance

I raise a brow at my best friend and throw on my jacket. “Whatever, do, don’t leave me tonight.”

“You’re in all-black. If I lose you, it’s your own damn fault.”



one.

It’s dark and loud. I haven’t seen Ava in over an hour. Angel has
stuck to my hip since we got here, and I’m two beers in when she gets
she needs to take outside.

“No ordering drinks without me. I’ll be right back.” Angel winks and
ars ago out through the side door, where we’ve been lingering.

Alone, I do another search from where I’m standing for Ava. I do
o set. A caught her, but I do see Eric and two guys who look around our age. I
they’re the other band members.

Ian isn’t with them.

At least that gives me a clue as to who she’s with. And at least
pressed someone from school.

Rabbit. A member of Eric’s band catches me eyeing them and smiles. I slide
down from my tip toes and turn before pretty boy gets the wrong idea.

But it's too late, Eric sees me too and nods to his friend. They are over a over.

s. "Hey, you're Ava's friend, right?"

"Yeah, have you seen her?"

stick. "Ian took her backstage to show her around and meet some other band herself I raise a brow and he chuckles. "Don't worry, Ian is harmless and respectful. We all are."

ver you Angel rushes back in. "Cora, I'm so sorry, I need to run. The band called again complaining about Rory. Dad's at the game so I need to go. I give you a lift home?"

Rory is Angel's baby sister—half-sister, I should say. She's the result of Coach's short-lived relationship a few years back. I've met his little girl who's cute as a button, but scares off nannies like she's the Bride of Chucky.

Sneaking a glance at my new friend, I smile at Angel. "You should as been think I'm going to stay."

s a call "Yeah, okay." She looks at Eric. "Make sure she gets home safe or failing my class."

id steps He gives her a single nod. "You have my word."

She shakes her head. "I'll call you in an hour to check on you."

on't see "Don't worry about me. Go."

assume Despite my reassurance, she looks worried but scurries off.

Meanwhile, I try to remember that I'm here with my friend Ava. Ava has always been kind, but she's not bestie material. She would be if she wasn't so seem so protective of me. I should have known her reason for coming was to watch me. She barely acknowledged her friend and stuck to my side back night and maintained my alcohol consumption.

"Can you take me to Ava?" I ask Eric.

ll walk “Sure thing. We need to change for our lineup soon anyway. Follow
I follow him and his friends through the crowd and backstage. The
long hall lined with dressing rooms, which we walk past. At the end
hall, there is a large open space with tree lights as the main source of li
nds.” An ice sculpture with drinks lined underneath, tables with costume
nd very equipment, and makeup. It’s not as busy as the dance floor but it
crowded. I move aside as someone with a clipboard and a headpiece
bysitter past us.

go. Can “This gig is no joke to you guys, is it?”

Eric shrugs shyly. “It’s kind of a big deal. We’re not being
result of anything, but hoping someone important notices.”

le girl, “That’s...really cool.” Though I wouldn’t hold my breath.

hucky. I find Ava sitting atop a table and nursing a drink. Her face lights u
ld go. She sees me. “Where have you been? I’ve been texting you.”

“I don’t have service here.”

you’re Ava shakes her head. “Her brother is Jace Knight of the Buffalo
You’d think he’d get her a phone that works.”

Two guys laugh but Eric doesn’t. “Your brother is Jace Knight?”

“Yeah. I just call him Jace.”

“You into hockey?”

“I don’t even skate. Angel gave me lessons two years ago but it did
ngel has out great.”

didn’t “I think your beer is empty. Want another?”

tonight “I’m all beer’ed out honestly. Anything more interesting back here?”

hip all “Yeah.” He reaches for a drink under the ice sculpture. “This stuff i
good. It’s like their signature here.”

I bring the cherry-colored drink to my lips. “Mmm, sweet. I like it.”

me.” “Careful. You can’t taste the alcohol but trust me, it’s there.”

ere is a I nod.

l of the “Oh, we’re up in five. It gets messy out there so I’d hang back and
ighting from the screen if I were you.” Ian says. He leans in to give Ava a kiss
s, bandcheek. “I’ll see you in a bit.”

’s quite I finish the first cup within minutes. I was thirsty. The second, I t
zoomstime and watch the band from backstage. By the third song, Ava and
rocking out to the point where my head starts spinning.

paid or

p when

Blades.

n’t turn

”

s really

“Careful. You can’t taste the alcohol but trust me, it’s there.”

I nod.

“Oh, we’re up in five. It gets messy out there so I’d hang back and watch from the screen if I were you.” Ian says. He leans in to give Ava a kiss on the cheek. “I’ll see you in a bit.”

I finish the first cup within minutes. I was thirsty. The second, I take my time and watch the band from backstage. By the third song, Ava and I start rocking out to the point where my head starts spinning.

Nicholas

DESPITE MY HEAD BARELY being in the game tonight, v against the Wranglers. I should be excited but instead, some off. I wonder if it's my sister and how she's doing. But I know Nicole.

It's the conversation with Cora I'd been replaying in my head since afternoon.

The fuck got into me? I was so convinced that Cora was lying. textbook to what I'd picked up from Nicole over the years. The answer flying out of her mouth—prepared, confident.

Also, a Cora favorite is to stick her tongue out at Jace for third questions. But today, she casually answered them all without a sassiness.

A giant red flag for me.

But I was wrong apparently.

And I upset her.

Cora may not realize it, but I'm always on her side. I've convinced
back up off her when he was acting more like a father than her big bro
He's supposed to be the fun one.

Cora needs that.

The girl is screaming for someone to be on her side. I try to
protectiveness in me wins every time.

What the hell did you think she was going to do?

I finally stepped away when the sweat beads on her throat
suffocating for air. I shamefully admit it's not my first time
something in Cora I damn well shouldn't, but it needs to stop.

"Hey Coach, you alright?" I ask, toweling my hair after my shower
on his phone and seems to have been distracted since first intermission
ve won "Yeah. Yeah, I'm alright. Rory's sitter quit this evening. Angel can
thing's Said she calmed her down and got her to bed." He sighs and I feel f
it's not Rory hasn't been easy since that girl learned to talk.

Or rather, bite. She's a snippy little one. But I like her. I've learn
ice this just need to have the right touch with someone as strong willed as
five-year-old.

It was "I can't keep pulling Angel out of her life to watch her while I'm he
rs came "So start bringing her here. We'll hang out with her," Jace offers.

"He's talking about Rory, not Angel."

-degree "I know," Jace snaps.

hint of Some of the guys on the team chuckle.

Coach usually gives Jace shit about messing with his older daughter
today he's not in the mood.

"Alright ladies. Good game tonight. Practice Monday."

Jace to
ther.



We get to Jace's just after midnight. It's quiet and Cora's backpack is on the floor, but the favorite pair of boots are in the hall so I know she's home.

We're about as quiet as two hockey players after a long aggressive game can be. Jace shushes me when I'm pretty sure he's the one causing the noise.

Noticing "It's been a long night. Go to sleep. I'll crash on the couch if that's okay."

"You sure? I've got a spare bedroom upstairs."

Mr. He's "Is there a fridge there?"

"I see your point. Night." He heads upstairs and I hope he checks Cora's room over, but he walks past her room.

For him. *It's fine. She's fine.*

She probably hates me and thinks I'm scum for accusing her of something earlier, but at least she's safe.

this his I'm not good at apologies, but I'll make some form of one tomorrow. It'll be fine. My dimples usually do the apologizing for me.

re." I settle into the sofa with a pillow and an oversized throw blanket and begin to doze off. Knowing it shouldn't be too hard considering the night I had.

I don't know how much time passes or if I slept at all when my eyes snap open from a sound at the door.

After but *Who the fuck?*

For a second, I think it might be Jace's dad, but he had no reason to be back here after we dropped him off at his place halfway across town.

I hear the lock fumbling again. Someone is trying to break in. Well, fucker picked the wrong house to pick on tonight.

I yank the door open, ready to knock this guy's teeth out. Finding no immediate eye level, I pause until my head dips down to a much lower frame than I imagine for a burglar.

"Cora?" I hiss. My eyes scan her thoroughly, questioning if I'm dropping the game. She's in some ridiculous and way too sexy dominatrix outfit. "What the hell is all the doing? What are you wearing?"

She looks up at me with haziness and confusion in her eyes. "Hello, okay." Oh...right." She pushes against my bare chest to get past me into the hallway. Her eyes are half open and I know the signs. She's piss drunk.

I grab onto her when she bumps into her own boots in front of the door on Cora. "Ow."

Christ.

"I'm fine—I'm fine," she mumbles as I hold her upright. I know she's lying. "You're not fine. Where were you?"

In *that* fucking outfit.

"This is the *up* staircase, right?" She squints at the bottom step, waving her hand as if she can feel for it.

"Okay, come on." I put her arm around my shoulder, attempting to help her up the stairs, but her legs are like fluid. I swoop her into my arms and carry her up quietly, feeling the leather against my bare skin.

It's lucky that Jace's door is at the end of the hall. Not that anything would wake this guy.

Pushing her door open gently, I set her down on her feet.

She grins sleepily. "You're so strong."

I shake my head and sit her on the bed, kneeling in front of her.

ell, this who were you with? How did you get home?”

“I was with Ava.” She laughs. “We were studying.” She laughs hard
one at I’m getting angrier by the second.

smaller I grab the back of her ankle and pull it up to my knee, taking a moment
dissect the contraption. Finding the end of the strap, I pull on it
aming, loosens from around her skin. I avoid the urge to run my thumb across
are you indent it made against her skin.

I take considerably less time with the other shoe and toss the damn
mm...? aside.

house. She groans. “I feel sick.”

“Cora...Cora...” Her eyes are shut and her head finds the pillow.

stairs. “Cora you can’t sleep in that. Cora, you need to get undressed.”

She doesn’t respond and it’s like dead weight trying to lift her. Be
know if Jace finds her in this outfit in the morning, he’ll kill her.

There’s no doubt in my mind. That man will kill *someone* for his sister.

I release a breath.

She’s my best friend’s sister. That’s all. I’m simply going to help
aving and undressed.

Cora is in and out of sleep as I unzip the leather corset she has on and
to help it gently down her arms. Relieved when I find a black bra underneath.

ms and Not that the flimsy thing leaves anything to the imagination. It’s like

does little to cover from the nipple down. I look up to find her awake
ing can eyeing me dreamily with a small grin like there’s a secret only she knows.

“What are you smiling at?”

“I’m having another one of my fantasies where you’re undressing me.”

My eyes hold hers for a beat and then I blink.

“Cora, *Fuck.*”

I rub my chin, debating if I should continue or if this is about as far as a drunk and a guy can go before his mind starts to go places it shouldn't.

When she seems to snuggle back into her pillow, I know there is no chance of her coming to her senses until I get her to undress herself after I leave.

Cursing again, I pull on the zipper of her pants and hook my fingers across her skin to try and drag the demon pants off her.

"Lift," I say, and she does slightly, letting me scoop them off from behind. Black lace panties start to come down with it and I focus on a spot on the carpet as I separate the undergarment and pull them back up. Ignoring the impossibly smooth round shape I graze when I do.

Clearing my throat and standing, I pull the tight leather off her legs. "One quick draw."

Enough is enough.

I make it the top of my to-do list to burn the fucking outfit as I toss it in the trash. "You're not wearing that again."

I scramble through her dresser, searching for her pajamas. The best she has that has full coverage are flannel Christmas ones. I yank them out of a drawer and sit on the edge of her bed. She wakes slightly and I ignore what might be going on in her head. I just need to focus on getting her dressed.

"I don't like those," she whines.

"They're now officially my favorite thing you own. Lift." She does and I slide them up her legs.

"They're not big-girl pj's. I'm a big girl now."

Hardly.

I pull her up, leaning her upper body against me for support as I slide the tank over her head.

"Why are you drunk?" I hiss at her, knowing she's likely to answer.

far as truthfully now than tomorrow.

“Buzz off. I’m exploring all the things I’ve never done.” She waves
shot of and lies back down.

“Yeah, what’s next sky diving?” I mock as I shove her in bed before
overprotective brother finds out she’s been drinking.

“Have sex.” She yawns and curls up into her blanket.

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“Buzz off. I’m exploring all the things I’ve never done.” She waves me off and lies back down.

“Yeah, what’s next sky diving?” I mock as I shove her in bed before her overprotective brother finds out she’s been drinking.

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Cora

MY HEAD FEELS LIKE a pound of bricks. I barely lift it off the pillow. My breasts are sore, and I remember the tight vest I wore over these girls last night. I put my hand over them, surprised I still had my bra on when I managed to remove everything else.

I groan. “These pajamas...” At some point last night, I remember thinking I’d rather be in anything than that ridiculous outfit, so it’s no surprise I found this set acceptable.

I fall back in bed and close my eyes. Nick’s face appears. That’s nice. But it’s something that rarely happens anymore.

“Cora.” Jace knocks on my door harder than needed. “You need breakfast?”

I hear Nick mumble something about it being Saturday and to let me sleep. I’m usually an early bird like Jace so I don’t blame him for waking me. But I can’t bring myself to move. I feel nauseous, my brain hurts, n

hurt. And I have no idea how or when I got home.

Aspirin. I need aspirin. That's worth getting up for. Damn it, I wish some in my bathroom here.

What feels like an hour later, I manage to make it down the stairs moving slowly and I stop in the hallway to gather up the energy to zoom to the kitchen, get what I need and get out.

That's what *sober* Cora would do.

Jace is talking up a storm about last night's game. Nick is eerily quiet. My brother doesn't notice me tiptoeing in. But Nick does.

He sits on the bar chair along the island. His usual spot. He doesn't look at me the way he usually does—small smile, a wink of some sort, or a nod about all the fun I missed at the game.

I don't know why I notice, but he doesn't do any of those things. The bottle of aspirin next to his coffee mug.

I want to reach for it but I know that'll only make them both question what's wrong with me.

I can live without it until they leave.

My head is spinning and I feel like I'm crawling to the cupboard. My hand reaches up for a mug and I notice it shaking. I'm in so much pain I can't think straight.

"Frankly, I'm over Garret acting like he owns the ice. It's his secret. Get over it man," Jace continues.

I reach for the pot, trying to keep my hand still so I don't lose hold of the piping-hot glass bowl. A body brushes against mine and takes the heat from me. With his other hand on my shoulder, he pours carefully.

I freeze and put my hand over my mouth, feeling sick.

"Hey Jace, you got a baseball hat or a beanie I can borrow today?"

go out in public like this,” Nick says. His voice low, thank goodness.
I can't handle anything remotely loud right now.

“Since when? Alright, let me see what I have upstairs.” When he
looks at me, I'm Nick slides the coffee mug away from me and pushes a glass of water
in front of me instead. He opens the bottle of aspirin and takes out three.

I feel the intensity of his glare, but I can't look at him. Opening my
mouth, I slip them all in and he lifts the glass up for me. I take a deep breath
and drink. My nausea and take a few sips.

“All of it.”

I look at him, I feel ill and he's too close. “I need some space.”
He backs up a foot. “And here I thought we were in a good place.”
I make a joke but there's no humor in his voice.
He's angry.

I finish the water and set it down, pulling the coffee mug toward
me. “I need milk,” I whisper.

“Try it black,” he says.

I moan, feeling nauseous. Maybe milk isn't a good idea after all. I
try to look up at him. His eyes are penetrating. I'm too weak to ask him
if he knows I'm hung over. But there's no doubt he knows.

“Nicholas,” I start, even though I have no idea what I'm going to say
in a year. “Got it.” Jace comes back into the kitchen. “Cora, want to come
for breakfast with us? A bunch of us are going to Michaels' Diner.”

I look at him. “No thanks.” I manage to say without groaning.

“You should come.”

I wince and glare at Nick. “I'm not very hungry.”

“I'm going to text the others, get a headcount so we can call ahead.”

I can't. “I'll be out in a minute,” Nick says, his eyes still on mine like he's

I can't for some sort of an explanation.

"I'm sorry for what I said about Nicole. I was...that was low. Real s gone, And I'm—"

toward "I'm over it," he says without a beat.

It throws me off, but I continue. If he's over it, he wouldn't be so mouth, with me. "It was wrong and I was...defensive. I thought..."

to ease "Your lie was solid?"

My mouth opens but I don't say anything. I've had enough interrogation this morning. I push past him. "I don't owe you anything

I'm halfway down the hall when his hand touches my forearm. ce." Hewith us and I won't ask questions." His voice is gentler but there is a v undertone.

I don't turn around. But decide that if he's giving me an out he me. "Itaking it. "I'll get dressed."

"Take your time."

A few minutes later, I come back down in gray sweatpants and a m finallyhoodie. I've applied tinted moisturizer, grabbed a pair of shades and li how hehood over my head, making a mental note to call Ava at some point : how the hell I got home last night.

y.

ome to



At the diner, Nick squeezes next to me in the booth by the w making me even more uncomfortable, if possible. Across from us Jackson, the right or maybe left defenseman, I can't remember waitingmoment. Next to him is Roger, the goalie. His complicated long las

escapes me. Jace is at the end of the booth, asking the pretty waitress
lly low specials—when we all know he always gets the same thing.

I refuse a menu and just order toast with butter.

“No protein, Cor? Maybe an egg?” my brother asks.

abrupt I swallow and turn away, facing the window. Nick leans forward
off his menu to Jace. “She’ll have some of mine.”

I want to sink my head into my hands. Or hide deeper within my hood
of his “Anything else here?” I hear the waitress ask.

.” Beside me, Nick says, “Yes. Two Bloody Marys over here. Or
“Comealcoholic.”

warning I frown up at him but he ignores me. His jaw tightening, like he’s
back.

re, I’m I bet he’s regretting his promise not to ask any questions.

Regardless, I start to plan out a story in my head. Ava and I were sitting
and decided to watch a movie. Her brother offered us a beer, I may have
atchingtwo. The end.

fted the I think back to the time by the stairs where he confronted me and we
and ask I stand a chance lying to him again.

I scoff to myself.

“What’s going on in your head?”

My eyes side glance at him like the nuisance that he is. “I’m
wondering when you’re going to ask me why I’m hungover,” I
quietly.

indow, “Don’t bother,” he mutters back, his eyes anywhere but me. “I
is Cain asking.”

at the “Good. It’s none of your business.”

st name The waitress drops off our drinks and he passes me one of the Blood

for the “This actually looks very refreshing.” I take a sip knowing he basically ordered me spicy tomato juice.

I cough at the first sip. “I think this is yours.”

“Nope. That one’s yours. It’s the ultimate cure. If you don’t believe me, standing you can call my sister. She’s the one who didn’t get piss drunk last night yet somehow, I’m supposed to be paying more attention to her.”

“Die.” I clench my teeth. “I said I was sorry.”

“And I said I’m over it.” His tone is biting and I can tell he’s angry. I don’t want to ask why.

I don’t care.

“Why are you helping me? Am I supposed to owe you now?”

He turns to me for the first time since we’ve left the house. His eyes meet mine. “What kind of man do you think I am? The kind that shows compassion because he wants something in return?”

“I’ve had.” “I’m hardly a girl anymore.”

“You keep saying that,” he mutters and spreads butter onto my toast.

“When did I say that?”

“Forget it. Drink your Bloody. It’ll help.”

I struggle to swallow down the strong, spicy alcoholic beverage and a few bites of my toast. My leg is jumpy, and I know my restless movements are just bothering Nick as my thigh rubs against his.

He releases an exasperated breath and puts a firm hand on my upper arm.

His voice is low and gruff as he leans in to whisper in my ear. “You need to relax.”

A puff of air escapes me. “Okay, say you were to ask me a question last night, what would it be?”

“Only one thing?”

ally just “Yes.”

He stares at me, deciding. “I won’t be able to. If I get an answer to c
just need to know more.”

ve me, “Why?”

ght and “Because I care about you, Cora.” There’s a flash of regret in his ey
he says it and he lifts his hand off my leg. Like he just accidentally l
bait into the water and fears a fish too small will latch on.

I don’t That’s all I am in his eyes.

A small helpless fish.

I roll my eyes. “Don’t worry—I won’t overthink it.”

He scans the other guys at the table. Finding them in an animated pl
s pierceover last night’s game, he turns sharply to me. “What’s gotten into you

s a girl “Buzz off.”

He pushes my drink toward me with a slight smirk. “Drink up. May
help with your attitude.”

My face twists. “Ugh, I never want to drink again.”

He chuckles. “Oh you will. And I’ll remind you that you said this.”

I know he means it in humor, and Nick has been around for half my
I take athere’s no reason he wouldn’t always be. But why does that stateme
ness isme a bubbly feeling?

It’s probably because I stupidly take it like a subtle promise th
r thigh.always be around and that’s not healthy.

need to Because even if he is, he’s not going to be around for me. He and J
BFFs for life.

n about That statement had nothing to do with me.

one, I'll

Nicholas

es after

owered

She's so goddamn cute I think *I'm* going to be sick.

Cute. Cute is a good word. Cora is cute.

She's not hot.

She didn't look like a fucking sex goddess last night when I caught that dominatrix outfit.

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I don't see myself peeling the skintight pants off her perfect, smooth legs every time I close my eyes. For God's sake she doesn't even remember happening, so it *never happened*, Nicholas.

She's my best friend's sister. She's not unbreakable.

She's a virgin. And for me—she's off-limits.

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face are

I don't cross lines. I don't betray my friends. And I don't take advantage of innocent girls.

But dammit, some other fucker is going to. Some dick she's going to ruin her. And I'm going to go to jail for killing him.

That's my future. And I don't deny it.

I'd kill for this girl.

Nicholas

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Cora

IT'S MONDAY AND THERE'S a game tonight. Jace tells me N coming so I agree to go so I can see her.

"We've got the executive suite for special guests tonight. I'll give y Dad passes," Jace promises before he leaves.

I do love it when the team is able to get a private guest room executive suite is the best. The owners usually reserve for their own p rent it out for up to ten thousand dollars a game. Naturally, when it the team and the Coach for guests, I happily attend.

There's food, drinks, and you can roam as you please. Bathroo exquisitely clean and you're guaranteed not to get caught in a random the crowd in the middle of the game.

Ava usually comes with me but I've been ignoring her calls all w When I asked her how I got home Friday night, she told me she had r Just that she wanted to stay and barely remembers how she got home.

Way to stick together, Ava, I'd told her before practically hanging up
"It's cold in here." I shiver, wrapping my arms around myself when
and I are escorted into the suite just before the game was set to start.

"Yeah, you could say it's like an ice box in here..." he says.

I glare up at him with my best dead eyes and he shrugs. "I thought
funny," he mutters.

"I did too, Mr. Knight," Nicole greets us and walks over with open arms.

Dad gives a wide smile back and bends to hug her. "Nicole. So good
you." He scans her in that awkward analyzing way that makes me
uncomfortable, but Nicole doesn't flinch. "You look...well."

Oof.

She presses her lips together and nods. "I am very well. How are
She turns to me. "Hi sweetie," she shrieks and I lean in for a tight hug.
Nicole is "I've missed you the most," she whispers.

Instantly, I feel guilty again for what I said to her brother the other day
you and "Oh sandwiches," Dad says before running off to the other side
room.

m. The "I'm sorry," I say.

party or She waves a hand. "Oh please. I'm so used to people being awkward
goes to me this past week." She bounces like a giddy, carefree child and pulls
two black leather chairs in the front of the room, directly facing them.
ms are "I've saved us seats."

fight in "Nice. I'm just going to grab a soda."

Nicole holds up her hands. "Oh don't do that on my account, feel
weekend, have a drink. It's not weird for me."

no idea. "N-no, I, well I don't drink. I'm not twenty-one."

Nicole blinks, then snaps. "Right. Right of course. That's—you're

3. Really, like never?"

en Dad I laugh. "Well..." I bite my lip. I don't lie that I secretly crave g
Real, grown-up girl talk, with someone who knows the things that I
Who I can share things with, and ask questions. But given Nicole's con
t it was I don't know if she's the right person for the job.

Noticing my dilemma, she reaches over and puts a hand on mine.
arms. you can tell me anything. I don't judge and I say it exactly how it is.
d to see It would mean the world if there was someone...that can still trust me.
highly I release a breath and my eyes water.

"Oh dear."

"Can I just start by apologizing for something stupid I said to your
e you?" last Friday?" My voice stirs, but I sound hopeful.

Nicole rolls her eyes and shakes her head. "He probably dese
What'd he do?"

I tell her the quick version of my heated conversation with Nick
of the stairs when he confronted me and how I said something stupid out of c
But to my surprise, Nicole was practically in giggles.

"Where were you going?" she asks in a hushed voice. Clearly havi
rd with interest in how I offended her.

s me to "Have you heard of Broken Glass?"

ie rink. Her eyes widen. "Yeah. I've more than heard of it."

When Dad comes to sit next to us with his plate of food, Nicole
miss a beat and shifts gears. She rakes her fingers through the pink st
free to my hair. "You have to give me the name of this shade. It's stunnin
winks at me and turns as we all settle to watch the puck drop.

And at that moment, I find myself wondering why I have friends lik
e right. After the game, Nicole and I stand to make rounds in the room as

Collins, Jace, Nick, a few other players and special guests start rolling out the room for a small after-party.

I don't. We slowly make our way to the winning team, but I pull Nicole out of the crowd, before I lose her in the growing crowd. "Can we hang out soon? Just you and me? I need grown-up girl stuff."

"Babe, I catch Nick glance over with a scowl. Probably still mad over what he said about her and is considering me a huge hypocrite right now.

"I know. I'm always here for you, babe." She holds up her phone. "My brother already programmed your phone number in here for me as soon as he trusts around me, so I'll text you." She starts punching into her phone. "My brother would have given it to you earlier, but I didn't want to miss seeing my brother's nose get bashed in."

I hear Coach Collins chuckle and the two of us look up at the older, suited man coming toward us.

I've always liked him. Royce Collins is sharp, quick-witted and hard on his defense team. Angel is a lot like him. Nicole and I always get a good laugh watching him howling at the guys when we used to come to watch practice. He's in his prime as usual tonight, which makes him that much more handsome. If possible, he's the guy who fights off more female attention than the players.

After a civil separation with Angel's mom, Coach Collins didn't renege on his promise. His little girl is the product of a short-lived relationship before the mom goes home. She doesn't have a mama took off, having not had any intention of being a mother.

"Lovely seeing you ladies here. Hi Nicky."

When she doesn't respond immediately, I look at her. She's looking at me, her lips slightly parted—but then she blinks. "Coach Collins. You did a good game," Nicole says, her tone impressively sophisticated, for someone who couldn't find her voice a second ago.

ng into “Sorry, I’m returning your brother in one piece.”

“I’m sure you’ll make it up to me next time.” She winks and he closes his eyes, tossing her a wink back.

the two “See you around.”

We make another effort to stroll over to the guys to congratulate them. I said Angel suddenly moves in front of me.

“Cora! Oh my God, hun, I’m so sorry I ran out on you Friday night.” My eyes widen. Angel’s voice tends to carry. She used to be a cheerleader after all.

“Rory’s babysitter called and I had to get home. She quit by the way. Another one bites the dust, I guess...” she trails off when she notices a subtle head shake as heads start to turn around us.

“What? I hope everything worked out okay after I left the club. I can’t reach you.”

The deliberate throat clearing behind her makes Angel jump a little. “Jace. Jesus, what the hell?”

My brother’s jaw and neck are tight. His arms are crossed in front of him, and he glowers between us.

My heart thumps in my chest. I want to ignore it but I know he’s going to be disappointed and there’s nothing I can do.

His eyes sweep past me and he steps up to Angel. “Can you repeat that?” She doesn’t move but her head dips back slightly.

“Excuse you—I wasn’t talking to...oh.” She winces and bites her lip. Nick draws closer, like he’s ready to intervene but doesn’t just yet.

Angel’s eyes dip down to me for reassurance. “Um...”

“I’m asking *you*, Angel. Where is it that you took Cora Friday night?” “I...” I’ve never seen Angel cave from a throwdown with Jace before.

it makes my stomach turn.

huckles “Jace stop—” I start.

He points a finger at me. “You be quiet. Clearly, I can’t trust anything you say.”

My chest heats until it starts to burn at his words.

He turns back to Angel. “I asked you a question,” he barks, and a portion of the room turns to us. I know it’s only a matter of time before the entire room grows still.

I can’t watch this.

“Drop it, Jace. Ava and I went out Friday night and ran into Angel. I know what you did.”

He glares at me. “Where?”

I don’t answer. Not right away. Nicole is at my side and moves to stand in front of me. “Back off. She doesn’t have to answer you. You’re not my dad and flipfather.”

Jace jerks back and licks his lips. He glances back at Dad who’s talking to Coach Collins in the back of the room. “Fine. Then let’s have *him* answer your questions.”

I know my brother is bluffing. He’s not the type to rat me out. We both know he did that.

“Unfortunately, Angel doesn’t know this unspoken rule we both have. She grabs his arm and her voice is low when she answers. “Glass. We’re talking about Broken Glass.”

Jace turns menacingly at me and Nick steps closer. “Jace, not now.”

“How the hell did you get in there?”

I cross my arms in front of me, refusing to answer—getting an approving nod from Nicole.

Angel is apparently slightly weaker than us. “I got her in. I know you’re a bouncer and—”

“Of course you do,” Jace bites.

“What’s that supposed to mean? I overheard her plans to go during the game and stepped in. I went to protect her. You’re fucking welcome.”

“Oh I should be *thanking* you?” Jace shoots back.

I’ve heard enough.

“I don’t need protecting!” I turn to Angel. “Not from you—no one.” I feel like I’m suffocating as I push past the crowd, looking for the red exit doors, needing to get as far away from everyone as possible.

“Cora,” Jace calls. His voice is softer. He’s still mad but I know he’ll be there when I’m upset.

My brother will battle anyone who gets in his way on the ice. He’ll be there full-on screaming match with a beautiful figure skater just to get to the bottom of what happened to me. But when I’m upset, the guy crumbles like a dried-up leaf.

I’m his only weakness.

Humiliated, I race across the parking lot, drying my tears against the back of my hand. Knowing that I was fooling myself to think I could try and be normal like what girls my age do. Make plans with the girls, go someplace that they’ll be at. She parents wouldn’t approve of, get stupid drunk and not remember how they were at home. It’s the stories I hear from everyone else, but never get to do.

But now that I have, I’m not sure what’s so great about it. I spent practically the entire weekend recovering from a hangover. I met a beautiful, innocent woman—who’s also grading me at the end of the semester—proving me. I was humiliated in front of a large group of people and now...

My brother is disappointed in me.

ow the This slows me down. My heart aches because I know how hard he
keep me safe and lying to him just so I can feel normal, feels wrong.

“Cora, stop.”

ig class It’s not Jace’s breathless voice that I hear behind me. And I’m r
But not enough when I realize whose voice it is.

Nicholas.

I stop and sigh. This is just what I need. “Of course, I’m sobbing
ot fromchild.” I turn to face him. Tears streaming down my face like I just fel
for theplayground and kids laughed at me.

He catches up and stops a few feet from me, his expression full of c
hates it “But it’s not because my brother yelled at me. It’s because I c
anything without people acting like the world is going to fall apart
l start ame.”

to the He releases a breath and takes slow steps toward me.
s like a “Sometimes I can’t help feeling like they’re right. Because look at r
not as tall as Angel, or as sharp as Nicole. I’m Jace’s kid sister. Poor g
lost her mother before her eleventh birthday.”

e wind. He takes another step. “Nobody thinks that, Cora.”

nal. Do I wait for him to tell me what he thinks of me. I sniffle as the wind
at youragainst my face and I wrap my jacket tighter around me. “Why are y
you gothere?”

“Because you can’t—”

I spent “I will,” I answer, not waiting for whatever he thinks I can’t do. “Or
ade anI won’t. Maybe I need to be a twenty-year-old girl who makes mistake
–lie forlearns from them. Maybe I need to have regrets.”

“Why do you want those things? Why can’t you let us be here to ke
safe?”

tries to I shake my head. “You don’t get it.” Another tear falls and I swi
But instead of giving up, I think of another way to get through
“Maybe I need to jump off a fucking plane just to feel free for one m
elieved.without someone laying down a mattress for me to fall on.”

His jaw locks. “Some aren’t as lucky as you to have people care s
to lay that mattress.”

g like a “Maybe they’re just trusted to lay their own,” I point out. I could do
ll in the day. I’ve had many unspoken arguments with Jace in my head over
needs to back off but held back over my own guilt. He’s done so m
oncern.me.

an’t do “No one trusts me,” I whisper. “Not Jace, not Angel...not you.”

around He glares at me. “You’re right Cora. I don’t trust you.”

I swallow and my head dips to the side. “It’s a good thing I’m not
my breath for it then,” I say sharply, even though it stings.

ne. I’m He stays quiet so I ask, “Why?”

irl who “Because of things you said when you stumbled home late Friday ni

I blink away the moisture in my eyes. “What?”

“Who do you think got you upstairs when you could barely stand
l blows feet and...” he pauses, his eyes skimming down my frame, “out c
you outclothes?”

“Y-you undressed me?”

“It didn’t feel right not telling you.”

maybe I shake my head. “Oh God.” I cover my face. “What did I say?”

s. Who “You told me to buzz off.”

I release a breath and he closes the small distance between us, tak
eep you hand and leading me back to the front of the parking lot. “Let’s get
here. It’s cold.”

pe at it.

to him. With the heat on in his car, we drive. No destination. He's just c

minute... He's passing all the exits and I'm not sure when he plans to turn back.

"You should have invited Ava tonight. You two are close, right?"

o much "I don't know. I guess."

He watches the road.

this all "She kind of left me there to fend for myself. I'd never do that to he

why he He doesn't respond right away, and I wonder if he heard me. "Just

uch for clear, you want the mattress from people like Ava, but not your family

My eyes flip to him and I consider it for a minute. "I know it doesn't sense."

holding "It doesn't Cora. Because it sounds like you want your friends to l
for you and your family to feed you to the wild."

I cringe internally when his hard tone hits me like a ton of brick
sorry. I know you didn't have the same kind of...attention problem I h

ght." "No, I didn't. But you don't have to apologize. You didn't exactl
decent hand dealt either."

on two Nick swipes his phone and I see the text from Nicole that mak
of your chuckle.

Nicole: *It's cool, I'll just catch a ride somewhere from someone.*

I like their relationship. They've had it rough but they always look
each other. They're equally respectful of each other. Jace and I will n
that.

ing my Nick stops to get us coffee and a couple of donuts for the driv
: out of which ends up being nearly an hour.

“Did I say anything else?” I ask finally, referring to my drunken driving, apparently naked state Friday night.

“How did you get home if not with Ava?”

“I don’t remember,” I answer honestly.

His jaw hardens. And he chews his donut. “You said you had Christmas flannel pajamas when I pulled them on you.”

I nod. So far, so good. I want to ask him more but I get a sense it’s not my turn. “I suppose it’s an eye for an eye here?”

He nods and I concede.

It’s not

look out



“I’m not a runner—but today, I feel the need to. I dress accordingly get a water bottle from the fridge.”

Jace is plating breakfast for two. He looks up, his tone extra “Perfect timing. Eggs are up.”

“I’m not hungry.”

He sets down the towel and releases a loud breath that only aggravates me more. “Cora. Please sit with me. Look, I’m sorry about last night—I’ve never been caught off guard. You never lie to me.”

“Does Dad know?”

He looks away without bothering to answer.

“Thanks.” I slam the fridge and kick open the back door starting my

n—and “If it makes you feel any better, he only blames me,” I hear him call
me.

Of course.

Why would anyone ever blame poor Cora for anything?

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ngly, in

grab a

chirpy.

ates me

was just

run.

“If it makes you feel any better, he only blames me,” I hear him call behind me.

Of course.

Why would anyone ever blame poor Cora for anything?

Cora

IT'S BEEN FOUR DAYS and I'm still mortified when I walk into the gym Friday afternoon. But Angel seems to be the more apologetic today for ratting me out in the first place—and for not telling me the reason she went was to look after me.

I've now had time to cool off and regardless of her reasoning, I apologize to Angel for coming with me. And profusely apologize for the way I treated her.

I almost wish it *was* my father. He'd have some self-control in public and wouldn't yell at an innocent young woman—who's likely already sweating inside.

I change into my North BU logo gym shorts and matching fitted t-shirt and walk back out into the gym tying up my hair and ready to burn off my excess energy.

Ava nudges me just as warm-up starts.

“Hey, you haven’t returned my calls all week. Are you seriously upset with me because I left you with Angel on the floor? How was I supposed to know she’d leave? Also, you seemed to do just fine.”

“Sorry I’ve been avoiding you,” I lie. I’m still annoyed but Nick was there and Ava trusts me and knew I’d be alright on my own.

Either that, or she couldn’t give two shits what happened to me outside the gym. I decide there needs to be some serious trust-building on my end because I don’t know who’s with me or against me at this point.

“But we’re good. Someone made me realize that you’re basically the only one who isn’t treating me like I need to be sheltered so, I guess—thank you. There could have been a lot more gratitude in my tone, but I’m just nervous about it yet.”

Ava frowns but drops it for the moment. “Can I give you a ride home after class?”

I sigh. “Jace texted and said he’s picking me up today.”

“He’s got his car back?”

I shrug. “Not sure. I didn’t ask. Actually, I didn’t even respond so I don’t know if he’s coming at all.” Ava seems lost and I realize she has no idea what happened Monday night. And I’m not sure I want to fill her in.

We’re doing a final lap around the gym when Angel calls the end of class and offers a quick reminder that the next class will be in the bike room.

More cardio. Fabulous.

I freeze when I see Jace standing by the double doors, watching awkwardly as the class spreads out into the locker rooms. His baseball hat is on, and only a matter of time before he’s recognized around here.

He’s focused on Angel as she makes notes on her clipboard.

set with “Is this your way of keeping an eye on me everywhere I go now?
o know when I reach him. It’s one of the few times this week I’ve acknowledged
brother. At the house, I’ve been blowing right past him anytime he’s
is right; talk to me.

He sighs and glances past me. “I’m here to apologize to Angel.” F
there. I drop back down to me. “Would that help?”

cause I My shoulders sag. My brother is good at acting like he has the upper
but I know my cold shoulder is hurting him. I’m about to respond
he only hear Angel call out from the other side of the gym.

k you.” “You can’t be in my class if you’re not in my class, Knight.”

ot there Angel’s tone makes me smile. It reminds me of the times I used to
watch practice and the ice girl and rookie would be ragging on each o
ne after every turn. She was still in college then, younger than I am now
somehow seemed so much older and braver comparatively.

I turn back to my brother and instead of responding to Angel, he’s f
on me. “Well? Will it help?”

wonder I cross my arms. “If she accepts your apology... maybe a little.”

a what “I’ll take it,” he mutters as he walks past me. He removes his jacket
tosses it on a bench, waltzing in with his arms stretched out. “I guess
your class today.”

of class The corner of Angel’s lip turns up, but I can tell she’s not easily impressed.
“This should be fun.”

I turn to step outside, needing air after our workout, and cr
wardly someone racing into class.

but it’s “Cora. You alright?”

I look up at Eric and don’t know whether to smile back or be as a
him as I am at Ava. “Aren’t you in Angel’s class now?” I brush past

” I askwalk toward the exit and hear him following behind me.

ged my “I am...but I’m glad I caught you. Do you have a minute?”

tried to “Not really.” I step outside and lean against one of the white columns
the main entrance, relieved for the cool air. I was starting to suffocate
his eyesthere.

“I was hoping we could talk—it was kind of hard to after the show and
er hand, I rub my forehead. “What happened? I don’t remember much about
when Iguys went on stage.” I’m almost afraid to admit it but I need to know.

He hesitates for a moment. “I think you had a few too many of
colorful drinks. Ava couldn’t drive back either so she had to wait for
o comeAnyway, I got your address from Ava and put you in an Uber.”

other at I groan and rub my temples. “Thank you.”

ow, but Eric takes a step closer. “I take it you don’t drink much?”

I shake my head. “No. Not really.”

focused “Well, we don’t have to drink...but I’d like to hang out again.”

I brush a hand across my face and look at him. “You would?”

“Maybe I can give you a call this weekend?” He pulls his cell phone
ket andhis back pocket.

; I’m in “Oh...” I hardly have a moment to process that he’s asking for my
number when a car door slams.

ressed. My lips part and I don’t know if the swirl in my stomach at the sight
him is excitement, panic or anger.

sh into “Is that Nicholas Kane?”

My jaw tightens as I access the hockey player coming up the steps
now. He’s not here to apologize to Angel, which means, he’s spying on
ngry at I decide it’s *anger* that bubbles in me.

him to “Nick Kane. Wow. Hi, I’m a big fan.” Eric slips his phone into his

hand and extends it to Nick.

Nick merely glances at his fan before turning a hard glare at me. "I'm not interrupting."

I shoot a scowl right back. "Actually, I was just about to give Eric my phone number." I don't bother looking at Eric as I say this, my eyes are fixed on Nick's.

"Were you?"

When I don't respond, he turns to Eric as if he's guilty of something. Eric drops his hand and takes a step back. "Um...yeah, you know for Ian. maybe we can catch up another time, Cora. I should get to class anyway."

I see the corner of Nick's mouth turn up as Eric pivots and runs back toward the building. I huff and shake my head. I'm not disappointed that Eric no longer wants my number. I'm disappointed that he let one look from the other guy scare him off.

This isn't the first time Nick's intimidated a guy asking me out, but I'm usually funnier about it, playful for my benefit—or for Jace's. But right now, the heat from the heat of his glare is anything but.

"What are you doing here?"

"Jace said he was coming by, so thought I'd tag along and stop and see the old coach. Any idea where he is?"

"Why would I know where your old coach is?"

"I meant your brother."

I point inside the school. "He got sucked into Angel's class."

Nick laughs and scratches his chin. "That's...suspicious."

I frown. "What's suspicious is how you think you have some claim on me because you saw me half naked."

"A little more than half, but we won't get into that. I don't think

some claim to you, Cora. I was testing him and he failed.”

“Hope “Testing him?”

“Yeah. He backed down at the first sign of pressure.”

Eric my “Oh, are you vetting my boyfriends now?”

he glued “You really thinking of going out with that guy?”

I cross my arms in front of me. “Why not? I spent half the evening
him last Friday.” I might be exaggerating, but he doesn’t have to know

His jaw locks and he moves in. His fingertips land on my abdomen
what, firmly press me against the wall. With his other hand, he reaches and
y.” the pink streak of my hair between his fingers and settles it behind
ick into leaning in slightly. “And yet he wasn’t the one who took your clothes
he no He pulls back to hold my gaze for a fraction of a second. I wait
another flash of regret in his features, but it doesn’t come.

Turning, he races down the steps. “You need a ride home since
out he’s clearly going to be a while?”

ht now, I swallow, peeling myself off the wall and struggling to find my

“No.”

He doesn’t bother convincing me. He’s in his car and gone—
see our couldn’t get away from me fast enough.

Nicholas

n to me

I have What the fuck was that?

I violated a few traffic rules on the way home. Hell, I violated a lot more than that today.

I run a hand across my face. I can't take that back. She'll take it back and I can't take it back. Worst of all, I can't *explain* it.

And I'm going to have to. There's no doubt that at some point I'm going to need to explain what the hell I thought I was doing back there with Cora. The way I touched her, the possessive tone in my voice. I acted like I owned her. There's no question. I didn't like that kid talking to her. Hanging off her twist her in a dark, loud nightclub, leaning in repeatedly to say things to her, my ear, lips grazing her ear every time.

off." I didn't like that one bit.

for that My mind trails back to what Cora said to me in her drunken state.

I'm exploring all the things I've never done...have sex.

Jace is Over my dead body.

voice.

like he

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I'm exploring all the things I've never done...have sex.

Over my dead body.

Nicholas

THERE ARE TWO THINGS my agent Doug hates. The word dealing with my shit when I cross the line—on or off the ice.

My temper has gotten me into more trouble than my sister probably have in a lifetime had she not gone to rehab.

Maybe that was an exaggeration—she was headed toward a bad place.

But with Nicole out now, I need to watch my every move. It's not like I haven't tackled the guy Cora was talking to earlier—he's hardly competition. I can't have this urge I'm starting to feel around her get the better of me.

My sister needs me right now. If I can control my actions and emotions, she can, too.

Our parents messed us up in different ways. I get angry. I fight. I hurt people.

Nicole hurts herself.

And if you ask me, I don't think she spent nearly enough time in. When they evaluated her and said she only needed three months, I was push for six.

But I'm relieved as hell that she's agreed to stay with me.

Which likely means she doesn't trust herself either. Theoretical should scare the crap out of me, but at the moment, I'm grateful for it.

Because I don't either.

On Friday night in the locker room, I gear up for the game. Glad I sport that allows fighting. Real fighting.

The kind of fight I want tonight though is against myself. But it would be mighty questionable if I went out there and beat myself up over who's...still a girl. Sure she's almost twenty. Hell, she could be almost no and always be the little girl I watched my best friend raise while she worked two jobs and was too emotional to deal with a pre-teen. They would both strategically planned out how to have 'the talk' with when she was fifteen.

I wasn't involved but I listened to Jace's practice speech about sex like it was a time.

—but I *And tell her about STD's and birth control and... hell, can you homeschool her and lock her in her room?* I suggested.

Jace's dad shook his head and left the room, happy that he didn't be the one having that conversation. He'd intentionally started dating a woman around the time hoping she'd have some sort of talk with his dad but Jace vetoed that idea.

I agreed.

rehab. It was embarrassing enough that Cora had no female adult to ask questions of, but the woman who for all intent and purposes replaced her mother in the parent's bedroom? No fucking way.

Jace and I figured it out. We read books on how to approach it. We watched videos, downloaded a few middle school pamphlets. At one point I considered asking Nicole for help, but decided she was in no shape to be giving advice.

All in all, Jace said it went well.

Now that I know our girl's still a virgin, I'm relieved.

For now.

Being in on Cora's little secret is making me edgy and temperamental more than my norm. It makes me think we screwed up that talk. It makes me think we need to give her a refresher that guys are assholes and she should be careful not to end up getting hurt.

It makes me want to shake some sense into her myself—leave Jace alone with it.

Sure by the time I was her age, I'd slept with more than a dozen women and yes they were younger than she is...but this is Cora.

She's not ready.

"Kane, you ready?"

No.

Fully geared, I stand and head out of the locker room. "Yeah."

My daughter



"How'd it go with Angel?"

uestions Jace shrugs. “The workout I can handle. The twenty autographs after in her were fine too. But man, that girl’s bite leaves a mark.”

I laugh as we change out of our gear.

atched “She’s up in the suite tonight with Coach and Rory,” Jace says. “I’d like to go there too. I’m going to do everyone a favor and stay away from the party.”

“Your sister still mad?” I wince and wait to see if Jace catches on. He referred to her as his sister. As if I don’t know her like she is my sister. I’ve always called her by name. But I’m afraid her name will roll off my tongue with way too much pent-up frustration.

amental But Jace just shakes his head. “She made me believe that if I apologize to her, she’d talk to me, but I’m still getting the cold shoulder.”

’ll only “This might be bigger than just what happened last week, bro.”

Jace nods. “I think that’s what she’s trying to tell me.” He sighs. “Do you want to go out of going up there?”

“To be honest, I want to go home and hang out with Nicole, but she’s not a woman—me just because she’s sober doesn’t mean I have to be and to hang out with my teammates tonight.”

“You’re team captain. You have to go. No one’s going to take you seriously if you don’t.”

“You’re going to let Cora hang out there alone?”

He shrugs and picks up his bag. “You’ll be there. Nothing can happen to her if she’s with you.”

I grimace as I picture myself peeling her tight pants off again. “Yeah, well, she’s not a woman.”

“Now it’s a party,” Cain shouts through the room.

er class I ignore him and search the room for Cora. I don't see her and I
Angel instead. She's taller and easier to spot. Maybe Cora is with her.

I find Angel with Rory. They're sharing a brownie and laughing
"Cora's something at a small round table near the desserts.

om the The little girl looks like a ladybug compared to the giant athletes
room.

s that I I walk over. "Hey, girls."

own. I Angel straightens in her seat. "Where's your other half?"

tongue I cock my head. "You didn't see enough of him in your class today?"

"Did he have to go home 'cause he's still achy? That's normal. A l
gized to and Epsom salt will help." She presses her lips together.

Women are evil creatures.

I rub the top of Rory's head. "You seen Cora?"

is. "You "She's out on the balcony," Angel offers with suspicion in her eyes
I ignore.

he told "Thanks." I turn and head directly in that direction. Imagining one
ut with rookies hitting on her.

I pause at the glass door. Well, he's no rookie, but Garret Garrison
e these any better. I push through the door, just in time to see Cora press
lightly against his chest in laughter.

Beat it. I want to say. But I know it won't go over well with either c
ppen to So I put a bit more effort into it.

"Get knocked too many times tonight, Garrison? Or did you just for
1." this one is off limits?"

He turns to me with a grin. "Relax man, Cora's like family here
thought I'd join her since she seemed like she was waiting for someone

My eyes pin hers. "I bet she was." Then they drop to the beer in her

look for “I’m here now so...you can go mingle with someone your own age.”

He shakes his head and makes his way back inside. “Get a grip dude

g about “What happened to never drinking again?” I ask when we’re alone.

She shrugs and dips her head back, taking a hefty swig.

s in the “Oh you a pro now?” I try not to laugh.

“There’s a lot of things I’m good at you might not realize.”

“Cora...” I warn.

“Nicholas.” Her eyes are tantalizing, and I can’t look away.

” “What?”

ittle ice She looks away nervously for a minute then back at me as if rea
herself. “You want to tell me why you’re shooing away every guy th
to me?”

“Because I know how they think and what they want.”

, which “Is it the same thing you want?”

My brow shoots up and I resent that I’m impressed with her forwa
: of our “From you?”

“Would that be so bad?”

on isn’t “How much have you had to drink?” I ask, pivoting the convers
a hand where it needs to be.

She rolls her eyes and turns away, letting the cool wind blow agai
of them. I’m tempted to come up behind her and wrap my arms around her
frame.

get that Instead, I reach for the beer she’s holding, surprised to find the
mostly full and warm.

!. I just I give her a questioning look and she shrugs. “I don’t like beer.”

e.” I glance inside and notice it’s mostly beer and hard liquor her
: hands. there’s no way I’m giving her the other option.

“Come on.” I take her hand and lead her to the other side of the building. I lead her directly to an elevator that takes us down to the parking lot of the arena.

When we reach the lower level, I glance back at her, expecting to see an expression full of question, but there’s nothing. She’s just wrapped her fingers tightly around my hand and letting me take her away.

She trusts me.

Don’t fuck it up, Kane.

I pull the passenger door open to my Jeep and she hesitates. A flicker of disappointment in her features. “Well this was fun. Getting home before midnight on a Friday night.”

“Get in.” I don’t blame her for thinking I’m taking her home. It’s what I would do. But since I don’t exactly know where I’m taking her, I correct her.

Fifteen minutes later, I pull into a dirt road parking lot. I grab my hat and hoodie from the back seat and reach over her to push open the passenger door. “We were never here. Get out.”

Slipping on my hat, I walk around to her, shutting the car door behind me. This isn’t how I want to be with Cora. In disguise, reminding her that she’s a public figure and we can’t just be normal. But I don’t want any photographic proof of us together.

“Where are we?” She takes in the view of the lake, the pier, and the surrounding buildings. I parked outside of the restaurant parking lot for privacy, but also for the views from this side of the pier.

I take her hand again. “Some place you don’t need Angel or some other kid to take you.”

alcony, We walk inside but in case I am recognized, I don't hold her hand
a. like a coward when I let go, but it will only turn heads and prompt un
see an photos.

ed her I don't want that for Cora.

I tip the hostess and ask for a private table by the corner w
overlooking the lake. It's not a fancy place but chic enough and isol
this part of town. That's what I like about it.

flash of I hand her the drink menu. "They have a lot more than beer. Tell m
fore ten looks good."

She watches me with a smirk as she takes the menu. "I don't know
what I something very sweet and apparently very strong last week. I don
I don't that."

"I'm sure whatever that was is not on the menu. What's your f
flavor?"

baseball "Blueberry."

pen the "Tangy?"

"No."

id her. "Okay." I scan the menu. "Sweet?"

at I am "A little and maybe slightly bitter."

res. No I lower my menu to look at her. "That's specific." I pick up the food

"Have you eaten? You need to eat."

nd our "Dinner."

rily for "That was four hours ago. I'm ordering you something."

The waitress comes by and I glance up. "We'll have an order of the
college fries. And two blueberry cosmos." I offer a polite smile as I hand o
menus.

"Great choice. I'll be back."

l. I feel I turn back to Cora, whose smile grows suspicious.

wanted I shrug and lean back in my chair. “What?”

“You’re going to have a Cosmo?”

I clear my throat. “That’s why I’m wearin’ the hoodie.” I wouldn’t
indowsit’s because I don’t want her face on the internet as my fling of the wee

lated in She nods. “That’s why.”

“What?”

ie what “I wasn’t born yesterday.”

I tap on my glass of ice water, watching her.

v. I had She looks around. “You’re protecting me. Even when there’s no
't wantto.”

“I always have a reason to protect you.” And it’s the same one ever
favoriteShe’s like a sister to me.

Except when my real sister springs into a room, my heart doesn’t li
My lip doesn’t turn up because of a new cute thing she did with her h
insides don’t twist to the point of combustion because she’s talking to .

My reason to protect Cora from everything that surrounds her sh
some point. Evolved. I can’t quite put my finger on it, but it’s not th
reason Jace protects her.

l menu. In fact, I’m one hundred percent positive her brother wouldn’t app
my reasons at all.

A few minutes later, Cora looks down at the blueish drink in front

“You know my dad lets me drink.”

e truffle I chuckle. “Giving you an occasional glass of wine over a holiday
ver the doesn’t count.”

“I’m just saying...” she says, lifting the stick of blueberries, “it’s
I’m trying anything new with you.” She pops one in her mouth a

relieved that it's not a bigger garnish.

I blink. "Would it be so awful if you did?"

"I don't know, would it?"

tell her "Are we still talking about drinking?" It's an honest question. Not n
ek. any other way than to keep up with wherever her mind goes when she
me.

She swallows. "What else would we be talking about?"

I stare at her, tapping my fingers against the table. I want to tell her
she's thinking about having sex. That she is actively in pursuit of it an
reason don't think this is the right time for her. But since the topic is on
something new with *me*, I bite my tongue.

ry time. Instead, I lift my glass. "To an occasional cocktail. *Without* being ju

She holds up her glass and cocks her head. "And under the supervi
ight up. my brother's best friend."

air. My "I'm your friend too, Cora." But my voice isn't soft when I say
a guy. sharp and edgy. Like I need her to trust that. "And I'm not supervisi
ifted at You didn't want beer, so...here we are."

ie same "Oh please. You humor me because you know I used to have a c
you." She picks up a French fry. The way she eats it makes it look l
rove of the most delicious thing on this planet.

I brush off her confession. "I was just the guy always around that
of her. related to you."

Her big brown eyes look up at me, almost in hesitation. "No. Thi
dinner why. When I was twelve, I broke my foot playing softball."

I shake my head. I remember the fall. Felt it all over my body w
not like went down. We all did.

nd I'm "Yeah. I nearly whacked a thirteen-year-old kid and her stupid co

that.”

She laughs and coughs lightly. “Yes, but you were also a sophomore in college then. You and Jace had a game and I came to see you, with no crutches, and all. I was so miserable and clumsy, struggling in my talks to wasn’t far behind the penalty box, which is like home to you, right? And you noticed me and I think you had me moved to a private row up front.”

I nod slowly, remembering asking someone to have her moved up front so I could get her more comfortable—and closer.

“Then a little while after I was moved...” She bites her bottom lip and tries to hide the remains of her drink. “You threw a crumpled paper at me.”

I laugh. Not remembering what the hell I wrote. “What’d it say?” “Roses are red, violets are blue, cheer up kid, this next one’s for you.” She pauses, which makes me think there’s more.

“And?”

She presses her lips together. “Well, when you stepped back, you looked at me. And...well, you don’t know what green eyes, a deep dimple, and a flirtatious wink does to a twelve-year-old girl.” She blushes and it’s like it’s me smiling.

“Does it do anything to almost twenty-year-old girls?” I attempt to ask, but she wasn’t whatever it was that melted her heart.

“Yeah, it makes us roll our eyes.”

I frown. “Oh.”

She grins. “Keep practicing.” She takes another sip of her drink. “It’s so good. Can I have another?”

“I may be the team captain, but Jace is bigger than me and won’t let me touch him. He’ll put me through a wall.”

“Hmm...probably for the best. That’s how I got into trouble in t
nore in place. Last week, that drink tasted way too good and I just didn’t kno
ny cast, to stop.”

seat. I I swallow and look away when I imagine that I’d be in a
nyway, predicament if I ever dared to kiss her.
it.”

asap to Back in my car, I force myself to think about anything but Cora
Which have been my main focal point for the past hour, I’m sure of i
nd stirs gotta give Jace a break, Cor.”

“He humiliated me—and Angel. She was just trying to help.” Sh
out the window and I’m relieved that I broke whatever sexual tension
going on at the restaurant.

lets are “He hates it when you’re mad at him.”
kes me

“Fine, I’ll throw him a bone tomorrow.”

“Thata girl.”

winked “I’ll at least wait until he makes me another gourmet breakfast.”

mbined “He’s been cooking? I’m coming over tomorrow.”

: makes “Bring Nicole with you. I haven’t had a chance to really catch up.”

I like that Nicole is so welcome in their lives. They haven’t been
recreate her for what she’s been through. Nicole and I were used to being ju
everyone for our mothers’ issues. Heck I’d borrowed enough of
clothing when mine were getting too small and my mother spent
money on everything but the family.

‘This is I walk Cora to the door because it feels right. It’s dark, late and
likely passed out. I want to feel like I covered for him tonight with hi
hesitate as he’s come to expect me to. But I can’t help but feel like our evenir
an entirely different direction than me just ‘looking out for her’.

he first She unlocks the door and turns back to me. “Thank you. I’m not su
ow how you took me out, but this was nice.”

“You’re welcome.” I realize I’m standing much closer than I should
similar I circle my arm around her to push the door open. But before I can, sh
my shoulder, pushes up on her toes and presses her lips to mine.

Cora’s lips are on mine.

l’s lips.

I can’t move.

t. “You

I can’t move—but I can taste. And I can feel. Her lips taste ever
than I imagined. They’re so damn soft and I fight the painful tempta
e looks explore her mouth just as she opens. There’s a low grunt that escapes
we had tear her off me and take a solid step back. I swallow hard but don’t
wipe my mouth.

My eyes are fixated on the glistening of her lips and I blink away. I
say something, but nothing is making sense in my head.

“I—I’m sorry, I misunderstood.” Her eyes are hopeful, like she’s
on me to make a move or tell her she didn’t misunderstand. That m
has been glued to those lips all night and she merely did the one th
never let myself do.

judging

Because I’m a coward.

lged by

“Don’t do that again, Cora.”

Jace’s

Her lips part and her eyes flood. I force myself to focus on the fro
all her “Get inside.”

Jace is

s sister,

1g went

She unlocks the door and turns back to me. “Thank you. I’m not sure why you took me out, but this was nice.”

“You’re welcome.” I realize I’m standing much closer than I should be, so I circle my arm around her to push the door open. But before I can, she grips my shoulder, pushes up on her toes and presses her lips to mine.

Cora’s lips are on mine.

I can’t move.

I can’t move—but I can taste. And I can feel. Her lips taste even better than I imagined. They’re so damn soft and I fight the painful temptation to explore her mouth just as she opens. There’s a low grunt that escapes me as I tear her off me and take a solid step back. I swallow hard but don’t want to wipe my mouth.

My eyes are fixated on the glistening of her lips and I blink away. I should say something, but nothing is making sense in my head.

“I—I’m sorry, I misunderstood.” Her eyes are hopeful, like she’s waiting on me to make a move or tell her she didn’t misunderstand. That my mind has been glued to those lips all night and she merely did the one thing I’d never let myself do.

Because I’m a coward.

“Don’t do that again, Cora.”

Her lips part and her eyes flood. I force myself to focus on the front door. “Get inside.”

Cora

S TUPID. SO STUPID.

I lie in bed staring up at my ceiling in the dark. I won't be s
much tonight. I feel like such a fool.

I hear it all the time. *She made the first move.* Girls hesitate. Wo
after what they want.

I always thought guys liked that sort of thing. Confidence. Boldness
I swipe at another tear...I guess not all guys.

I shake my head for the tenth time since I raced up here. It can't just
There was something there. We were *flirting*. I'm not imagining it; I
dropped to my lips on more than one occasion tonight.

God, how am I ever going to live this down?

By two a.m., my mind starts to wander. I think about Angel. H
beautiful features; unscathed, unflinching while my brother stoo

shouting at her, berating her.

She didn't race out of the room like a scorned child.

She shouted back, she defended herself—and me. And when he c
see her a few days later, she...*smiled*. Sure it was a slightly evil smile
hell she was about to put him through, but she didn't crumble or kick l
or hide away.

Angel wasn't humiliated in the least.

This is also the same girl who took a hard fall, fracturing her a
badly scraping nearly the entire side of her leg in front of thousa
viewers.

There isn't much anyone can do to upset her any more than she's
suffered.

Other than the leg warmers Angel wears all year round now, sh
ashamed of anything.

leeping And if I'm being honest, neither am I.

I'm not ashamed of my feelings for Nick. I'm not ashamed that he
men go me in that leather outfit I wore last weekend. Or that he'd taken it off r

I'm not ashamed that I kissed him. I wanted to. More than any
wanted to feel his lips on mine. I wanted to feel them kiss me bac
everything he had. To admit he's wanted to do that for so long.

be me. His words sting, but I'll survive. I'm not an idiot. There's sor
his eyes between us and he can deny it all he wants. But my bet is he wo
another week.

I splash cold water on my face and brush my teeth. I sniffle as I w
er soft, skin with a clean towel and take a good look in the mirror.

d there "It's time to start living the life you want. Not the one they w
whisper to myself before turning down the light, disarming my ala

going to sleep.

came to
for the
him out



It's Saturday and I don't bother going downstairs like Jace expects every morning. I shower and dry my hair. I naturally have wavy hair and out of my way to straighten it like some goth all the time. I spend hours of straightener today and soften my hair with conditioner before taming with a curler and shine, making my hair look shorter but fuller and lay the hair already strands carefully on one side.

Yanking open my closet, I pull out every outfit I haven't worn in a year or don't intend to. Ava's been telling me I'm due for a wardrobe update.

I don't think I've ever had one. I've never had an older sister tell me what's out of fashion or that skinny jeans are the new bootcut.

And apparently, boots with fur have been out for over four years?

I jog down the steps and find Jace in the kitchen.

"Took you long enough. I'll make a fresh pot."

Smiling, I step up and wrap my arm around him. I feel him release me as soon as I do and it makes *me* feel better somehow. It's been a long time since I hugged him like this. And there's a beat before his arms embrace me and his big hands dig into my hair.

"I love you," he mumbles into the top of my head.

I pull back. "I know. I'm sorry I lied about Broken Glass."

He releases a heavy breath. Like he's been waiting for this. "Thank you, I know I can be—"

rm and

“I actually don’t need your permission to go anywhere—but I re
was uncool of me to lie.”

“Cora.”

I raise my brows. “Am I wrong?”

“Technically, no.”

s me to I reach for my mug.

and go “Cora, I worry about you. I need to know where you are and what
kip the doing.”

vith my “Without trying to stop me?”

ot pink His jaw tightens. “I can’t promise that. Cora. You’re all I’ve got.
don’t—”

over a “I’m not all you’ve got. You have your entire team. Your friends
update. hockey career, your dream car. I don’t have a paying job now, but
e things have to live here for long if you’re going to make me have to lie to you
time.”

He huffs out a heavy breath. I can feel his wheels turning as I p
coffee.

“Alright fine. If you want to go out, can you please tell me where
tension going? And maybe who you’re going with?”

ng time I shrug. “Sure.” I turn, sipping my coffee.

ace me “And who’s driving.”

I turn back. “Would you like their driving record too?”

He shakes his head, giving up on this conversation. “What’s with th
bags upstairs?”

κ you, I “Those are all donation.”

He glances up the stairs. “You have anything left?”

“Of course, silly. I’m wearing it. I need your credit card, by the way

realize it He pulls out his wallet and hands me his card with a grin. “You rer
this next time you think about moving out.”

“You love me too much to let it get that far. You’re stuck with me
thirty.” I jump up to kiss him on the cheek.

“I wouldn’t mind it,” he admits.

I roll my eyes. “Oh please. Just imagine all the things you’d have t
you’re to when I’m in my room with a guy.”

“Jesus Christ. Weren’t you leaving?”

I giggle and whip out my phone, texting Nicole, who’s likely also
Please some new clothes.

s, a pro **Cora:** *Going shopping. Wanna come?*

I don’t **Nicole:** *Hell yeah. Give me ten.*
I all the

our my “Sweet ride,” Nicole says, her hair blowing in the wind and she see
she’s in heaven. It’s a little cold out but the sun is strong enough to
you’re having the top down in my convertible. The one Jace bribed me with t
in with him.

I smile, still a little unsure of things I can and can’t say to Nicole.
considered a sensitive topic? Do I know all the problems she had? Do

She watches me as I focus on the road and I realize that Nicole is t
of person to pick up on internal conflict.

ie trash “Thanks for letting me tag along.”

I shrug. “I have an ulterior motive.”

She nods. Unsurprised. “Is it to talk about my brother?”

.”

number I evade her presumptions. “I need big sister kind of help today. I need
with a new wardrobe. Just...nothing leather.”

till I’m She frowns and then her eyes are wide. “Wait. That leather outfit
tossed in our trash. Was that yours?”

I glance at her as a car passes and I zoom out of his way. “He took it
o listen “He *destroyed* it, Cora. I had a few friends stay over that night and
morning when I was walking them out, I saw Nick rustling with the
bags and toss pieces of what I immediately recognized as genuine leather
due for the trash.”

I laugh and have no idea why I find it hilarious.

Stopping at a red light, I look at Nicole, who grins back mischievously.
“We are so discussing what that was about.”

I sigh and tell her about the night I wore that outfit...how immensely
I was... how I woke up in pajamas I don’t remember putting on...and
this outfit mysteriously disappeared.

ms like She laughs. “Holy hell that outfit looked smoking hot. I would have
warrant to see you in that.”

o move Funny, I would have killed to see someone take it off me, but life isn’t
that way.

What’s We arrive at the mall and plan out where we’ll do most of our damage.
I ask? “So that’s it?” Nicole says as we scan through a few aisles of denim
he type shirts.

I glance at her. “What?”

“Nick tells you he undressed you and you just...” she shrugs, “Is there
other way?”

I focus on a pair of ripped jeans and hold them up. “I know I used to have a
little crush on him but I’m over that.”

ed help She jerks and cocks her head at me. “Wow. And here I thought w
friends.”

it Nick “Nicole.”

“Nope. Fine. Keep your secrets. I get it. I need to earn trust bac
t?” people I care about. It’s part of the process, I’m just going to be patier
d in the sighs and frowns and I feel terrible.

garbage “I kissed him last night.”

her into She chuckles and leaps for joy. “God you’re easy, tell me more.”

“You tricked me?”

“No. I’m teaching you to get what you want via manipulation. You
vously an older sister?” She holds her hands out. “There’s no one better.” She

I run a hand across my face, feeling the pain and humiliation of la
y drunk again.

nd how Nicole sits on the bench and her expression is timid. “I take it that i
work out well?”

e killed I shake my head.

“Yeah. Nick’s not easy. I know a ton of *women* who are less comp
s unfair in relationships.”

“It was stupid and he told me to never do that again.”

ge. She doesn’t say it but her face scrunches and I know what she’s th
n and t-*Ouch*.

She watches me as I scope out more items. “I love the beach waves
way. Such a great look for you.”

ook the “Thanks. It’s actually really easy. I think I like these.” I hold up a
and a few tops, then throw them over my arm. “Shall we move on?”

o have a “Yes. I want to look at boots and then I have an idea and I hope you
mind.”

we were

A few hours later, we're all shopped out. Nicole comes over to help me sort out what's left in my closet. When we're done, she sits on my bed.

"How you feelin'?" she asks after I've filled my closet up with clothes. "It's great." She

"Great. You?"

"Really. I know last night sucked. I'm sorry. I wish I could say something to make it better or that he's given me any kind of clue but—"

"Nicole. I don't want to think about it. There are plenty of fish. A lot of fish going to catch one."

She nods slowly. "And then what?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'm assuming you're still—"

"Yeah. The one and only."

"You're not the only...but yeah, it's a little rare for someone you don't know to have—"

"Thanks."

"Well don't do what I did."

"What's that?"

"Do it with some guy just for the sake of doing it. I don't remember the name and it wasn't very memorable."

"Were any of them?"

She considers it. "Not really. But that doesn't mean it won't be for me."

"I'm just...well, hard to please."

I laugh. "You look like someone who's hard to please in or out of the bedroom."

I won't

She shrugs. “It’s probably why I’m meant to be single for life. The help me a man with enough...experience and skill to satisfy me.”

My lips part as I’m about to ask her to tell me more about what that all new But then we’re rudely interrupted.

nething

nd I’m

age to

his last

r you...

of the

She shrugs. “It’s probably why I’m meant to be single for life. There isn’t a man with enough...experience and skill to satisfy me.”

My lips part as I’m about to ask her to tell me more about what that means. But then we’re rudely interrupted.

Nicholas

“GIRLS, DINNER.” JACE CALLS obnoxiously from the kitchen. I roll my eyes. The guy needs to stop being such a dad.

I’m aware that my sister has been with Cora all day and nervous about what those two talked about at the mall.

I hear them make their way down and second guess letting Jace into staying for dinner.

This is a bad idea.

I need more than twenty-four hours to stay clear of Cora after what happened last night. But what was I to say when my best friend calls me over on a Saturday for dinner—especially when my sister is over. I brought my friend with me, who also happens to be a fan of Jace’s cooking.

I expect Cora to linger, to be timid, to hesitate and avoid me, but she comes into the kitchen first. Her eyes level mine almost instantly with as much as a blink.

“Hi Nick. What a surprise.” There’s sarcasm in her remark and she looks away from me. Her hair is different. It’s bouncier today, fuller, wild with bouncy looking waves. Cora has always gone out of her way to straighten her hair. But this—this look is dangerous.

This is an “I’m letting go” look that looks way too fucking good on her. Her lips have a shine to them. Her cheeks rosy and powdery. She’s not wearing eyeliner. Her smile is natural when she strolls up to Jace, hands him a credit card and kissing him on the cheek.

“Thanks bro. It’s exactly what I needed.”

He grins and hums in response. Clearly loving the affection from her. It’s one thing in this world he adores. “You smell pretty. I don’t like it.”

Cora rolls her eyes.

Nicole is bent over greeting my Labrador. Max has come to like her in the kitchen, though my sister was never into animals. “Hello, my furry friend. I noticed you noticed me walk into the room.”

as hell She stands, giving me a pointed look and I blink, focusing on the length of her head. “Really?”

talk me “What? You don’t like it?”

Jace looks over to see what we’re talking about. “Look at that Cora, an influencer,” he chimes, referring to the all-new yellow streak on the side of Nicole’s dark hair. It’s bright and in equal thickness as Cora’s.

or what Nicole shrugs. “I liked it on Cora so thought I’d try it.”

ne over I shake my head and smile back at her. “But yellow?”

ht Max “It’s not yellow, it’s Cosmic Sunshine.” Nicole corrects.

but she Cora scoots over to Max and scratches his neck. “Hey boy, miss me
hout so *Man, is it me or does she sound like a dream?*”

Max licks her palm, nuzzling her and I’m forced to look away.

ie turns *What's different about you, Cora?*

natural- It's not the hair. It's not the body-hugging jeans or the soft ca
r wavysweater she has on. Something is different and I decide it's not the v
looks.

her. It's an effortless way she moves around the room. An ea
ie's notunmistakable confidence—I'm not certain I like it, but I can't look
standingEven if I have grown used to having to peel my eyes off her lately.

The doorbell rings.

“That's Dad and his date. Cor, could you get that?”

the one Cora taps Max to follow her down the hall. She curbs him before c
the door, knowing Max is rough around new people.

“Hey sweetie,” I hear Bruce greet his daughter. When Max starts bar
—eventhe blonde he's with, I slide out of the bar stool and make my way dc
At leasthall.

“Easy Max, she's a friend.” Cora smiles up at the leggy stranger. “
eft sideyour name again?”

“Cynthia.”

“Okay, Max, let's take you outside to cool off,” she says.

you're I greet Mr. Knight and his date quickly and follow Cora outside. S
the lefther knees on the side of the driveway, playing with Max. I catch up t
and bend to clip Max's leash on.

“Thanks,” she says breathlessly.

“I could leave him here with you if you need a reason to be out here

“My dad's dates don't bother me anymore.”

?” I'm the type to avoid an uncomfortable situation with a girl I
interested in, so I'm surprised when these words leave my lips as I sta
look down at her. “I meant if you didn't want to be around me.”

She squints up at me as she runs her fingers through Max's fur and suddenly jealous of the mut.

“What part of my throwing myself at you last night gives you that impression?”

My eyes flare. Cora's never been shy. But she's never been this forward either. Not to mention, the fact that her raspy voice has devolved with her, only makes her that much more...suggestive. “It's a misunderstanding, Cora. That's all. Consider it forgotten.”

She scoffs and stands, then pats my chest lightly. “That'll be all. The opening wasn't that memorable.”

She takes the leash from me. “Come on Max, let's give it another try. Not barking at Dorothy or Candice or whatever her name is.”

I shake my head and call back, “Cynthia.”

“Dinner's almost ready,” Jace calls to everyone in the living room.

Cora sets the table while I make a bowl for Max. I move to the far side of the table, where Nicole is sitting and pull up a chair next to her. Cynthia and Bruce are across each other on the table and Jace is at the head. I'm forced to sit in the open seat next to me.

“Oh I should have brought wine, I notice there's none at the table,” Cynthia notes, blindsiding us all.

Jace and Bruce exchange glances, and I look at Nicole. Knowing that she's on my side, I nod. “No alcohol on the table is on her behalf.”

But it's Cora who doesn't miss a beat. “Yeah. That's because last time I proved to these two,” she points her thumbs to me and Jace, “that I can't drink my liquor so there won't be any of that around me for a while. Sorry Cynthia, that's all me.”

and I'm "Cynthia," Bruce corrects.

Cora doesn't apologize and reaches for her glass of water. I don't know what to say to her.

Jace releases a heavy breath and clears his throat, avoiding looking at me. "I don't want to damn my sister." "Um, yeah. That's—I mean, obviously."

"Oh." She looks at Cora in a way that annoys me. "Well...I suppose the best of us, *adults* will suffer then," Cynthia laughs unauthentically.

I can't control the sharp turn of my head toward the condescending woman. I immediately feel Nicole's hand on mine. I don't know how she can do that. I'm about to lose it, but she does.

Here Cora was being the only adult in the room, taking the blame for something for the sake of a friend and this woman was calling her a child.

My teeth clench and I blow quietly into a fist before standing. "Excuse me, it looks like Max really does need that walk." I feel like shit when I see the dog away from his bowl and put his leash back on, but I need to get out of here before I flip over another table.

Cynthia and Cora is

table,"

he lack

week I

can't hold

bandage,

“Cynthia,” Bruce corrects.

Cora doesn’t apologize and reaches for her glass of water. I don’t blame her.

Jace releases a heavy breath and clears his throat, avoiding looking at me or my sister “Um, yeah. That’s—I mean, obviously.”

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My teeth clench and I blow quietly into a fist before standing. “Excuse me, it looks like Max really does need that walk.” I feel like shit when I rip my dog away from his bowl and put his leash back on, but I need to get out of here before I flip over another table.

Cora

I 'VE PUT UP A hell of a front all week, but my heart still aches
I hear Nicholas's words in my head.

Don't ever do that again.

There are moments I want to cry for being so stupid. There are mo
want to cry for thinking I'm head over heels for a guy who doesn't wa
That's mostly at night.

Mornings, I'm usually full of fresh start vibes. Loving that I no lon
the need to power iron my hair. Appreciating my new wardro
internship, and the relationship I'm rebuilding with my brother. Havi
crush turn you down flat shouldn't be a reason to stop enjoying things
have. Which thanks to my brother—is everything.

Last night we had a glass of wine over dinner and he told me some
vicious things Angel has done to him over the years when I asked v
that's been about. I hardly ever ask him about relationships, but I'm su

interested in why my brother is single. And how much of it has to do with
—or him.

He's worse than Nick on the dating spectrum. Nick's girlfriend
remember. Hard not to when you sit there and compare yourself to each

I don't have classes on Wednesdays. Usually, I'm at the center during
my internship hours, but not today. Ava and I have big plans.

We're finally taking the plunge. Literally. We're going skydiving.

After going back and forth with myself, I decide I'm not telling
because he'll just stop me. And it will only anger me because I really
do this. I want to feel the freedom, the excitement, the adrenaline. From
I hear, it's the next best thing next to sex.

Ever since I put it in Ava's head this summer, she's been all about it

My stomach churns as I head down the stairs with my backpack. I
when I literally eating me alive right now for lying to Jace again.

I send Ava a text.

ments I **Cora:** *Leaving soon, just telling Jace I'm heading out.*

nt me.

There's no response from her and I figure she's standing in front of
mirror, practicing her mid-fall facial expression.

ger feel When I get downstairs, I nearly stop in my tracks to find Nick sitting
be, my the counter. He hasn't been here since dinner this past Saturday. I
ng your where he'd stormed off and didn't come back until after dessert. I dig
you do find that courage to walk past him like I don't notice him in the
e of the seemed to have mastered it last week.

what all "You're a little dressed down for work, aren't you?" Jace notes.

iddenly

with me Jace knows my schedule better than I do most days. Which inconvenience, to say the least. He's like a walking calendar. My p ends, Icalendar.

h one. "I'm not going in today. I'm working on a...project with Ava and v tting into get it done. Today."

"Oh cool, you need a ride?"

"No. I'll drive. We're going to grab lunch at Western Inn."

Jace— "Western Inn? By the airport?"

want to I wipe my forehead. I didn't expect the third degree this mornin m whatdidn't plan this out. He'd been so chill since our fight that I thought v past him basically tracking my every move.

∴ I turn and open the fridge, packing an extra Gatorade into my ba Guilt is "Yeah, Ava loves their grilled cheese."

Jesus, Cora.

I feel Nick's eyes on me but I ignore it. He's suspicious again. H stupid enough to call me out in front of Jace.

Come to think of it, he's never done that. So why am I so nervous?

t of the *Also, he's probably going to be avoiding confronting you anytim Cora.*

ting by I remind myself that it doesn't matter. I'm an adult and can make r he one decisions. I don't need anyone's permission.

deep to And I refuse to let anyone stop me today.

room. I "Hey, when's our next team meeting?" Jace asks Nick. Sure, he kn schedule by heart, but his own? Not if his life depended on it.

Nick isn't answering though. He's distracted on his phone. Or checking the date.

It doesn't matter.

It is an “Later,” I call back and flee.

Personal In my car, I bolt out of the driveway and pull up directions for Hc airport. I settle into my seat, adrenaline already pulsing through me.

We need This is exactly what I need.

And I’m not getting it anywhere else.

Ava: *Can we go next week?*

Cora: *No. Today!*

ng so I

We were **Ava:** *I don’t know about this.*

ckpack. **Cora:** *Seriously?*

Why doesn’t this surprise me?

le’s not **Cora:** *Fine. You can come next time.*

The weather is fitting today. It’s not too sunny. There’s a bit of a c
it’s not freezing. And I’m not worried about the cold. I’m doing this—
e soon, I’m doing it alone.

I park in a large lot next to a small building. At least it look
ny own compared to the aviation school next door. The small one is clearly
NYSky Fall.

“Hi.” My voice is too perky to be convincing, so I clear my throat.
ows my try again, greeting a uniformed team member. She has similar pink str
her hair, several in fact. I can’t tell if she’s sitting or standing or if sl
: likely knows I’ve entered the room and greeted her twice. “I made a rese
online for a—”

“Tandem jump?”

llyville “Yes.”

“Fill this out, have a seat. Bring it back up with a photo ID.”

“Thanks.”

Paperwork is supposed to be the easy part about jumping off a plane. At least that’s what I thought before I look down at the death sent front of me.

Four pages?

Assumption of Risk...*obviously*...initial.

Release from liability...*fine*...initial.

I will not sue...I mean, can I do that if I’m dead...and no one kno here?

Initial.

hill but Initial.

-even if Initial.

Done.

s small

labeled Finished with signing away my life, I walk back up to the counter you go.”

“Hi,” I “Thank you. You’re just going to follow the red arrow to the t eaks in room. There, they’ll teach you about harnessing, free falling, you’ll v re even short video and be on your way.”

rrvation “That’s it? Just...like that? Okay.” I release a heavy breath and fol arrows.

Our instructor's name is Trip. It seems appropriate. He's not very the slim side, has dark jelled hairstyle and every time he says something claps his hands like he's ready for the next big thing.

There is only one couple here and it's not their first jump so they're together, right?together, not in a tandem.

The training actually turns out to be fun. And though it didn't bother me when I walked in, I was hoping to see a lot more people here. The room seems colder and my nerves are turning on me. I wonder if I should go back another time—with Ava, but given I'm the only other person besides the couple, it would be too awkward and embarrassing.

I jump when the doors from the front office burst through. "Hey, what the cat dragged in," Trip calls to the person behind me. "We don't have you on the schedule to fly today, do we?"

"No, you don't."

I freeze at the voice behind me.

If it's possible, my skin pales even more when I turn and find him marching through the open space of the training room. He's glaring hard enough to make my body react in a strange way.

I turn back around—as if there is a shot in hell of hiding from him. "Here I wrack my brain trying to figure out what tipped him off. And sigh in frustration when it comes to me. The night Jace yelled at me for sneaking off to a training nightclub. I blurted my desire to jump off a plane just to feel free.

And this morning, I mention the only diner nearby. Since I stupidly wasn't watching a nothing prepared.

"Trip." He strolls in and they exchange some sort of a handshake.

"We're just about to board, you joining us?"

My head snaps back. "Wait, he hasn't done his pre-flight instruction

tall, on “Oh don’t worry, my buddy Nick here is certified,” Trip says, the
ing, he his hands for the fifteenth time. “Okay, let’s get out there. Plane’s wait

Pushing down the butterflies creeping into my stomach, I follow T
e going the others out. There’s no way I’m chickening out now—it would onl
that I’m not ready to take risks and be my own person.

her me When the others step out, Nick grabs my arm and twists me to fa
e room “Cora.”

d come “How did you know I was here?” I hiss.

on here “Call it a hunch. Don’t you know you can’t get one over on me by
His voice is sharp.

7. Look I’m a breath away from him and can’t move. I can’t even say anythi
i’t have so close. I swallow.

“Jace doesn’t know. But I’m not letting you on that plane witho
knowing.”

I yank my arm away from him. “It’s too bad I’m over eighteen
d Nick can’t tell me what to do. And if he tries, I’ll move out.” I cross my arm
g at me He frowns. “What do you mean?”

“Go ahead, call him. He’ll come over here. We’ll have an argume
now. I still going to get on that plane—and he’ll lose the one thing that h
ternally about more than hockey.”

f to the His eyes narrow and study me, as if he has his own way of call
bluff. I’d hate to hurt my brother, but I’m not so sure I am bluffing.

dly had “Okay.” He cracks his knuckles and brushes past me into a larg
garage. I think this is what Trip referred to as the preboarding area.

Nick reaches for the gear and starts to dissect it.

“What are you doing?”

l.” “Checking your rig.” He spends a few minutes checking

n clasp compartments and then dresses himself. He gives me the helmet and g
ing.” “I’ll let you know when to put those on.”

rip and “Isn’t that Trip’s job?”

y prove He ignores me once again and starts toward the waiting plane.

Trip waves at us. “There you are. Come on, we were about to take o
ce him. Nick scoffs. “Not with just those two you weren’t.”

“What can I say, it’s a Wednesday.” Trip scans Nick. “That’s the
gear. You’ve got a harness. You need a solo one.”

now?” “I’m not going solo,” he calls back as he boards then turns to lift r
the plane. “I’m taking her.”

ng he’s “What?” I shriek.

“Oh,” Trip calls as he boards. “Cool.” Trip takes my arms and p
out him flush against Nick. I feel his hard body behind me as we’re strapped to

I’m not cold anymore. I’m very warm. Hot in fact. Nervous. I fee
and he butterflies again and they’re out of control inside me.

is. Trip moves to check on the couple.

I try to control my breathing. But it’s becoming harder the higher
ent. I’m relieved to be facing away from him and try not to focus on my
e care reaction to being flush against him. Nick is quiet, surprisingly. Too qui

After a moment, I feel him slowly gather my hair into one fist and t
ing my lips are against my exposed ear. “You sure about this?”

I don’t answer. I focus on the open door, watching and feeling us
e, open the ground higher and higher. Wondering when we’ll stop going up a
level. I’m aware of my breathing. I’m aware of his ever so steady
behind me. I’m aware of my body as it sinks into him.

I nod and feel him release a breath. Then I shake my head. “Nick.” I
random can say. But I hope he understands it.

joggles. “Kane? You wanna go first?”

“No,” I shout.

Trip’s brows jump and he turns to the other couple. “Okay, you’re u

Nick moves us aside and rubs my arms behind me. My eyes are clo
ff.” I can almost see the way he’s looking down at me now. Like what the

I going to do with her?

wrong “Cora.” His voice is soft as the stubble on his chin brushes m

“We’re going to jump next.”

ne onto I shake my head.

“Yes. The only way out is down and I’m coming with you. I won’
of you. I’ve done this many times.”

ulls me “Can’t I turn to face you?”

gether. He chuckles. “It defeats the purpose of flying if your head is buried.

l those “Nick.”

“Cora,” he whispers. He takes my chin and turns it up. “You’re g
love this. I wouldn’t let you do it if I didn’t think you were one h
we go.percent safe. Believe me, I triple-checked. If there’s one scratch c
body’s pretty head, Jace will have mine.”

iet. I swallow and his eyes dip to my throat.

hen his “You’re in good hands, Ms. Knight.” Trip assures after the cou
jumped and it’s our turn.

rise off I dare to glance down and see small squares of land, water, mo
nd stayWhen I hear how high up we are and how many seconds we’ll
breathfalling...I think it’s less than a minute but seems like an eternity to jus

I whimper and turn my head. “Nick. I can’t.”

it’s all I “Cora, listen to me.” His voice remains calm, but there’s a s
urgency in it. “I’ve got you. We’re doing this together. We’re going

an amazing fall.”

I turn back at the open door. “Wh—what am I supposed to do again?” He wraps his arms around me, his lips are against my ear. “Open your eyes and when I tell you to.” And with that, we’re falling through the clouds. My heart is squeezed shut.

“Open your eyes, Cora,” he calls behind me as he spreads my arms against my skin. I open them slightly and then shut them again. My stomach leaps. “God. Oh my god, oh my god, oh my god.” I shut my eyes again and my head back.

“Cora.”

I know we’re still nowhere near pulling on the parachute.

He calls my name again, but I can’t respond. I’m panicking. I feel his fingers on my chin just before his warm lips press against mine. I finally open my eyes, but now his are closed. His hand slides up behind my ear and joins to the back of my head as he presses me harder against his lips.

His lips. They move softly around my mouth, exploring me, tasting me. His other hand slides off from around my waist and I feel him holding something behind him. The parachute blows open above us and I glance at our surroundings. I see the trees, the water, the land.

And I’m flying above it all.

Nick’s arms wrap around me again. I turn my head up and smile at him. “Thank you.”

He holds me tighter and kisses the top of my head.

I don’t know what he’s thinking and I don’t care.

For whatever reason, Nicholas Kane kissed me as we fell from the sky. I’m not going to overthink it.

to have

?”

our eyes

My eyes

open.

‘Oh my

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ky.

Nicholas

“KANE,” COACH CALLS WHEN he sees me straggling down the hall Saturday afternoon after a long practice. / that’s what it feels like I’m doing because my head was clearly in the during today’s practice and I’m pretty sure I missed the locker room about ten feet behind me.

I turn, expecting Coach to rip me a new one for the “poor leadership showing and I suck in a breath. Ready to keep my fists in control at head level.

“Yeah.”

His usual hard features soften only slightly when he sees my face. ‘Nicole?’”

“What?” I’m genuinely confused until I realize where he third distraction is coming from.

Guilt consumes me even more than it has since I kissed my best sister when we fell twelve thousand feet from the clouds.

“She’s doing well.”

Coach nods slowly as if he’s waiting for more. “If it gets...difficult just let me know. Being team captain is a lot and with Jace as your al I’m sure he can step in when you need it.”

“Nicole is fine. I’ve just got other things on my mind.” I’m in defensive of my sister. I know Coach always had our best interest a but I refuse to let either of us be a pity case. Those days are over.

I’ve done well enough for myself and so has she—she’s smart, strong she’ll fight this to death.

“So tonight wasn’t about your sister?” His expression is hard again don’t mind it. I need it, in fact.

halfway “No. My mind just flaked out today.” I don’t have an explanation

At least And Royce Collins will call bullshit when he sees it so I don’t give him

clouds The truth is the only way with this man.

n doors “Get your shit together by tomorrow. I want everyone here by seven

Fuck.

ip” I’m We don’t have a scheduled practice and now, because I’ve pissed

and my—I have to tell my team that we do. And at the crack of dawn, no less.

In the locker room, I find Jace on the bench and curse my ex

internally. Of course he’d be the only one left in here out of

“How’s teammates.

He’s not wearing a t-shirt and doesn’t even notice me come in. His

lks my hard. He’s tense and I feel it weighing on me. I feel it deep in my che

wonder if he knows about the kiss.

Paranoia is not a good look on me.

friend's Or if he found out that she snuck off to jump off a plane and lied
saunter in—making a beeline toward my locker and toss a spare clean
him. “Lookin’ for one of these?” I try to sound myself—but hell if I
t again, what that is.

ternate, Jace blinks, finding me in the room. “What? Oh sorry.” He stares
shirt and sets it down. “No, I’ve got one, thanks.” Despite what he te
stantly he puts on the shirt absently and rubs his temples.

it heart, I put on my best captain voice and take two steps toward him. “
going on?”

ong and His eyes are tired and spaced. “Something’s off with Cora.”

I raise a brow and throw my practice jersey in the laundry bag. “Sh
n and I you again?” I hate asking but I have to know if he has any clue
Wednesday.

to give. “She’s been spending a lot of time at her internship and I’m happy
n any. and all, but I feel like she went from fifteen to twenty-three in two day

“She wasn’t fifteen two days ago,” I point out. *Otherwise I’d have
l.” bigger problem on my hands.*

He stands. “It’s everything. It’s the streak on her hair, drinking
him off changing her entire wardrobe. Now she’s hanging out with Ang
Nicole.”

istence I shrug. “What’s wrong with that?” I can’t help being a little bit del
all my He and Angel might never get along, but she’s a great person and is
trustworthy. And despite my reservations, Nicole and Cora’s fri
s jaw is seems to be beneficial for both of them.

st and I “I don’t think she was with Ava on Wednesday,” he blurts wher
back to my locker.

I freeze, with my hand on the latch. “How’s that?”

again. I “I overheard her on the phone with her later that day—I shirt ateavesdropping or anything but it sounded like they hadn’t seen each other in a couple of days. Meanwhile she supposedly just had lunch with her.”

I clench my teeth. *Maybe Cora needs to spend a little bit more time at the Nicole to learn to cover her tracks...*

He asks me, “And you haven’t asked her about it because?”

He looks at me like I’m from another planet. “Well because she’s the one who was with Ava. If I ask her about it, then she’ll know I know she lied.”

I shake my head and throw on my hoodie.

“And then she’ll get defensive. And we’ll fight. Then I’ll be in a mess for a week. And you’re going to have to deal with it.”

I nod. “Ah that’s right. The Cora withdrawals.” I made this up a few weeks ago when Jace and Cora really started fighting like brother and sister on a regular basis.

“More like the Cora Chronicles. It’s a new story with her each week.” *a much* looks up at me. “You notice anything off with her?”

I shake my head. “Nothing outside of her usual,” I lie.

He waits for me to say more and I don’t know why I feel the need to lie and I need him to believe it. “I think it’s all in your head, bro. Let it go and stop bothering you that much, talk to her.”

Jace stands and picks up his bag. “Yeah.” He starts for the door then he turns back. “Maybe before she heads out tonight, I’ll ask. If I get up enough courage to talk to her.” My ears catch him say when ‘she heads out tonight’ but I don’t correct him.

“Anyway, Cain and Roger are comin’ by around nine tonight if you want to shoot some pool and have a few beers? You can bring Max.”

My lips part but I don’t answer right away. It takes everything in me to ask where on earth he’s letting her go on a Saturday night.

wasn't "Yeah, sounds good."
other in

ne with



Nicholas: *Hey.*

aid she

Cora: *Hi.*

Nicholas: *You better not be thinking about going back without me.*
ood all

Cora: *I wouldn't dream of it. I mean Trip is cute, but I'd much ra
w years* *kissing you in the sky.*

er on a I don't write back. I want to tell her that it was a mistake. But it
feel right. That kiss was anything but a mistake and we both know
ek." He both felt it.

I chalk it up to pure instinct—where I felt like I'd do just about anyt
calm her down.

o. Like But I wanted to do more than calm her down with that kiss. I wante
d if it's feel good, free...to let go of her fear. I've been dying to have my lips
again since I pulled them off just a few days earlier.

n turns.

ge." **Cora:** *Ooh did I go too far again? You gonna tell me to chill?*

mment.

Nicholas: *Bye Cora.*

want to

Cora: *Night Romeo.*

e not to



The doorbell rings at my house and I'm too distracted to hear it. Her coyness in her messages is getting to my head.

I'm downstairs in my gym when I vaguely hear Nicole answer the door. We live in a private gated community, so I assume it's a neighbor until I hear what sounds like a heated argument.

I set down my bells and step out of the room.

What the hell is that?
"Nicole, who is it?"

My sister doesn't answer. She turns on her heel and storms away from the door. "It's for you."

That's not good.
"Nickles..." the woman pleads from the door and I tighten all the bolts. There's only one person who calls her that.

I step to the front door and cross my arms, my eyes scanning her face. She's wearing a dark overcoat. Her bleached hair in untamed waves. The look in her eyes is as hopeful as ever.

That's not good.
"Hi, Mom."

That's not good.
"Nicholas." She steps up to the threshold and I don't move. She steps back. "I would have thought you would have called your mother when you were back."

"Why? You're the reason she ended up there in the first place."

"That's not true. You put her in there without telling me."

"Are you high?"

"Nicholas," she snaps.

"What do you want, mother?"

She takes a breath. “Well, your father seems to have cleaned up his account again and then he doesn’t answer when I call so—”

“Wait here.” I march into my office and reach for my checkbook.

Cora’s My mother, Terry Kane, steps into the foyer.

I hold up a check for the same amount I usually write her when she comes to the door. “I’m giving this to you on one condition.”

I hear “It’s not for what you think it is. I just need to pay some bills—”

“I don’t care what you use it for. Stay away from Nicole. That’s my only condition. You come near her again and I’ll cut you off completely and you’ll actually have to get a job.”

From the “I do have a job. I’m workin’ at the—”

“Is she gone yet?” I hear Nicole yell from her room.

It all over. “I think that’s your cue, Mom.”

“I just want to know how she’s doing. Can you please tell me that?” I nod my head to “okay?”

es. And My face heats and she steps back as I advance on her. “Did you care about her when she was when you kept bringing her around your dealers?”

“Not this again. I didn’t *leave* her with them. I just didn’t have any money left to assure them I’d pay my debt. I stepped away to get some cash.... She’ll be fine.”

“She was sixteen,” I grit.

“I knew those guys. They were harmless.”

I glare at her. Mom picked her up nearly two hours later while Nicole was there frightened out of her mind.

To this day, my sister tells me nothing happened. And as much as I don’t believe her—a part of me wonders if she’s blocked it out or if she remembers every agonizing moment.

out my Where Terry went to get the money between those hours is something I never bothered to ask. Her debt should have never been our problem.

Last year, after I paid off Nicole's debt to a horrendous group of people, we had a fight and I compared her to our mother. It was harsh and she took the showstake to that very well. It sent her into a deep depression and although she had cut the drugs, her drinking became heavier. That was when I asked曹曹 for some time so I could focus on getting Nicole the help she needed.

ny only "Your existence is anything but harmless."

7. Then "When did you become so mean?"

"You have what you came for—please leave so I can go do some work and get control."

"Nic—"

"Max!" I call and my lab races to the door. He's not a harmful dog. Is she can tell when someone is not a friend.

He growls at Terry and she steps back just enough for me to shut the door. I know how

money

she was



I'm too worked up to go talk to Nicole—not even to tell her the evidence is gone. Instead, I go back to the gym and start punching the bag until I can't feel the strain. I keep going way past my knuckles telling me it's enough. Nicole sat

It's not though. I need to know that I'm not immune to pain after a few years.

want to

worse—

I didn't mean for so much time to pass before Nicole finds me. I'm on the floor with my back to the back wall. My hands hurt—a good

ing wepain though. My head is down but my eyes lift to meet hers as she enters the room tentatively.

people, “I should have been the one to come find you,” I say, my voice strained. “I didn’t.” She sits with her back to the wall beside me and takes my hand, holding it between her soft, uncalloused, delicate ones. “I’m sorry.”

each for “What the hell are you sorry for?” I brought her here to protect her. I help her recovery through while she got back on her feet. Meanwhile, I don’t answer the door because I can’t seem to shake a certain nineteen-year-old’s image from my mind.

damage Not that I’ve ever had a similar issue with any other girl, but I know the fact, there’s only one way to get a girl you can’t stop thinking about out of your system.

; but he And that’s not an option—not Cora.

I screwed up tonight. Nicole could have a setback because of it.

the door. “I should have dealt with her myself,” she says, like the twisted, full-headed girl she is. “I know how you get.”

“How I get is not good for you, Nicole. I’m sorry.” I pull my hand from hers and stretch my arm around her.

She lays her head on my shoulder. “I’m going to have to talk to her eventually.”

il witch “You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to.”

l I start “What’d she need it for this time?” Nicole asks, knowing our mother’s name when she stops by.

ll these “I didn’t ask. It would imply that I give a shit.”

is sitting “You do though,” she points out, not being wrong. She stands and pulls up her tight jeans and glittery green blouse.

kind of “You going somewhere?”

ters the “I bought it when I was out with Cora last week. You like it?”

“No.” I like her better in sweats. “But I didn’t ask where you bought
ned. She sighs. “Yes. I’m going out tonight.”

lding it I peel myself off the wall and stand. “You’re not ready to be going c
She bites her lip and I know she knows I’m right. “I think I am—
To seenot, I swear, I’ll call you to pick me up.”

let her “Nicole. You’re not seeing your old friends again.”

old out “Of course not. Trust me you’d approve of the group I’m going out
I glare at her and she rolls her eyes. “I’m going out with Cora.”

w for a “Where?”

t out of “A place Angel wants to take us to.”

There’s a low grunt from my throat and I’m not even sure what my
—I just don’t like it.

“She just knows a lot more people than Cora and I do. Well, I know
foolish-of people, but not the kind you want Cora around.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I narrow my eyes at her.

l out of She pats my chest. “You’re a little protective of her, that’s all. Why
did you think I was talking about?” She smirks and I have reason to
to hershe knows more than she says.

“Nothing, forget it.” I start to put on my gloves again, then remember
supposed to be at Jace’s tonight for pool and beer. It’s not good for m
r’s MOaround people when I’m in this shape. But with Cora and Nicole out
—I’m going to need the distraction.

Jace hasn’t questioned why I haven’t been coming around the past
I noticebut I’m sure he’s noticed I’m avoiding it.

He doesn’t talk about Cora around the guys, so at least I won’t be forced
lie to him again.

“Who’s driving?”

“Angel.”

I like Angel. She’s trustworthy and she’s Coache’s daughter. Because of her gymnastics, she keeps her body fit and doesn’t drink—so that’s a relief—and if she hears from me, she’ll call. “Fine. But let me know where you are and keep in touch—I’ll hear from you every hour or else.”

“Right...you’re going to call Angel.”

“No. I’m going to come get you.”

She rolls her eyes but grins as she jumps up to kiss my cheek. “Thank you for you, Nick.”

I don’t want to show her that I don’t trust her. Part of her therapy is to prove to her I do—but the fact of the matter is, I don’t.

Not yet.

How a lot



Why, what

believe

I come in through the backdoor into Jace’s kitchen—part of my effort to avoid Cora at all costs. My luck—I’ll be zeroing in on her lips or cheeks before I’m noticed. Someone will notice. Someone like Cora—who’s slowly realizing my weakness for her.

tonight

And she’s using it well.

I shake my head. No, she’s not that shrewd.

Next week,

She’s vulnerable. She’s got sex on her mind for some freaking reason.

Knowing that is putting me in a state of permanent unease.

forced to

And given Terry's surprise visit, I'm too outraged to be around her. I'll probably call her out on all her shit lately. And that's not my place. Cause of I'm not her brother.

good. I I'm not her boyfriend.

want to And by no means will I be anyone she experiments with.

Jace is setting up a table suitable for a super bowl party. Then again, hockey players can devour all that in about an hour. I already hear the TV roaring in the living room. It sounds like they're watching a game.

Thank God "I'm making a chili too."

"It's a good thing I barely touched dinner tonight," I say absently, looking at the spread of wings, chips and salsa.

Jace drops a dish into the sink. "What happened?"

I shake my head. "Terry stopped by." Jace knows all the unpretty details about my parents—mostly my mother, so I don't try to hide this from him. He will also likely explain my mood for the rest of the night, so it serves as a warning too.

Jace stirs the chili. "How's Nicole?"

Efforts to "I have no idea."

rest, and "Really? I thought you had that twin radar going on."

ing my "Yeah well, it's not picking anything up. All I know is that she's going out with Angel tonight."

Jace scoffs. "Yeah. And Cora."

son and As if on cue, Cora comes down the stairs and straight into the living room, greeting members of my team I've yet to meet. "Hey guys." She makes conversation with them and I'm annoyed with every second that goes by. "Smells good in here," she says when she finally makes it into the kitchen.

Jace scans her outfit meticulously. His scowl is firm, but he does

r today.anything.

I don't need to scan it. I memorized it the second she came into view before I looked away.

"Where are you girls going again?" He tries to act cool but I know he's eating him up inside.

in, four "Buttercup."

the guys Jace scratches his head and turns back to his chili. I know I should leave the room but I figure since this is where my sister is going, I should know.

Buttercup isn't as bad as Broken Glass so Jace doesn't freak. It's a lounge with live bands and definitely more upscale than your average college bar.

"Yeah? Angel know the bouncer there too?"

She smirks and leans in to smell the chili. "Probably," she teases him. "Relax. We'll *all* be fine. None of us are drinking. We just want to go out and dance."

"With who?" he snaps.

"With complete strangers, of course." She slaps his back.

Jace scratches his chin. "You know what, we should come with you."

"You have guests." Cora turns, her eyes sweeping past me as if I'm not in the room. "Don't make your friends have to hang out with your sister. Make sure they're not interested."

"I'm interested," Roger calls from the living room. I'm not so sure I should be joking but Cora laughs. She peeks into the living room and waves something to the guys but I'm too distracted looking at her outfit from across the room to hear.

hen. The skintight black miniskirt has a gold zipper along the back. I wish I didn't see picture someone yanking on that zipper tonight while she's dancing,

blood boils at the vision alone.

ew just Her royal blue long-sleeve blouse is off-shoulder and crops right ab
skirt.

ow it's Her hair is down and wavy. Her cheeks have a rosy shimmer to th
her lips are glossed. Her brown eyes accentuated with dark blue an
shadowing.

d leave She looks older and it bothers me. She doesn't look older than a
ow. twenty-year-old going out on a Saturday night, but she looks older tha
s a barWho turns twenty next week and I know I'm in trouble if I don't sha
tandardobsession with her soon.

When the doorbell rings, Cora flips around, catching my eye.

Angel. Jace, can you get that, while I put on my shoes?"

ses her "No."

want to She smirks at his tone. She doesn't roll her eyes or grunt or sigh
toying with him.

"What time are you coming back?"

She shrugs. "Tomorrow?"

." He glares at her.

1 not in "Kidding. Jeez you're easy." She starts for the door. I have no ide
ter. I'mI'm doing, but I follow her. Before she can open the front door, I pull
arm and pivot her toward the garage door, pushing it open and holdin
re he'sfor her.

hispers "Don't forget your jacket. It's nippy out tonight."

behind Her brow is arched and she takes my hint and steps in. I follow an
the door behind us. I already know this is a bad idea considering my m

stantly She flips around and gives me a cocky grin. "Are we really in her
and myjacket?"

“Yes. Why are you suddenly going out every weekend?”

“Because I can.”

“My sister is in no condition to be playing into your game or looking them and hook up—so keep her out of it.” I’m basically rambling at this point. I had silver little to nothing to do with Nicole, but I can’t exactly articulate what’s on in my head.

“Nicole is safe with me.” Cora’s tone is sharp and I have a feeling *Cora* offended her.

“So you’re just going out to...dance?” I step closer.

She looks up at me without stepping back. “I’m still a girl who wants to have fun.”

“What’s your idea of fun?”

“Why don’t you just come out and say what you brought me out here. She says, Nick,” she chides.

“You thinking of hooking up with some guy? You think that’s going to make you all grown up?”

Her pupils flare and her chest hikes with frustration. “I’m not looking to hook up—” she takes a deep breath, and closes her eyes briefly as if reminding herself to stay calm, “but if I happen to find a guy on the floor who doesn’t gross me out, I’ll—”

“Is that where your standards are, Cora? Someone who doesn’t gross you out?”

She turns her head aside and I step forward. “Do yourself a favor and get them just a tad.”

Her smirk is back before she looks up at me. “Maybe you should go out there and beat them off with your stick.”

I press her against the wall. “I don’t need a stick to convince some-

keep their hands off you.”

She grins and I know I pushed too far. “Then it’s a good thing you’re coming.”

“Cora. Be careful tonight.”

She swallows and her façade fades for a second as she looks at my face. “You’re so worried, maybe you should make sure you’re the only one thinking about tonight.”

“I’m not kissing you again, Cora. That was a mistake.” Her eyes bore into mine. “You want to be a grown-up, then act like one and stop coming here. I’m not interested.”

Cora sucks in a breath. Her eyes flood and I feel like shit.

“Okay. Cool.” She pushes off the wall and reaches into her purse, but she catches the tears away before they fall. “Yeah, then I won’t be needing these tonight.”

She takes my hand and pushes something into it.

I look down, finding a pair of black lace panties. My eyes snap up at hers as she straightens. “You’re bluffing.”

Her gaze drops before she pushes past me. “Excuse me.” She reaches for a long wool coat off the rack.

I grab her hand and twist her around. “Cora, tell me this is one of your jokes.” My voice is gravel. If she’s full of it, I’m angry she has the nerve to mess with me. If she’s serious—and she better not be fucking serious—I’ve got a much bigger problem.

Because my anger is red hot and Cora cannot under any circumstances be on the other end of that.

Her eyes are wide. She loosens one of her hands from my grip and reaches behind her, pressing a button. The garage door opens and headlights beam into the dark space.

I release as she pushes past me and grabs her coat from the hanger.

I'm not "There you are," Nicole says as she steps down from the front entrance.

"Sorry, couldn't find my coat," Cora says too fluidly.

My sister squints at me and I know she's suspicious. "Right. Okay." She shrugs.
lips. "Ifin."

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I release as she pushes past me and grabs her coat from the hanger.

“There you are,” Nicole says as she steps down from the front entrance.

“Sorry, couldn’t find my coat,” Cora says too fluidly.

My sister squints at me and I know she’s suspicious. “Right. Okay. Hop in.”

Cora

NICOLE SEEMS QUIET ON the drive over and I wish Angel could telepathically communicate.

Was this a bad idea? I'd ask Angel right now if I could.

In all fairness, it wasn't mine. Nicole started a group text with Angel and me a few days ago saying she needs to get out and specifically, to spend time with us.

Immediately, Angel, knowing Nicole's situation—like everyone in this town—offers coffee or dinner. Nicole insists on doing all the things that women in their early twenties do—and it doesn't involve going out on a Saturday night.

On Friday, I talked to Angel briefly before class and she said if we could do this—she'll just call someone else.

For lack of a better term, we're babysitting tonight.

Neither one of us is drinking at this upscale lounge, which doesn't serve alcohol unless you're ordering one, but the music is impressive and the atmosphere is warm.

We order a few virgin drinks and scope out the scene. Angel recognizes some people and takes off for a bit. I'm only four years younger than her but envy her. She's so confident. She's not happy—that much I can tell. Her smile is always so genuine. Unlike Nicole and me, Angel is a social person, she loves the camera, and before her accident, she loved the spotlight.

"You doing okay?" I ask Nicole, who's gripping my hand hard enough to hurt necessary, and I don't think she realizes it.

"I'm great," she replies instantly, plastering a smile on her pretty face. "This..." she holds up her fizzy, non-alcoholic drink, "is really satisfying."

I laugh at the effort and hold up my own. "And refreshing."

! and I When Angel returns, she insists we join her and some friends she found on the dance floor, and I drag Nicole over with me. I am by no means a dancer of any kind—not like Angel, but I'm not nearly as awkward on the dance floor as Nicole.

nd time After barely two songs, Nicole leans in, "This is fun, but I need some water to cool off." She turns toward the bar and I grab her arm instinctively.

else in "Oh, I'll get you one."

normal Nicole stops and turns to me. "Right. Okay thanks, Cor."

: coffee My heart clenches and I feel horrible. *This isn't going to be an average friendship at all.* I get us both a soda with lime and hand one off to her. My purse starts to vibrate. I pull my phone out and read a message from

Ava: *Where are you? Wanna come hang with me and the guys from the band again?*

It's even
crowd is

Cora: *Thanks, no. I'm at Buttercup.*

I don't hear back from Ava for a few minutes and figure she's either
recognizes with me for not inviting her or is busy sucking face with a certain lead
Angel, A few minutes later, my phone vibrates again.

Well, but
people

Ava: *Sounds good, we're coming over.*

Spotlight. What? I look back at my message knowing full well that at no point
other than invite her to join me here.

My face. **Cora:** *I'm with Angel and Nicole. It's girl's night. So leave the
thing." wherever you are and come.*

Ava: *Nicole Kane? You brought HER to a bar?*

Sound on

dancer Heat boils in my chest and I want to text back it's none of your business
dance but Ava has already been sensitive to my avoidance. Not to mention,
coming here, I'm going to need a favor. One I know Ava will
the water questions asked' about.

Cora: *I have a strange favor.*

Ava: *Listening.*

awkward

just as **Cora:** *Can you bring me a pair of panties?*

in Ava. **Ava:** *Why? Are yours already wet? (wink emoji)*

from the
I stand corrected.

Cora: *I've made the mistake of going commando.*

er upset **Ava:** *Been there. See you soon.*

singer. About an hour later, I return from the bathroom and find Nicole star
space in the back of the lounge.

“Are you okay?”

She's sweaty and flushed, but we left the dancefloor a while ago
nt did I temperature in here is normal. She's holding a full glass with clear
don't remember getting and I take it from her shaky hand, giving it a s
alcohol content is strong.

ie guys “Nicole,” I whisper.

“I—um—” she stares at the drink now in my hand and shakes her h
probably shouldn't be here.”

Angel reaches us. “Okay, I just had valet bring my car around
usiness, ready?”

if she's Nicole looks at me, her eyes glassy. “I didn't have any, I swear.”

be 'no I nod. “I believe you.” I set the drink at the bar and look at Angel.
think we're both ready.”

“I'm so sorry you guys, I'm just not ready for this.”

“No apologies necessary,” Angel waves off, her large ocean-bl
filled with concern. “I'm pretty tired myself. Let's go.”

I nod and take Nicole's hand, heading for the exit.

“Where are *you* going?” I hear Ava's voice and turn. Sure enough,
her with both Ian and Eric.

I shake my head. “Ava, I forgot you were coming. I'm so sorry, but

Nicole pulls her hand from mine. “Was just walking me out and the
be right back,” she assures my friend and glares at me. “You’re not
on my account, Cora.”

ing at a “Nicole, I’m leaving *with* you.”

“I’ll be fine. Angel is taking me home and she’ll stay with me for
don’t want to tell Nick what happened. But you are staying.” She ta
and the hand and pleads. “You never get to do this. Please have fun. Have
liquid I drink and I’ll call you tomorrow, okay?”

ip. The I look back at Ava, who I know will write me off if I blow her off ag

“Promise we’ll talk tomorrow?”

She hugs me and leaves with Angel. Ava reaches for me and pu
read. “I hand, simultaneously slipping silk fabric into my hand.

“Thank you.”

d. You Ava looks back at the exit. “Is she alright?”

“Of course she is.” I scrunch up the panties in my hand and glance
the ladies room. The line is a mile long. I slip the pair into my pu
“Yes. I decide to try again in a bit.

I’m not much in a dancing mood but I do indulge in a drink with A
and Eric—glancing at the ladies room line every few minutes as
ie eyes increasingly uncomfortable with Eric so close to me all night and b
against my hips every chance he could.

When I’ve had just about enough, I excuse myself and decide to v
finding the line by the brick wall along the back and decide to check on Nic
been nearly an hour since she left. I swipe when I see a message fr
I—” brother.

n she'll **Jace:** *You want to tell me why Angel and Nicole got back and you leaving not home?*

Cora: *Ava just got here and I didn't want to leave her. Nicole in a bit. I ^{stay}.*

kes my **Jace:** *Well I'm insisting you come home.*

e a real

Cora: *Fine. After I pee. Been waiting in line.*

gain.

Jace: *You're better off just doing it here. You're only fifteen minutes*

ills my **Cora:** *If you and your car want to take that risk...*

Jace: *I'm sending you an Uber. Be outside in six minutes.*

I huff out a breath and shove my phone away. He's not being fair. I have known Jace only let me go because of Angel and Nicole. The front of me moves and I stay still, leaning against the wall, feeling like for believing he's finally trusting me.

va, Ian, "Hey," Eric comes up to me, eyeing the women I just let cut in front I grow "You okay?"

rushing I nod without engaging.

"Listen, I'm sorry about last week outside the gym. I just thought best if we talked another time. Your brother's teammates are pretty people. It's of you, huh?"

om my "My brother—or his teammates, have no say in who I talk to," I sn comment isn't necessary, but I'm feeling defensive right now.

"Okay. Want to dance?"

're still I release a breath. "I don't think so. I've been trying to go to the room and now—"

I look up and freeze.

sisted I Nicholas Kane just walked into Buttercup. His eyes are dark and searching. His jaw is set tight and I fear for anyone who gets in his way.

Is he looking for Nicole? No. Jace confirmed she's home.

He's looking for me.

Something between anger, frustration, and humiliation bubbles chest. Instantly, I'm reduced to an adolescent whose parents are yanked away from the party she wasn't allowed to go to in the first place.

I'm lightheaded when I turn to the band member whose name escapes at the moment. He's still talking, but I don't hear any of it. My perception sees a pathway open for Nick as he walks toward me. I'm not even spotted me yet. But if he's going to yank me out of here, I'm going to should line in him a good reason for it.

e a fool "Kiss me."

Eric blinks, as if he's not sure he heard me right.

of me. "Now," I say.

His eyes dip to my mouth. And then his lip turns up. "With pleasure lips press onto mine and I'm holding my breath. My head spins and it'd be nothing to do with the one drink I had for the evening.

etective It's Nicholas.

What he does to me. He makes me crazy. He makes me do ridiculous things. I don't want this. I don't want another man's lips on after tasting Nick's. I don't want to open for him so when he forces I push back lightly against his chest. "Girl's got to breathe," I say breath

My eyes shift away instantly, searching for Nick, I don't see him

ladies' anywhere. All I see is his tall frame walking past the crowd in the direction and out the door.

I have a feeling I just made a grave mistake.

they're

y.

Nicholas

in my

ing her

I blow between my palms and rub my hands together before sliding my fingers into my pockets.

It's colder than usual tonight.

This whole evening's been one cold bitch.

It's not every day your deadbeat mother comes to see you and breaks everything you worked hard to fix. I replay what went down in my house an hour ago when Nicole ran into the house, throwing herself into my arms.

"You were right," she sobs. "I'm not ready."

His eyes shoot a terrified look to Angel, who walks in behind her and I push her sister back by her shoulders, looking at her face. "What happened?"

Nicole shakes her head. "I don't know. I was fine, I didn't even drink. I wanted to have a good time, but all I could do is see her as stupid, I wanted to get her out of my mind. So when Cora stepped away, I asked her to get the car because I didn't feel well..."

"I'm sorry I left you alone." Angel shakes her head in shame.

lessly.

his face

e other “It’s not your fault.” My sister looks up at me. “I ordered a vodka rocks, hoping to down it before either of them got back.”

“She didn’t,” Angel says. “Not even a drop.”

Nicole races off to her room and Angel asks me if she can stay for a

“Of course, thank you. Is Cora home?”

“No. Her friends showed up and Nicole didn’t want to ruin her night. Don’t worry, I know the guys she’s with, they’re in my class.”

I blink. “What do you mean? She didn’t come back with you?”

Angel’s eyes widen. “Well, no but—”

ig them “I’ll be back. I’ll lock the door behind me. Would you mind staying here until I get back before leaving?”

“Of course, I might spend the night. I want to make sure she’s okay.

“You truly are an Angel.”

nearly

1 at my I run my hands through my hair and jump into my Jeep, shaking into my vision of Cora’s lips on that loser kid.

I shouldn’t be angry. I shouldn’t feel anything.

She did it because she knew I was there. She did it because I wouldn’t kiss her again.

pull my She’s just a kid who’s hurt and acting out.

I know it and I’m still being a possessive prick about it. But I’m not want a when I call her a child. That was a high school move, if I ever saw one here. I’m going to make her regret it.

d Angel

t on the

Cora

bit.

ght. But At some point, I dropped the pair of underwear Ava lent me but I wasn't turning back for it. On the ride home in my Uber, I text Ava that I had lost them and I owe her silk panties to replace the ones I lost.

until I **Ava:** *Saw you making out with Eric. Something he said?*

Cora: *No. Just need to get home.*

”

Ava: *Ugh, tell Grandpa to chill. It's Saturday night. Call me later.*

off the I step into the house and expect to be reamed out by my brother, who's likely planted himself on the bottom steps staring at the front door.

room and breathe a sigh of relief. Instead, I find my brother—and two teammates passed out in the living room and breathe a sigh of relief.

I gasp when the door behind me opens. I don't feel out of the loop anymore when Nicholas welcomes himself in.

“What are you doing here?” I ask, still catching my breath.

Nick glances at the guys sleeping on the floor and the couch. “I found your driver here and now I'm making sure you get upstairs safe.”

I nod toward the living room. “I already have an older brother.”

Nick glances at the guys sprawled out on the couch and floor. Jace's phone app tracing my ride back home, still running.

“I’m good. What could possibly happen to me here? With my brother there?”

“Jace is a heavy sleeper and the others—they’ve been drinking Cora you’re...” he scans my outfit.

“I’m what? *Welcoming?*”

I’m not “Go upstairs, Cora.”

I to run “I’m what? Lonely? Horny?”

“It’s not *you* I’m worried about,” he grits. “I would just feel better if I knew you were upstairs.”

“Fine.” I give up and take my coat off, stepping into the garage to change. I walk back up. It’s dark and cold in here so I make it quick before turning around. I stop short when I find Nicholas standing in front of the door, shoving Cora behind him.

who’s His eyes blaze with heat so intense, I have to look away. I step around him but he pins me to the door and leans down.

in living “I was going to say that you look and smell too good to resist.”

woods My chest heaves as I breathe silently. “Would I be wrong to think about being pursued *that* way has been on your mind?”

I swallow hard. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

He leans into my neck. “What’s the matter?” he asks calmly.

allowed I don’t respond and turn my head, stretching the neck he’s prowl. His hand moves up to my ear. “Here in adulthood, we call it dishing it when you take it.”

s phone *Oh. That. Does it.*

I smirk and turn back to face him. “At what point will you be giving me something I can take?” I raise my brow. “Did I miss it?”

“Cora.”

er right “And no. I wasn’t bluffing.”

His face flattens and his body tenses against mine. “If you’re not v
ora and anything under there, Cora so help me...”

“Of course I am,” I say, my voice a little shaky, and turn to push t
open.

Nick grips my hips, stopping me from behind and I freeze, m
practically pressed against the door. Once I’m still, his hands glide
ter if I body and under my arms, lifting them above my head. He doesn’t hav
me to hold them there once he releases.

hang it Somehow that message is clear.

back. I He keeps one hand on the side of my waist while the other drop
itting it zipper along the back of my skirt and my breathing accelerates.

I don’t know what I’m afraid of.

nd him, I’m not even sure I am afraid. I know he thinks I should be.

He starts to pull on the zipper slightly, and I need to say somet
cover up my nerves. “Making this a habit now, are we?”

nk that “Shut up.”

He only unzips less than a quarter of the way down before his han
my bare skin. Finding me indeed panty-less, he freezes and releases a
breath to the back of my neck, making me shiver.

ing. He I yelp as a slap grazes my ass. I tense and there’s a beat before a
ou can’t harder smack comes.

He wants the upper hand.

He’s trying to scare me. To make me think I’m not ready for this.

ing me And I don’t know if I am. But what I do know, is I’ll die before I
win this game.

“Maybe we should take this upstairs,” I say with a hint of amusemer

With a grunt, he flips me around and I'm barely able to catch my
breath before his fingers dip under my skirt and instantly find my wet core. I

he watches my face react to his fingers inside me. I bite my lip to keep
myself from whimpering.

"I'm not going to let you do this."

My body My breath is heavy but I manage to respond. "Just warming me
up for someone who will?"

His fingers push in and out of me, rubbing against my clit so inten-
sely unbearable, it's immense. It's the best thing I've ever felt in my entire
life. My orgasm starts to come in strong heated waves, and I come apart hi-
sting to the trembling, using his shoulder to muffle my cries.

He leans into my ear. "I'd like to see you try."

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it.

With a grunt, he flips me around and I'm barely able to catch my breath before his fingers dip under my skirt and instantly find my wet core. I gasp as he watches my face react to his fingers inside me. I bite my lip to keep from whimpering.

"I'm not going to fuck you."

My breath is heavy but I manage to respond. "Just warming me up for someone who will?"

His fingers push in and out of me, rubbing against my clit so intently, it's unbearable, it's immense. It's the best thing I've ever felt in my entire life as my orgasm starts to come in strong heated waves, and I come apart his arms, trembling, using his shoulder to muffle my cries.

He leans into my ear. "I'd like to see you try."

Nicholas

I 'M NOT PROUD OF what happened in that garage. I don't know the fuck came over me. I don't think it was sexy or hot in any way. It was sick.

And I think I need help.

I skip practice and use my sister as an excuse. Which makes me a bigger scum.

No one would ever believe that I'm sick, so I really didn't have a choice. But it works. When I mention Nicole—no one questions it. It gives me the guilt about abandoning my team before a big game.

Unbeknownst to him, Jace is also making me feel like complete shit. I haven't been over—for obvious reasons, so he's offered to bring over for Nicole and me almost every night.

And I accept. Because his cooking is better than anything I could do.

I'm not a total liar. Nicole does need attention these days and I've told her that when I do have travel games, she's coming with me. To she then muses sleepovers with Cora instead—since her brother will be out of town and I realize that I'm winning on both ends with that one.

It's Saturday night, exactly one week later and I'm in my gym on the twentieth rep on my chest press—still unable to get Cora's pre-orgasm out of my mind. I swear it was the most beautiful sight I've ever seen.

And I don't know how I'll ever be okay with anyone else seeing that me.

It wasn't fair. Claiming her like she belonged to me and no one else. I'm psychotic, in fact.

Her going out commando wasn't what set me off—that part I'm convinced was for my benefit.

It was the kiss.

And whether she planned it or not—another guy put his lips on her and she pre-orchestrated easy access. I even felt it.

It was powerful and intense and it would have had no fucking mercy on me. My temper is one vicious son of a bitch and I had to get it out. No one hell out of that bar before I bashed an innocent kid's head with his own set.

Shit. I “Hey.” Nicole walks in again and I make a mental note to add a “no dinner disturb” sign on that door.

I pull myself off the machine and wipe my forehead. “Hey. You alright?” I check her eyes and features—the usual.

already “Actually, I’m worried about you. You barely left the house except
which jogs at weird hours of the night and you’re in here more often than not
also sits on a bounce ball. “Is it mom?”

“No.”

“Is it Cora?” she asks without hesitation.

on the “It’s mom,” I lie.

sm face She gasps and her eyes widen. “So it *is* Cora.” She bounces over

that but “What’s going on? Do you like her?”

“Back off,” I snap, moving to another machine.

Impervious to my tone, she sits on the mat next to me and crosses her
else—I sigh. “What?”

“Oh nothing. I’m just relieved that I’m not the reason you’ve been
ruined house arrest all week.”

I look down at her and give her a sheepish look. “I told everyone you
I admit and drop onto the mat next to her.

r while “I know. And you’ll owe me one day for that.” She scoots over and
shoulder hits mine. “Tell me what’s going on. I want all the meat.”

I laugh at her. “You mean all the juice?”

rcy if I “See, I don’t even know what it’s called anymore because no one
get the anything. They think their problems are going to send me back to my cell
n drum

I glare at her.

do not She reaches out and shakes me. “Pleeeeaaseee.”

“Okay, okay just stop.” I sigh. “There’s something going on with Cora
I don’t know how to deal with it.”

ight?” I “First of all, nothing’s going on with *Cora*. You’re what’s going on.
You’re attracted to her.”

I start to protest but she interjects. “And that’s okay, Nick.”

cept for “No, it’s not.” I look at her and she knows why.

ot.” She “I don’t think you’ll scare her away with your little tempers.”

“They’re not little and you know it.”

“You’d never hurt her. Just like you never hurt me.”

“Not physically, no. But I’m aggressive, Nicole. I get angry faster for a lot less than most. Cora—she’s…”

to me. “A delicate flower?” she laughs.

“No. Maybe. She’s just Cora. She’s like my little sister. Maybe I’ve seen her as that, but I’m not sure anymore.”

er legs. “Was it the leather outfit?” she asks with no shame.

I want to say it was. At least then I would sound like a guy that been onhuman. But I know that’s not true. “I don’t think so.” My voice is rasp I admit it.

ou are,” “Well, I’d love to sit and chat, but I’m going out.”

“Where?”

ntil her “It’s Cora’s birthday. Jace is throwing a party for her at Bridges.”

I frown. A sports bar? That can’t be right. “Bridges?”

“Yeah. Jace said she didn’t want anything fancy and just to hang o ells meclose friends, have wings, soda and lots of laughs. She only invited lik lealer.” people she knows so Jace invited the team.” Her eyes wander when s *the team*, like she’s wondering if someone specific will be there.

I take out my phone and sure enough, there were messages and voi ora andfrom Jace I’ve been avoiding. I release a heavy breath. “I should c back.”

ing on. “Can you do me a favor?” she bites her lip.

“What?”

“Jace told me that Cora requested no alcohol at the party, I thin

worried I might...slip again. Can you please tell him to not do that account? I never told Cora about mom coming by so she probably t couldn't handle being around bottles."

I stand and put my arm around my sister. "You sure?"

er—and "Yeah. I'm good. Also, you have an entire wine cellar that I touched, mind you."

"Good point."

always "Okay." She stands. "You're coming right?"

I look up and scrunch my face. It's Cora's twentieth. I wouldn't

Even if she hates me and never wants to see my violating face and 's only again. "I think I have to."

y when *Even if she slaps me across the face.*

And I really—really hope she does.



ut with I get to our favorite bar and greet the owner first who's at the doo ce threehis usual jolly self. I like the guy but there's only so much jolliness a he sayslike me can take. He also talks way more than Coach Collins—the onl grump I know—can take.

ce mails "Hey Pat. Nice setup you got here."

all him "Hey anything for our girl, eh?"

"Yeah." I walk past him before we get caught up in a near conversation about tap beer or floorboards.

Jace releases a breath when I approach him and a few of our teamm k she'swas about to send a search party out for you. You missed two practices

on my “Sorry, man. I’ve—”

hinks I “I needed him, sorry guys. It’s been a rough week for me.”

I look down at my sister and she winks. Guilt eats at me and I str arm around her, appreciating her help. But I can’t let her do that. I’m a haven’t tell them I’m the one who’s been feeling out of it, but Coach Collins up to us.

“We have to throw a party for you to show up, Kane?” His large f like a shadow among us. Royce Collins, ex-hockey player domina miss it. room with his presence.

l hands “I’m sorry,” Nicole offers, her dark eyes wide when he approache we’re not the only ones afraid of him.

He winks at Nicole and touches her arm lightly. “I’m just k Anything for you.”

I roll my eyes when my sister blushes. It looks so real, but I know mastered the innocent coy persona she puts on for literally *any* man. I she got away with so much for so long.

“I don’t suppose you brought Rory here?” she asks hopefully.

r being “Unfortunately, yes. She’s over by the jukebox with Angel. Still car grump sitter for the little weasel.”

ly other Nicole beams. “She’s a girl after my own heart.” She starts to walk direction then stops and spins back, looking at Coach like she’s obligation. “Is it okay if I hang with her for a bit?”

His brows crease subtly and he breathes, “Of course, Nicky.”

ingless Nicole smiles shyly and Coach watches her hesitantly as she walks c “You alright Coach? Rory is totally safe with her,” I assure.

ates. “I His eyes snap back to mine. “Yeah.” He nods at the other guys and s.” off. I watch him as he approaches Cora and her dad by the far end of

along the booths. She greets him happily and they make small conversation before her eyes find mine.

Her hair is in the loose waves style I've come to like. Her glossy lips and rosy cheeks add just the right amount of color to her olive skin. She wears a sage green wrap dress and heels. I can't remember the last time I saw her in a dress. She looks elegant—but still Cora.

I put my hands in my pockets and approach her. She smiles as soon as she sees me and relief washes over me.

"We're going to go grab some food by the bar." Cora's dad nods at her. So...walks off with Coach.

Cora doesn't say anything to them; her eyes are squarely on me. "I'm kidding, scared them away."

"As long as I didn't scare you away." I lean in tentatively and kiss her cheek. "Happy birthday."

"Thank you." She blushes.

"I don't deserve the looks you give me, Cora."

She's about to say something sassy, I can feel it. I'm already grinning but don't get a response. But then Jace interrupts us. He's handing Cora a beer. "I know it's not your twenty-first, but thought I'd offer you one anyway."

Cora dips her eyes to the cold beverage. "I'm good thanks."

Jace looks to me and I shake my head. "No thanks."

"I'll have it." I look down at the little voice and chuckle. Rory Collier leans on Jace's leg and his brows jump as he smiles down at her.

"Oh will you now?"

"Ew, that stuff is disgusting." Nicole skips over. "Hunny if you want to drink like a big girl, you need something cherry red with an umbrella." She points to the bar,

conversation She holds out her hand. “Come on I’ll teach you how to sweet bartender.” She winks back at us and picks up Rory to sit on a bar stool. My eyes shoot to Coach. No one trusts my sister these days and she’s in a haze, not overstepping. But the glimmer in his eyes is anything but in a daze. Surprisingly, he looks annoyingly smitten.

Jace shrugs and walks away to mingle with the crowd. The DJ starts a new song shortly after and I pull Cora into a booth. “I can probably see if the bartender can make us a blueberry Cosmo.”

me and “You’d have one right now?”

I scope out the crowd. And shake my head. “No.”

she. “You She laughs. “Then no for me too.”

“I have something for you.”

she kisses her “You do?”

“I got it a few weeks ago.” I pull the small box out of my pocket and hand it to her.

She pulls on the white ribbon and opens it. “Oh.”

“You don’t have to wear it. In fact, it’s probably better that you don’t. I know it’s just what you wanted you to have it.”

She pulls on the stone. “It’s beautiful. What is it?”

“It’s a red tiger’s eye stone. It means a lot of things and they all remind me of you. Strength, self-confidence, empowerment. I got it from my first jump years ago. I want you to have it.”

She looks up at me tentatively, “But—I wouldn’t have gone through all that if you weren’t there.”

I touch her hands and press her fingers around the stone, into her palm. “This is for when I’m not there to fall with you.”

She considers it for a moment, then wraps her arms around my neck.

talk awhispers, “Thank you.”

l.

I hope An hour later, I’m still not feeling right about how I handled Cora’s week and need to apologize. But I don’t want to ruin the mood of her party, so I avoid her the rest of the night.

J starts The other half of my mind and tension is on my sister. Nicole seems to be chatting with Rory and Coach Collins. I was expecting him to ream her out for missing two practices but I can tell he’s concerned for Nicole. I’m always sensitive to her situation. Especially less than half a year ago when things got bad.

I hear yelling and turn. Expecting to find drunk hockey players going home. Instead, I find Jace, and he’s yelling at Cora.

Again.

My blood boils and I step closer.
“No way. Over my dead body,” he barks.
“Excuse me?”

“What’s going on?” I ask her friend Ava.

“I should have just waited. I’m so stupid, I bought her a skydiving certificate. We were supposed to go a few weeks ago but I chickened out. I thought we’d go. Jace saw it and basically shut it down.” She shakes her head. “And now they’re at it again.”

“It’s too big of a risk. It’s not worth it for a minute and a half of thrill.”

“Um, yes, it is,” she bites back.

“No, it isn’t. And you’re not doing it.”

“Joke’s on you because I already did,” she shouts.

“What?” It’s a low hiss and I step forward instinctively, but Nicole grabs my arm subtly.

ack and

The room goes silent as Cora cocks her head at her brother and crosses her arms. I swear she looks sexier right now than the night I peeled leather from her skin. “I didn’t need your permission. I wanted to so I did.”

at the party. Jace glares at her. “I don’t believe you.”

“Cora? You went that day?” Ava presses, obviously having no clue about the little adventure together.

“Interesting.”

Jace glances at Ava, then back at his kid sister. “You went alone?”

Cora doesn’t say anything.

I push my sister’s hand down and step forward. “No. I was with her.”

He turns his glare on me and I’m relieved it’s off her. “You took her out of your jumps?”

Cora steps between us. “He didn’t take me. I went by myself. Aggravate your business.”

“Not this again.” Jace sighs.

I’m tempted to move Cora aside, but it doesn’t feel right touching her right now. So I step around her. “Jace, cut it out man. It’s a party.”

“You took my sister sky diving? She’s just a kid.”

“No she’s not. And she did just fine.”

Jace is about to blow a fuse—and I’m ready for it. Until Bruce steps between us. “Alright son, that’s enough. This isn’t the time or place.”

He throws his arms in the air. “Fine. You handle this. Just like you’ve handled Cain.”

Cain cuts off the comment. “Jay, man, calm down. She was with me. I did anything that should make you feel better. Also, I took my nephew when he was fifteen. It’s completely safe—”

“Back off. She wasn’t safe. She could have been killed.”

Jace turns to me. “I think you should leave.”

sses her “Yeah,” I agree with a single nod and turn to Cora. “Happy bi
ther offCora.”

But she doesn’t hear me. She’s staring at her brother—too ang
shocked to speak.

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Nick. If

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“Yeah,” I agree with a single nod and turn to Cora. “Happy birthday, Cora.”

But she doesn’t hear me. She’s staring at her brother—too angry and shocked to speak.

Cora

“NICK.” I PUSH THE door to the back alley of the bar and run calling after him.

“Go back inside.” He keeps walking.

I gasp as the brittle cold hits me and I realize I ran out without my jacket. I consider going back for it but don’t want to lose him.

“Nick, wait.” It doesn’t take long for the air to hit my lungs and my body shakes from the cold.

Nick turns and rushes over, wrapping his jacket around me and pulling me to the wall where there is no wind. He’s breathing heavily and shielding me with his body. It’s dark and I have no idea what he’s thinking, but I’m safe now.

“I’m sorry,” I say, knowing somehow this was my fault.

He pulls me into his arms and holds me. “You have nothing to apologize for Cora. I know I shouldn’t have interfered, but I hate it when he

you.”

I look up at him and he searches my eyes. “I’m sorry for last week—garage, I completely lost myself and there’s no excuse.”

“It’s my fault, I—”

“Don’t ever let anyone make you believe it’s your fault they hurt Cora.”

“Nicholas. You didn’t hurt me,” I insist, in wholehearted honesty. What happened in the garage was a mind-blowing moment I never want to forget. But I don’t need to tell him that. I don’t need to tell him that orgasm was the best I could have ever given myself. That his touch makes my entire body hum and heat. That no one will ever compare to his touch. No one.

“But I will,” he rasps.

I stare at his lips and shake my head.

“I don’t know what this is between us or why it’s happening or how long it’s been happening, but I can’t...let it.”

“Nick.”

“I’m not good for you, Cora.”

“Why not? You’re not that much older than me and—”

“It’s not that. It’s—you know me Cora. I’m trouble—both on and off. I’ve already wanted to smash a guy’s head in on two occasions and it’s not normal.”

I chuckle and he sighs in frustration, pushing his hair back.

“You’d never hurt me.”

“You’re right. I’ll never hurt you. Which is why this needs to end.”

I know he can see the hurt in my eyes and I don’t try to hide it.

“Fine. But tell me why you did what you did last week. Why you needed to know if I was bluffing. Why you needed to touch me. To feel how we

for you. Why?”

—in the He stiffens and looks away. “Because I know you’re thinking about sex, Cora. And when you basically told me you’re going out there with your underwear, I panicked. Then I saw you kissing that guy and I put you through horrible things. I needed to leave before I got arrested for doing something really bad to him.” I can tell he’s sugarcoating the violent things in his life. What but it’s not my main focus right now.

forget. “How do you know?”

was the “You told me when you were drunk.”

the body Ooof. “Yeah. Well, it shouldn’t be a secret. I’m like the last of my—
“It’s special, Cora. You’re special and you need to be careful.”

I feel another chill, but it’s not from the cold. I’m hurt and angry but I can just ignore the undeniable chemistry between us. I should feel uncomfortable about what he did last week but I don’t.

I know from Nicole that their mother paid them a visit and they were out of sorts. And even though I feel like shit for pushing his limits last week, I’m not telling him I know about Terry. I’m not giving him that out.

I want him and I’m not going to let his fears over his temper stop us. It could be the best thing we both ever had.

and that’s “I think it was really unfair of you to touch me the way you did with kissing me. It’s a little disrespectful.”

“Cora.”

“I think you at least owe me that.”

“Jesus Cor. You haven’t been listening.”

“No, I hear you loud and clear. You want me to sleep with someone else. I had to—”

at I was “I never said that.”

“But you’re okay with seeing me with someone else, *knowing* without having looking for? Knowing it can be any day now?”

He scowls. “No.”

“And yet you’re going to let it happen anyway.”

He swallows and steps back. “Yes.”

I push off the wall and stand on my toes as I whisper against his ear. “I like to see you try.”

I give him back his jacket and rejoin my party but not before I catch a smirk from his lips.

—”

that he
used for



“There she is,” I hear Coach Collins call and everyone starts singing. A chocolate cake is brought out in front of me and I put on a smile—a fake one.

And out of all the people in my life, only Jace will know it’s fake. And right now, I’m glad for it.

I spend the rest of the evening with Angel and Ava. At one point I make conversation with Jace’s teammates about my skydiving experience which stops abruptly when Jace comes over to us.

The guys quickly engage in hockey-related shit-talk and Jace takes the opportunity to lean in to me and whisper. “I’ll apologize to him tomorrow. Cain was right; I’m just glad he was there.”

I deadpan him. “Thanks for the party, Jace.” I turn to walk away and he swings back. “Oh and thanks for finding a way to ruin it too.”

hat I'm



“So you want to tell me about it?” Jace asks lightheartedly while making my coffee in the morning.

ar. “I’d I look up at him and answer flatly. “It was amazing.”

He takes a minute to make his own and then joins me by the kitchen

catch a “When will you stop keeping things from me?”

“When you start treating me like an adult. Or when I move whichever comes first.”

He sighs, digressing. “Need a ride to work today?”

“I have a car.”

He shrugs. “Maybe I want to spend time with you before I lose you going. A rest of the world and you end up hating me.”

blatant I raise a brow.

“Cause it’ll happen. I’m going to go too far with you one day and hate me forever.”

“Thanks for the heads up.”

it, I did “Nick told me that like a year ago. I laughed in his face when he ience—He’s always looked out for you, I know you’re safe when he’s around.

“You should tell him that.”

kes the He lowers his head and shakes it. “I tried. He didn’t answer. I’m su in the he didn’t punch me in the face last night.”

“He wouldn’t do that to you.”

nd then “I’ve seen him lose control, kid. Nothing would surprise me.”

I wait for it to deter me.

It doesn’t.

en I'm

island.

out—

u to the

l you'll

said it.

”

urprised

Nicholas

SAYING I HAVEN'T BEEN able to get Cora out of my mind past two weeks would be an understatement. Especially since she's always on my mind. I think about her when Jace and I have travel games, I think about her when we stay out too late celebrating a win. Hell, I even chose where I live based on the two of us just wanting to keep her safe under our watch through her college years.

But my thoughts were never this insufferable. It also doesn't help that I know she's here tonight. Cora and Nicole are up in the Platinum Suite along with Garret, who's suspended for two games. I'm picturing him in a crisp white shirt chatting up my girl, like I found him doing last night out on the terrace.

I imagine her laughing at something unintelligent he says, her soft cheek against his hand pressing against his chest. It lingers there for a moment. Enough to think it's an invitation.

Fuck. I need to get up there.

We're halfway through third and someone bumps me. I don't even see it is and I'm ready to throw down my gloves and beat him to a pulp.

It'll be easy too.

Just have to picture Garret's face as he smoothly talks my girl up in the crowd while I'm down here actually earning my paycheck.

Number seventeen of the Panthers glides past me with a smirk, waiting for me. This fucker's been itchin' to fight me all night, I can feel it. I can feel the challenging sneer.

Hockey fights are normal, and expected. But it also doesn't have to be tonight—not with Nicole watching. She knows it's part of the game, but the strong possibility violence is still a trigger for her. I scoff and nod over my shoulder and Derik as backup to finish the job for me.

for the

it girl is “What's going on Kane, don't want to break a nail?” Roger mockingly asks. In the locker room after the game.

I even hear “You seemed to do just fine, Sanders,” Coach hollers when he enters the dressing room.

That fight should have been mine. Everyone in the room knows it. It's just a matter of time before Coach. Roger's the only one to call me out on it. And I know why. In the locker room—tightens. I don't like being handed a pass because of my sister. I swipe my hand across my face.

at this time *I need to figure this shit out with Nicole.*

I'm out of the shower and wrap a towel around my waist stepping out of the locker room. It's been a long game. Or not long enough.

for him On the one hand, I can't wait to get upstairs to pull Garret off Cora. On the other, I know I should probably take my time to get my shit together

my mind off the girl.

I spent days brooding on what she said to me the night of her party. I flat out told her this isn't going to happen. And though I never suggested it, she was inadvertently telling her that she needs to move on. That she should find someone else to be *the one*.

"Hey," I nod at Jace, who's alone when I step into the locker room after practice. We haven't hung out much after what went down at Bridget's party a few weeks ago, other than a few beers after a late practice one night with the team.

He looks up and his brows shoot up. "Hey, good game."

"I was distracted."

"Yeah," he agrees.

I'm relieved he's not giving me an out for my sister the way Coach is. I swear that guy's soft spot for my sister might be in my favor but I don't like it.

I just hope I never have to remind him of that.

"We good?" he asks.

I shrug and throw my shirt on. "Yeah, we're good." I'm still ticked off—especially about how he treated Cora at her own party, but it's not supposed to be my business.

He stands. "I'm sorry I asked you to leave. I overreacted."

"Water under the bridge," I say, throwing my shit into the hamper. It's not bothering to tell him that's not what I'm pissed about.

Jace doesn't buy it but waves a hand and lets it go. "We should probably not be standing here half naked talking about our relationship."

I laugh—surprising myself. "You should be so lucky," I joke. "Besides, I know a good number of girls that might claw my eyes

rumors were to start about me and Buffalo's most eligible bachelor.”

When I Social media posts and blog headlines often peg me or Richard R
ted it, Iquarterback on the Buffalo Dixon's as most eligible bachelor's—but I
uld findno means *eligible*.

Not like Jace, who wouldn't know it if it hit him in his pretty face—
n to getadmit it.

ges two “Yeah right. I don't need that kind of attention right now. Not unti
with thesomeone I can commit to. Set an example for Cora.”

“You want her to settle down?” I ask, clearly not taking my own ac
moving on.

“I want her to settle period. She's all over the place.”

“Right, and when you were twenty, you weren't?”

clearly “I wasn't. I had a kid to look out for.”

I don't “Yeah, but that doesn't mean you were straight and centered eithe
were all over the place. You thought about giving up hockey. You
about doing a nine to five because you thought she needed stabilit
haven't dated for longer than five minutes because you didn't want
off forfeel like you weren't paying attention to her.”

be my Jace shakes his head as if this is all coming out of left field, and
blame him. I never told him how I felt about the choices he made or t
he struggled with.

er. Not But he doesn't disagree, so I go on.

“Cora's doing just fine. She's finally starting to find out who she w
robablybe and you're keeping her sheltered from living.”

After a quiet moment, Jace nods and stands. “Like you haven't bee
e back.all along doing the same thing.” He picks up his duffle bag and walks
s out if Alone in the locker room, I shake my head, thinking that once ag

best friend completely misses my point. It's not until I'm anxiously th
amano,my shit on so I can get upstairs to get Cora away from anything with
I am by—that I realize he's fucking right.

I've been so convinced that her naivety will lead her to make mista
-or evercan never take back—including me—that I'm practically throwing h
the arms of someone who could disrespect and mistreat her.

l I find And then I'm going to get arrested for beating the guy senseless.

Yeah. This isn't going anywhere good.

lvice of I run my hands through my hair and frustratingly tug it at the
Knowing that what we both want will have consequences...

But it's better than the alternative.



er. You
thought

y. You “If you're looking for the ice girls, you're in the wrong room,” Ange
Cora toat Jace when we get to the suite—a little late to the party, but at l
showed.

I don't “Shouldn't the ice queen be in there with them?” He rubs his chin.

he ones “And miss another battle of the Knights between you and Cora?
chance.”

Ouch.

wants to I shake my head. Nothing is off-limits when it comes to these two.

“You two ever give it a rest?” I ask both of them.

en there “He started it.”

out. Jace pops a peanut and smirks at Angel before turning to me. “You
ain, myaround?”

rowing “For a bit. Is Cora still here?” I peek around then level my gaze with
a penisbest friend.

There’s a beat before he answers. “She’s here.” He nods to the enclosure
where Cora stands with two of our players I’m not sure I can
near into nearly missed her behind their broad frames.

I turn back to Jace, who’s dead-focused on his sister. “Mind if I stay?
I’m not even sure what it is I’m asking him. Or what my intention is.

“Better you than them, I guess.” He turns his attention to something
else. I b-line toward the trio.

It’s a short walk, but my mind is out of control. Every step is
stabbing image of another man touching her. And it doesn’t feel good
for her—and certainly not for me.

There isn’t a single soul worthy enough to do it.

I likely fall in the category of least worthy—but at least I know it.

I’m not going to pretend she’s the lucky one. I’m not going to take
a quipstroke of my fingers against her skin for granted.

east we I’ll do it right.

And mostly importantly—I’m not going to promise her forever.

’ Not a



Apparently, I don’t need to say anything for Garret and Roger to steal
the second I approach them. Somehow—at some point over the last
weeks, I’ve made it undeniably clear that she’s mine.

stickin’ And I don’t mind it one bit.

with my “Good talkin’ to you Cora,” Garret says, then points his thumb back
“Don’t let this guy talk you into anything you don’t want to do.”

l of the My ears burn. What the hell?

trust. I Cora laughs. “Yeah right. He’s the one who tried to talk me out of
didn’t show, I was just going to do it myself. I don’t need a man for it.
ep in?” “What are you guys talking about?” I finally bark.

Garret shrugs, a small smirk across his face. “Sky diving. What c
ng elsethink we were talking about?”

I swallow hard and glare at the asshole, who Roger smartly pulls a
a newthe other direction.

od. Not I take a breath and look down at Cora’s grinning eyes. She’s enjoy
way too much.

“Alright,” I say.

At least “Alright, what?”

e every I don’t bother with the explicit explanation. I take a step toward l
hold my finger up. “But there will be rules.”

She grins wickedly and I want to kiss her to oblivion just to wipe it
face. “I’ve been breaking rules lately.”

I raise a warning brow. “If we’re doing this, you’re going to keep th
Her eyes widen as if she’s just realizing what I’m saying. “Listening
"Rule number one; Jace doesn't know. Rule two; if I mal
uncomfortable or hurt in any way at any point, you tell me. You nee
p awayhonest with me.”

ast few “There’s one more. And it’s the most important one, Cora.”

She bites her lip and I need to look away. It’s this last one that I
make abundantly clear. And I find myself hoping it’s not a deal breake

at me.

Cora

it. If he

”

My heart is beating and even though my mouth is slightly open, I don't seem to take a single breath. So far, his “ground rules” seem acceptable. I don't know what's coming and I am foolishly nervous and intrigued at the same time.

He swallows. His jaw hardens and he keeps his voice sharp. “This thing about us is permanent. I want to do this. I want you—to be your first and I want it done right.”

My brows twitch and I hope it's unnoticeable.

“No other reason,” he adds.

I wait to feel okay with this. With the last one—but what did I expect? Not like I imagined my first to be my last. Or that Nick and I would be “together forever”, but I can't help that it hurts that technically...my heart is already breaking up with me.

I can't help but admit to myself that instead of “being the one who is right” he would have told me he can't stand the idea of me with anyone else. Or that he can't deny the attraction between us.

My body's awareness of him waits for the words I think I see in his eyes. Something dirty, like he's the only one who can make me come the way I did weeks ago in my garage. And that there's so much more he wants to do with me. That he wants to be the first and only to ever taste me. I want to feel that heat in his eyes intensify when he pictures it.

But he doesn't.

And I come back to life and nod once. "I agree to all."

"Good. Any rules for me?"

I press my lips together. Casting a glance away. "Just one."

Don't hurt me.

I can't But not getting hurt is not a rule I need to set for him. It's for myself
le, but I "Yes," I finally answer. "I want things to be equal. I don't want th
l at the 'lessons on lovemaking'. I want you to be with me how you would an
girl."

Nothing He shakes his head. "No way."

because I "So I have to follow your rules but you get to veto mine?"

"I will never treat you like every other girl."

I assess him. "Hmm...and all it took was a little jealousy?"

His neck twists slightly to glance around us and he steps forward,
ect? It's in just enough to ensure I'm the only one who hears what he's about
ever be "I'm not jealous, Cora. I'm territorial. Neither of which is good for you

first is When he steps back, I see the conflict. A mixture of possession, r
and a little bit of warmth.

does it From the corner of my eye, I see my brother approach us. "I'll get
ne else. you on the equal part," he murmurs before turning to his best friend.

"Hey," I greet Jace. "Nice game. Also nice of you to finally say I
eyes—your sister."

ay I did He puts an arm around me. "Looks like you had enough hockey
o do to surrounding you." He glances back at Garret and Roger, then turns t

see the "Thanks for scaring them off."

If only he knew Garret and Roger were talking to me about their
year of college and all the trouble they got into and Nick pushed ther

so he could seduce me with his stupid rules.

“Yeah, thanks, Nick. I was in grave danger with those two guys
been your friends and teammates for five years,” I say with a slight smile
my head.

“Anytime, doll.” He winks at me. “I’m going to go make sure the
move in on Angel or Nicole.” He leaves and I already miss him, but this
is to be for the breathing room.

“You alright there? Got a little...” I thumb the corner of his bruised
He wipes at it and chuckles. “Yeah, we all took a few for Nick tonight
“What was that about?”

“I think he’s taking it easy on the fighting for Nicky’s sake. I
looking up at the window—clearly distracted by whatever was happening
in here.”

leaning

to say.

1.”

egret...

back to

hello to

players

o Nick.

: senior

n away

so he could seduce me with his stupid rules.

“Yeah, thanks, Nick. I was in grave danger with those two guys who’ve been your friends and teammates for five years,” I say with a slight shake of my head.

“Anytime, doll.” He winks at me. “I’m going to go make sure they don’t move in on Angel or Nicole.” He leaves and I already miss him, but thankful for the breathing room.

“You alright there? Got a little...” I thumb the corner of his bruised lip.

He wipes at it and chuckles. “Yeah, we all took a few for Nick tonight.”

“What was that about?”

“I think he’s taking it easy on the fighting for Nicky’s sake. He kept looking up at the window—clearly distracted by whatever was happening up in here.”

Cora

I DON'T GO TO the next two games. Not because the team doesn't have the suite reserved for guests but I've been working long hours at the center, and need to rest my brain. I'm learning a lot there and I do love it, it's definitely been taking a toll on my brain. It's also made me realize how lucky I've been to have had my dad and brother looking out for me when so many of these young children and adolescents don't.

And even though they might not know it, they're desperate for it.

The stories I hear are beyond traumatic.

The biggest theme being parents abandoning or abusing their children, widowed parents who can't cope enough to raise a child on their own.

Each story making me appreciate my father every day for his sacrifice. Certain times avoidance yes, but Jace and I could always count on him when we really needed him.

There are days I want to call him to tell him how much I love and appreciate everything he's done for Jace and me. But knowing my dad will call my brother asap and tell him this new internship is bad for me makes me making me emotional. Which will result in the two of them making me a new line of work.

But they'd be wrong. This is perfect for me.

I've been going after classes most days, but on Thursday, I decide to skip Ancient History and go to work. I doubt one absence would affect my average in that class. Besides, it's a boring class and my mind will wander to reasons why Nick hasn't contacted me since last week's game.

He hasn't come by, called, or even texted and I hate that I'm afraid I might be having second thoughts. That kind of self-doubt and negativity is something I've been working on overcoming and if I can't handle it, I don't have distance now, I sure as hell will fall a freaking part when the time comes. I don't want him to call us quits.

"Hi Julia," I greet my mentor.

"Hey, Cora. I wasn't expecting you until later."

"I know. I'm feeling it today, so I wanted to stop by early and see if you can help with anything. Is that okay?"

"It's not like we have you on payroll. Come on in. I'm actually here to file some paperwork on Bradley Thomson. We need to find him a counselor. He keeps being referred to someone else."

I frown. "That's strange. What's the issue?"

"There are just some people who don't want to be helped. They don't feel comfortable in places like these. It's intimidating and they feel like we're setting a trap for them to say something we'll use against them. Or we keep them from going home."

ve and My heart hurts. “That’s terrible. Mind if I sit with him and maybe try to talk to him?”

ne and She hesitates. “Not...unsupervised.” She looks down at his file. “I suppose if you were in the waiting room, you could just sit there with him and...” she shrugs, “if you happen to say something and he engages with you, I’ll hand you his file.”

hands me his file. “He’s not violent at all—at least not yet. Everything you need to know is in here.”

my A “I’m sure it’s not everything,” I mutter quietly, taking it from her.

I likely When I was on the other side...not that long ago...there was so many counselors didn’t know about me and kept getting wrong.

raid he “Good luck. I’ll go have him wait in the waiting room and keep it busy.”

ivity isShe winks and smiles.

a little A few minutes later, I walk into the room that Bradley waits in. He’s scribbling on a piece of paper. He’s sixteen, which is older than me, but that I’m technically allowed to work with. He has slightly long untamed hair. He glances up just barely when I come in, but I’m not tentative about it.

“Hey,” I nod like I’m cool as I take a seat.

if I can He sighs and doesn’t greet me back.

Okay that’s cool.

aded to “What’s your name?” I ask, hoping it’s casual.

a new “Just open up the file and read line one,” he says dryly.

I frown. The hell? “What file?”

He glances over and sees me empty handed. Then goes back to doodling. “I’m not an idiot.”

we’re *Okay, he’s figured me out.*

use it to I’m not surprised—nor am I disappointed, because of course he’s an idiot. An adult walks into the room—regardless of what room it is.

y to...Immediately focuses on you? Yeah, they're here for you.

I still have a lot to learn.

“But I “What, they won't give you a tablet?” I ask, watching him doddle
ith himsmall piece of paper.

..” She “I didn't ask for one.”

ing you “Oh,” I say as I stand and touch random objects around the room.

and staring makes people uncomfortable. “Well, then there goes getting
you want...like ever.”

uch my He doesn't say anything.

“Am I in the right room?” I ask, having no idea where I'm going with
: clear.” He looks around. “Who you looking for?”

“Someone to talk to.”

n. He's “Wrong room.”

ost kids I scrunch my face like I would at my brother. “I never said they had
ed hair.back.”

t.” He shrugs. “Go for it. But I'm just waiting for my ride, so if I wait
ten minutes—don't be offended.”

I can no longer tell if he's onto me. But if he is and is just playing
can't help but be a little proud. And I don't even know the kid.

“Gotchya. Also if you walk out in seven and just wait for your ride
I still won't be offended.”

He frowns and finally looks at me. “You're weird. You new?”

to his “Oh I don't work here. Well, technically I do. But not officially. I'm
school.”

He laughs. “They sent a student.”

not an “Student with straight A's mind you. Okay fine, I might need to
is—andgym in the summer but it's the last class on a Friday—you try

motivated enough to run two miles around the football stadium.”

Another chuckle. Before he clears his throat and goes back to his drawing on the paper. “You an artist or something?”

“I thought you were doing the talking.”

“Well, I need something to get me going, you know. Like I can’t just sit and talk. Someone has to say the right thing, something I can relate to at some point to myself. “I like to draw so if I’m gonna talk to a fellow artist, I know.”

“I wouldn’t call myself an artist.”

I nod at the paper. “Is that one ready for an audience?” I ask before he knows when I draw, I don’t want a single soul looking at it until I’m done.

He shrugs and stretches it out for me. “Wolverine. Nice,” I say and smile at him, handing it back to him. “I like Storm. When I was little, I wanted my hair to talk like hers. My mom wouldn’t let me so I…” I press my lips together and pause, waiting for any signal that he’s interested in this. I need him to be engaged even in the slightest.

My eyes flash in triumph when he gives me a short shrug and asks, “What?”

“I put baby powder on my hair and blended it all in so it would give it that salt and pepper look she has.”

His eyes bulge and I hold up a hand and laugh. “I don’t recommend baby powder. I coughed for weeks. I couldn’t get that newborn smell out for days, it’s still indreadful.”

He laughs. “What’d your mom say?”

My smile fades. “She said some things...I can’t remember, I’ll never repeat the look on her face when she found me, you know after the shock. She looked proud. She knew what I wanted, and I figured out r

way to do it. Regardless of someone telling me I couldn't." I release a
awing. "I mean, I think it was pride. I never had a chance to ask her year
before she died."

"I'm sorry."

ist start "I was ten." I'd never flat out tell a stranger, much less a patient sor
you." I this personal, but this was no ordinary case. And if I didn't follow
want to here, I'm in the wrong business.

I feel a pound of regret when he shuts down and turns his head
highly unengaged position.

cause I "I'm sorry. I probably shouldn't be telling you this. It's just that
ne. brought out the memory for me." Like the inexperienced idiot that
d mean keep rambling.

l to dye *It didn't work, Cora, just get up and get a professional asap, be
my lipsshuts down completely.*

s story. "Anyway, I'll let you get back to it. I'mma go...sign up for n
therapy session."

s, "You "I was thirteen," he says as I touch the door handle.

My head snaps. I don't do anything but blink. I don't tell him I l
give me don't tell him that I understand why he doesn't want to talk. I just stan

"Mine was sick."

nd it. I "Car accident," he offers.

it was I move back to the couch slowly. "It's worse when it's so sudden,
not sure of how much I believe it. It's just as bad to watch them su
months.

I never "Yeah, I didn't appreciate that part."

e initial "I guess that would make it three years now, huh?" I ask, not hid
ny own fact that I read his file.

breath. He nods. "I don't always lose my shit like that you know?" his de
rs later shifts to defensive, but my expression doesn't change.

Bradley is being treated for a mild case of intermittent explosive c
—sudden outbursts that can be aggressive and violent when s
nothing Bradley's condition isn't violent—at least not yet. But his file notes f
my guttemper tantrums and aggressive behavior such as pushing empty cha
he doesn't hurt people. If anything, he tries to get away from them. It
l into a common in young adults and his cause is likely environmental.

I doubt Julia would let me work with her on this one. My internship
sketch only let me work with children under ten.

I am, I "Okay," I say, keeping my tone light with a hint of indifference. "
it's out of your control."

fore he "Sometimes I try to. Sometimes I don't care enough to."

"Well, it's a good thing you're here."

ly own

know. I

d there.

" I say,

ffer for

ling the

He nods. “I don’t always lose my shit like that you know?” his demeanor shifts to defensive, but my expression doesn’t change.

Bradley is being treated for a mild case of intermittent explosive disorder—sudden outbursts that can be aggressive and violent when serious. Bradley’s condition isn’t violent—at least not yet. But his file notes frequent temper tantrums and aggressive behavior such as pushing empty chairs. But he doesn’t hurt people. If anything, he tries to get away from them. It’s more common in young adults and his cause is likely environmental.

I doubt Julia would let me work with her on this one. My internship would only let me work with children under ten.

“Okay,” I say, keeping my tone light with a hint of indifference. “I know it’s out of your control.”

“Sometimes I try to. Sometimes I don’t care enough to.”

“Well, it’s a good thing you’re here.”

Nicholas

IT'S AN EARLY GAME Saturday and I can't wait to get the hell here. I hit the shower as soon as I'm done with two out-of-t interviews off the ice—basically attacked by media again. One o mentioned my sister and I almost punched him in the face. Luckily a r —also an old flame— intervened immediately with a few of h questions.

The best part about tonight—Cora's here. After she skipped our l games, I thought she was keeping her distance so she can think thi between us through. And I want her to. I asked for a lot, and probably make it sound like it was going to be any fun—so I'm hoping tonigh prove it will be.

I'm the last one in the locker room when I hear a sultry female vo my skin tingles.

“Hey twenty-seven.”

I don't mind interviews with her—the woman knows what she's doing. She gets to the point. Lori Conrad knows the kind of shit we want heard—questions are always on point. But I don't exactly want her sneaking me alone in the locker room. I didn't like it when we were hooking up, but I certainly don't like it now.

At this point, I'm relieved I had a chance to put my shorts on and stepping back into the locker room.

"How'd you get in here?" I approach her but only because she's standing directly in front of my locker.

"One of these." She holds up her reporter badge.

"You just missed the rest of the team, but I think they're heading up the stairs."

She scans me with a grin. "I didn't miss anyone."

That makes two of us.

I look out of the blue at her. "You already interviewed me."

"Thought you'd like to know, you're our feature cover for next issue."

"Can it wait until I get my shirt on?" I point to my locker.

She shifts slightly. "I'm not a photographer, but thought you'd give me a bigger interview for page three. They're giving me the *whole* page, Kate."

"No, they're giving *me* the whole page. You just have to type it all." She gives me a smile.

She laughs and pushes against my shoulder as I open my locker. "Should you say, should we do this over drinks tonight? We can keep it real."

"I'm sure you want to get out of here."

I'm aware of another body in the room and my eyes move to the door. Cora stands at the threshold, her lips parted. Her eyes shift from Lori to me.

ing andand she takes a step back awkwardly, as if she's walked in on a
—so hermoment. “Sorry I was looking...”

g up on “Hey beautiful, come on in, I'll only be a minute.” I turn back t
. And Iwoman. “I've got other plans tonight, Lori, but happy to do a
conference or something in the next few days.” I watch her and wait
beforeleave. I'm standing close enough for her to read the disinterest on my f

She pushes off the locker next to mine. “Right. Well, I'll call you
standingphotoshoot and we'll talk, okay?” When Lori scans Cora from head to
her way out, I realize my protectiveness may not be limited to men.

I smile at her and she bites her lip, stepping in tentatively. “I take
stairs.” had two surprise female visits today?”

Still shirtless, I close the distance between us and pull her inside, s
the door behind her and pressing her against it. I imagine it was *her*
standing here when I got out of the shower. Hell, whether I had my sh
nonth'sor not.

I wish I could press my lips against hers right now to wipe the ins
off her face, but I know it's not the way.

re me a Not with Cora—not yet.

ne.” I take her hands as she stares at my chest—avoiding my eyes. “You

' I flash “I could have come back later,”

I raise her chin. “But I want you here now.”

so what “She's more than just a reporter, isn't she?” The strain in her voi
casual,me.

“I don't know, I didn't ask.”

e door. “I mean, you've slept with her.”

i to me I don't answer, my eyes dipping to her lips, rubbing the palm of her

She shakes her head. “It doesn't matter. You probably don't want to

private Reaching up, I brush her silky hair behind her ear. She's feeling hu
know in my gut I can't ignore it. And I'd be more than happy to jut my
o other little to give her all the reassurance she needs. But I respect Cora too r
i videostart with that. "We could always talk. Tell me what's on your mind."
for her She looks up, centering on my lips before her gaze slides up to mee
face. making it that much harder not to kiss her. Knowing I'm fucking h
for that now that I have her permission to be this close to her.

o toe on I take both her hands. "Cora, it's important that you trust me. That
me what you're thinking, especially if it has to do with me. I'm not s
e it you with anyone while you and I are...doing what we're doing."

She releases a breath. "Okay. I don't think I can do... " she glance
shutting door, "all the things she's done. I don't...I'm not as..."

I found *Alright. That's it.*

ports on "Tell you what she *didn't* do when I found her waiting for me."
close so she feels the bulge in my thin shorts. A smile forms her lip
security breathe. But it's short-lived and my chest tightens again at her hesitatio

"I want to make you feel the way you make me feel." Her voice is
but I love that she's speaking her mind.

okay?" *God, she's beautiful.* "How's that?"

"Good," she breathes. "So very good."

I bend closer, loving the way her breath catches as my nose brushes
ce gutshers. Funny, because that made me feel so very good too. Touchi
watching her come, feeling her get wetter against my fingers. That ni
unplanned, unwarranted, un-fucking-invited as it was—it was hott
anything I've ever experienced.

hand. But it can't happen that way again. Cora deserves better. She d
talk." romance, someone who doesn't finger-fuck her in a dark, cold garage.

rt and I I bend my head in shame.

y hips a “Nick?”

nuch to I lift my eyes to hers again.

“I know I put off this tough exterior that I’m ready for anything an
t mine, need anyone to do it, but I just...I don’t know what to expect with you
opeless Visions of Cora coming hard comes to mind, making me harder than
of us can handle right now.

you tell Her chest rises and falls, her heart-stopping breasts straining the fa
leeping her top, making me ache to set them free. My voice dips to sor
huskier. “It’s not going be anything like that night—not again,” I p
s at the “I’ll never catch you by surprise. You’ll be ready for everything we do
you’re not—we won’t do it.”

I wrap an arm around her waist and pull her tight against me. My e
' I lean coming in contact with the soft curve of her belly is all the encourag
s and I need to bring my other hand to her breast, cupping her through the sof
on. of her shirt. I squeeze lightly, making her moan. It’s a soft, sweet s
s small, know I’ll never get tired of hearing.

“I lost control that night. Feeling you bare had me lose any sense
left. But it won’t be like that again. I’ll never be rough with you.” I sn
run a thumb against her bottom lip. “I can’t promise that we’ll always
against bed, but I can guarantee I’ll keep you warm wherever we are.”

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er than

eserves

Cora

“Always?” I ask, the anxiety I’ve been feeling over being a one-time for him lifting.

“You didn’t think I’d be able to have you once and never want to see you again?”

Is he forgetting I know his MO?

His fingers dip under my shirt and immediately push down my bra straps around a bare breast and I swear his cock swells as it pushes against the fabric of my pelvis. His head is in my neck, his nose roaming as if I’m the most delicious scent he’s ever breathed.

He’s already driving me crazy and I’m ready to do it in the sweatiest, most unromantic place one could possibly lose their virginity—the locker room.

My head is turned to the side as he kisses along my jaw and my breath is heavy. I’m so desperate for more but don’t want this to be a one-way street. “Can we get back to rule four again?”

“Which one was that again?” he murmurs, losing himself in the kisses. I lick his trailing that make me shiver.

“Keeping things equal. If you make me come...in whichever way you do...I intend to return the favor.”

He pinches my nipple in response, making me moan again and then licks my bottom lip. “We’ll talk about it later.”

He doesn’t realize it, but Nick has given me enough confidence in the last five minutes to fight him on this. I’m not deterred by him shutting me out. I’m no longer afraid he’ll reject me. After all, he didn’t exactly say no now.

I reach down and tug on the band of his jogger shorts and lick my lips. His eyes dip down and steps back just enough to look at my face.

ie thing “Have you ever given head before?” He holds up a finger and I
laugh. “If you say yes, we have a bigger problem than if you say no.”

o touch I decide to have a little fun with him. “You know what, you’re right
talk about it later.”

He tightens his grip on me, playfully. “You’re fucking with me.”

to wrap My eyes dance. “Sweet little Cora?”

nst my “Tell me you’re fucking with me,” he urges with a hint of amusement
lectable steps forward, pushing me back up against the wall.

I raise a brow. “How would you ever know...unless I...?”

st, most He growls softly and I’m turned on by the sound. “You *are* fuckin
r room. me, you little minx.” He kisses me hard. “You’re going to pay for that.

thing is My eyes flare. “When?”

7 street. He laughs. “Come on,” he says, pulling my hand. “I’m going to
and then we’re going out.”

ses and I frown. “Where?”

ch way “On a date. Never let a man get in your pants without taking you ou
town first.”

en bites I let him drag me across the locker room to a bench as he gets c
“It’s a really big town,” I pout.

the last A wide smile spreads his face as he puts on a clean shirt. “It is,” he
casually. “And you’re worth the wait.”

e down.

no just



ips. His

We go to dinner, where Nick tries all the different cocky grins and
to make me swoon again—and even though I know he’s just trying t

almost me laugh, I don't have the heart to tell him it will never be what it was was thirteen.

it, we'll We talk about my internship, Jace, Nicole. He tells me which team can be trusted around me—spoiler alert—none. He keeps mentioning he's the least of all I should trust. It's not the first time he's dropped about him not being worthy, but I know it's just his way of trying to connect as someone that I'm special.

Which he hasn't stopped doing since he found me standing in the doorway of the locker room. He'd taken full control—leaving no room for doubt or anxiety and regardless of what we are—I'm grateful for it.

"I'm still coming down from whatever happened between us after the reporter left and the door was shut. I'm starting to wonder if I'm just changeable to arouse or if he's the reason my body reacts to every touch he does.

"Didn't you just get off the ice?"

It's on the "Yeah, but that's work. This is for fun."

I stare at the frozen path of water in front of us. I know I'm looking at a smaller lake of the smaller lakes in Hollyville but it looks tremendous to me.

"I don't have skates."

He agrees He pops his trunk open. There are his skates, which he reaches for like it's second nature and a black box. He holds the trunk open and looks toward it.

"Am I supposed to open that?"

"Yes, genius."

I shake my head and pull open the box. I don't know why I'm expecting a pair of shiny new white skates. What I find are used worn and eerily familiar ones.

when I “These are my old skates.”

He nods.

mmates “I tossed these in the trash.”

ng that “You did. I dug 'em out.”

ed hints “Why?”

onvince “Angel couldn’t keep you from falling on your ass, but I think

Before I have a chance to think or respond, his strong hands are on m
at theand he sits me on the edge of his open trunk, removing my boots and
om foron the skates I chucked when I was eighteen after Angel tried giv
lessons.

fter the She was a great teacher and it was just for fun, but I kept falli
ust thatdecided balancing on blades was not for me.

way it I step around in a circle, testing the vicious old things near the ca
the pro next to me puts his on and walks me to the ice.

“This is safe right?”

Nick eyes the perimeter of the lake and squints. “For the two of us?
g at onethink we’ll be alright. You can swim right?”

My eyes bulge and he laughs. “Alright come on.” He takes my ha
eases me onto the ice.

id pulls “Nick, there are no rails here.”

id nods “You have me.”

I look across the ice and see a man with a small child in pink coat a
skates.

ecting a “I hate that your idea of a first date is treating me like a five-year-ol
He follows my eyes to the duo several yards away. “We’re not datin

familiar I roll my eyes and take another step. “We’re not fucking either.”

He yanks me against him, and I yelp. “Say that again,” he breathes.

“We’re not fucking—your words right?” I repeat biting my lip smirk, deciding that getting a reaction out of him is my new favorite th

“You’re on thin ice, baby.”

“I hope you don’t mean that literally.” I raise a brow and he sha head. Then unknowingly spreads that infamous grin that made me sw I can.”years and the butterflies are back.

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“We’re not fucking—your words right?” I repeat biting my lip with a smirk, deciding that getting a reaction out of him is my new favorite thing.

“You’re on thin ice, baby.”

“I hope you don’t mean that literally.” I raise a brow and he shakes his head. Then unknowingly spreads that infamous grin that made me swoon for years and the butterflies are back.

Nicholas

I WASN'T INTENDING ON bringing Cora back to my place tonight here we are.

I'm not sure what I was expecting but I don't want our night to end damn right about ready to take her in that locker room and the fog distraction did nothing to deter me—which is an excellent tell of how much control I have around her.

There's a lingering taste I have in my mouth for Cora when she's near me. It started around the time she started college. Like one of those candies at the candy store that's only for display. Not to be touched or eaten. Just lures you into the store. And you're stuck picking out any other candy in the damn world—just not that one. The one your eye always catches, that's always there because no one else has or can touch it—and the haunting thing is—it's been staring back at you.

That's Cora in a nutshell.

And now I feel like the criminal that broke into the store after having taken that candy home with me.

“Lights are all out,” I mutter as I put my Jeep to a stop in the driveway. “Nicole must be asleep or out.”

“She’s okay to go out?” Cora asks.

“Yeah. Her old friends have been really good about getting her out of the house and trying to make her feel normal again, I think it’s helping.”

“You really trust her, don’t you?”

“Not one bit,” I say honestly. “But I gotta let her live.”

I jump out and come around the passenger side to help her out—least bit surprised finding her already on her feet. I take her hand and lead her to the front door, stopping and turning her to face me before we can press my lips softly to hers, swiping my tongue across to part them. I lick her, exploring her, but mostly owing her this kiss after I pushed her outside her front door.

I break the kiss, finding a beautiful lazy grin before her eyes flutter open. “Beware of the dog,” I warn before realizing I don’t need to since I’ve known Cora as long as I’ve had him. Which makes this my first time treating her like all my other dates.

Luckily, Cora pretends not to notice. She swipes her hand down my face and lifts a brow “Which one?”

I take her inside, closing the door behind her and immediately press her against my chest to continue what I started outside. She’s in a fit of giggles waiting for my furry friend to come running out of the den—but he doesn’t. Which is strange.

I hear a whimper. “That does not sound like Max,” I think out loud. I turn on the lights on in the foyer and living room, filling the entire front of the

urs and It takes a fraction of a second for me to notice my sister huddled
floor beside the couch in the den. She's swaying and sobbing. I race o
iveway. kneel beside her, putting my hand on her forearms to lift her off the flo

“Nicole. Nicky what's going on?”

She doesn't respond. She doesn't look at me, but her eyes move
t of the direction, so I know she's aware.

Cora dims the lights in the room almost instantly and I look at her.
are you doing?”

She ignores me and goes to the other side of Nicole kneeling do
not the puts one hand on her back. “Nicole? Sweetie.”

ead her My sister's eyes shift to the left where Cora sits but don't look at he
lk in. I “Hey, yeah, it's Cora,” she says with a smile. “Will you come sit
Tasting couch with me?” she asks as if she's talking to a small child.

r away I go to lift her but Cora, whose eyes never leave my sister puts
hand out—stopping me.

er back Nicole shakes her head shielding her face from the other side of the

ce Max “Lower the lights in the hall,” Cora urges me in a calm but rushed m
slip of I dim every room setting on the floor and return.

“What do you need?” Cora asks in a soft voice.

y chest “I—I need her to leave.”

Cora and I exchange glances, then her eyes are back on my sister. “
null her see her?”

s and I Her head shakes. “No.”

't. “Neither do I. Was she in this room?”

A harsh nod.

and flip “Do you want to try standing?”

house. Nicole stands and Cora hooks an arm around hers, taking her the tw

on the back to sit her on the couch. “Is this comfortable?”

ver and She nods.

ior. “Can you look at me?”

She turns her head slowly.

in our Cora smiles in response. “It’s just me and Nick here.” She waits for
acknowledge both of us. “Take a deep breath with me.”

“What Nicole hesitates, then starts breathing along with Cora, except it’s
and faster than Cora’s—but she doesn’t judge.

wn and “Okay, good.”

My mouth is open and I’m afraid to say or do anything that might in
r. Whatever Cora is doing seems to be working since Nicole is so
: on the responsive.

This hasn’t happened before and I’m in utter awe of her. Her tone is
a sharp gentle, and I wonder what the hell I’ve been missing about my own sister
past few weeks. Did I miss any signs? Was this in her discharge
room. Have I been ignoring Nicole’s needs?

urmur. Cora continues to speak in short easy sentences, all seeming to
together. She’s so collected. I knew she’s a psych major with a focus in
therapy, and about her internship, but I’ve never actually seen her do
someone who needed help.

Do you I don’t know what Cora said but Nicole nods and breathes easier and
don’t want her here again.” She looks up at me. Her eyes seeing
“Don’t let her near me.”

Cora looks up at me, clearly giving me a chance to respond and I freeze
Cora rubs her back and answers for me. “He won’t. You’re safe here.”
voice wavers and she looks back at me for reassurance.

70 steps “She came back,” my sister whispers painfully as Cora holds her.

I turn away and run my fingers through my hair in frustration. The way I get alerts for any motion around my property. But just in case I check back the security footage on my phone for any movement. Cora looks at her phone and I shake my head in response.

"I believe you Nicky," Cora whispers. "I believe that you saw her promise you're safe. I'm going to go make you some tea. Do you like sharper or honey?" The way Cora phrases the question, it isn't casual. It's intentional. Like she needs to make sure Nicole is focused and with her.

Nicole shakes her head. "Sugar." Her voice is soft. Cora nods but watches Nicky. "Warm or cold?" "Warm."

Satisfied, Cora stands and walks toward me. She stops at my shoulder and is calm, mutters, "Sit with her—short simple sentences, easy questions, and slow her breathing." I grab her arm before she walks past me. "What's happening?"

Cora shrugs like it's a simple matter. "She's having a panic attack. It could have been a dream or just—a reaction to something."

I look into her eyes. "Can you hurry back? I don't want to screw this up." She smiles up at me and nods.

I sit with Nicky and put an arm around her stiff shoulders. It's all I can do. I don't know what to say. I don't know if I can control my breathing the way Cora did. I don't know if I can sit here long enough without losing my temper and putting a restraining order on our mother. Give Nicky the reassurance that she's safe from her.

Nicole's tension starts to ease and she puts her head on my shoulder. Cora comes back with tea and touches Nicole's hand gently before placing

re's noon her lap. She holds it there until Nicole's fingers wrap around it.

, I play "Thank you."

s at my "I need to go make a phone call," I mumble before I bolt the room.

r. But I I'm gone for fifteen minutes by the time I get off the phone w

e sugar lawyer and the security office of the community. Cora is talking to N

ntional. can't make it out, my vision still blurred, but I know she's rambling

Nicole responsive and present.

"I checked your room, Nicky. There's no one in there. All the do
locked and we can put the heat up if you want," I offer.

Nicole nods and turns to Cora. "Will you stay with me for a little bit

der and "I'm right behind you," she says reassuringly.

try and After the girls are safe in Nicole's room, I make my third walkthro
the house. It's the definition of insanity, but I do it anyway. I also c
still. I hate feeling helpless when it comes to her. I couldn't help her a

. A bad years ago. I let her push me away while she let herself slip into

delayed existence and now I have no idea what to fucking do when she had an

s up." I text Jace a quick update on Nicole and that Cora is with her. Luc
doesn't ask for more background on that.

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on her lap. She holds it there until Nicole's fingers wrap around it.

"Thank you."

"I need to go make a phone call," I mumble before I bolt the room.

I'm gone for fifteen minutes by the time I get off the phone with my lawyer and the security office of the community. Cora is talking to Nicole. I can't make it out, my vision still blurred, but I know she's rambling to keep Nicole responsive and present.

"I checked your room, Nicky. There's no one in there. All the doors are locked and we can put the heat up if you want," I offer.

Nicole nods and turns to Cora. "Will you stay with me for a little bit?"

"I'm right behind you," she says reassuringly.

After the girls are safe in Nicole's room, I make my third walkthrough of the house. It's the definition of insanity, but I do it anyway. I also can't sit still. I hate feeling helpless when it comes to her. I couldn't help her all those years ago. I let her push me away while she let herself slip into a toxic existence and now I have no idea what to fucking do when she had an attack.

I text Jace a quick update on Nicole and that Cora is with her. Luckily, he doesn't ask for more background on that.

Cora

I'M NOT SURPRISED TO find Nick awake when I lightly knock door at nearly two in the morning. Nicole finally fell asleep and I'm staring at her ever since...with my mind wandering to places too complex to think about at this hour. What caused her attack? How can we help them?

I make a vow to myself to check in on her daily. She's lucky to have just as I'm lucky to have Jace looking after me, but he can't always be with her.

Words get stuck in my throat when he swings the door open following a light knock. He looks about a year older than four hours ago. He's shirtless and in a pair of plaid drawstring pants.

"I'm sorry," I say finally.

He pulls me inside, tugging me against his chest and I'm overwhelmed by the affection. His grip turns strong, tight. After a moment, he moves to

the door behind me. “Thank you.”

“I’m sorry it’s late. She’s been asleep for hours, I just...got lost in watching her.”

He rubs my arms and rests his chin over my head, breathing in my know the feeling. I forget that you’re a therapist.”

I push past him. “I’m far from a Ph.D.”

He’s holding on to my hand as I walk further into his master bedroom seeing it for the first time. “I’ve never been in here before.”

“There’s good reason for that.” He smiles for the first time in hours.

“Oh, do naughty things happen here?”

“Not for me. You might consider them pretty naughty.”

I bite my lip.

“You’re tired,” he says matter of factly.

on his “A little.”

ve been He takes my hand. “Come here.”

licated I rest my head on his chest as he smooths my hair, stroking me. My prevent drifts to his bed as he leans down to my ear. “Stay with me. Sleep with me,” he says in a husky voice that warms me.

e Nick, He lifts my arms and pulls my sweater over my head, and bends to show me his bare shoulder.

be here “You cold?”

ring my I shake my head and smile up at him encouragingly.

hirtless He strips me of my pants and in just my undergarments, leads me to the bed. I’m not nervous or scared. I don’t feel cold or self-conscious. Nick has a way of always keeping me warm and I feel safe in his arms.

med by And I already feel safe in his bed as he settles next to me, wrapping me too close in his arms.

I expect to start questioning what this is, what it means that we're just thoughtsleeping next to each other. And for how long we'll be doing this. A
things would be the *healthier* option to let my mind wander to right no
hair. "I But instead, I let myself do the one thing I know I shouldn't—I en
love it. I want more of it.

"Why did you choose to work with kids?"

room, I blink. Unprepared for the question. But give him an honest
"Because I hate child therapists."

"Oh. So this is a 'keep your enemies close' kind of scheme you go
on?"

I laugh and feel his stomach rumble beneath me. "No. It's because
it when my dad forced me to go when I was younger. I sat there and v
these kids be forced to talk about things they don't want to talk about.
I just want to make a difference."

He strokes the top of my forehead and then my hair. "I'm sorry yo
ly gazethrough all that. I guess they thought it was the best thing for you."
th me," "I remember thinking when I'd sit there that I wouldn't mind talkin
they didn't say or do anything to make me trust them. Why should I
kiss myyou about how I'm feeling? Who are you to me? Is there an answer
clipboard on how to treat me if I tell you my heart is broken? That
sure how my life will be now. Do you see a crystal ball that says, eve
the pain and anger will go away and I'll be happy?"

e to his Nick moves and lifts my chin, his eyes searching mine as if he's
Nicholasfor something. "Did it?"

"In a way, it kind of did go away. And I guess I'm happy. I feel sh
; me upsometimes, but I consider myself lucky—comparatively."

He chuckles. "I'm sure comparatively, your dad and Jace would be

ist hereof how they raised you.”

ll these We laugh and he twists me to spoon me and we settle into a comf
w. silence. For a moment I think he’s asleep until he whispers.

joy it. I “Thank you for tonight. You were amazing with her. I don’t know
would have done.”

“You would have done just fine.” I squeeze the hand he holds arou
answer.and turn to face him. His eyes roam my face. There’s something betwe
and appreciation in them and I’m not sure which I want to hold on
t goingthen it shifts and I think I see regret.

“I’m sorry,” I say instantly.

I hated He frowns. “Why?”

atched “You should have been here. This is my fault. You would have bee
I guesshours ago.”

“Cora. What happened to Nicole or the fact that I’m not with her t
ou wentfour-seven isn’t your fault. I’m just so glad you were here.” He br
hand down my cheek and I turn to kiss his palm.

ig—but He pulls me closer, pressing my barely covered breasts against hi
talk toand kisses between my eyes. When he touches me like this, when I
in yourheat, his mouth, the need to hold me like this, I want to melt.

I’m not “Is this weird for you?” he asks.

ntually I shake my head. “No.” *It feels right*, I want to say. “Does it feel w
you?”

looking He frowns as if confused. “I thought it would. But it feels...” he lo
the right words and I can’t help but cut him off.

reltered “Just like any other one of your—”

“No. Nothing like that.” He swallows. “I was going to say it feels...
e proudbeing with you.”

I smile sheepishly, because I know he'll never say what he really
fortable Not even if it would mean the world to me that I mean so much more

I swallow it down and turn the focus back to his sister.

what I “Don't worry about tonight. Nicole got through it alright and she's
hands with you.”

und me He watches me for a moment, then brushes the crease along my b
een lustsmooth the frown line. “So are you.”

ito. But

Nicholas

n home

twenty-

ushes a

is chest

feel his

eird for

oks for

decent

At dawn, I hit the shower faster than I can make sense of what d
Cora and I slept for maybe three hours and my dick was way too awar
presence. Her ass brushing against me involuntarily on more th
occasion.

I decide that I love the way Cora sleeps. Everything about it is
adorable. After she dozed off, I watched her until I couldn't keep n
open. Only to wake up with a boner seven times between then a
minutes ago.

I brush my teeth and set a spare one for Cora on the counter.
It occurs to me that I hadn't thought of my best friend once since
him that Cora was with Nicole—and I'm okay with that.

Cora should feel wrong. All of this should feel wrong—not we
word I used for her sake last night. But it doesn't.

means. It feels fucking right.

to him. It feels good.

And I feel like utter shit for saying this, but I can't wait to make her
in goodTo be inside her. To watch her detonate again and again like the bomb
that she is.

How to I rinse the soap in my hair and shake my head, wondering how the hell
going to control myself with this girl.

I'm probably only going to end up freaking her out with my kind of
dirty talk.

And God do I want to get dirty with her.

When I hear the door creek open, I pull my hand off my cock and cover
myself.

She walks in ignoring me and picks up the sealed brush next to the
swipe at the steam filled glass to see her better and she looks back at me
ay it is. the mirror and winks, brushing her teeth.

end of her "Sure," I call. "Make yourself at home."

and one She spits. "If you say so." She bends and I'm not sure what she's
fucking until she stands again, now bottomless. She turns to face the mirror,
me a full view of her bare ass and brings her fingers to her back, unbuttoning
my eyes her bra.

and five "Cora," I warn, but my voice is too strained to be taken seriously.

She turns and I'm done for.

"Fuck Cora."

I texted "You almost done?" Without invitation—and I'm not speaking for myself
here, she steps into the shower.

bird, the "Cora," it's a whisper now.

She shrugs. "Just in case you run out of hot water."

“You’re going to kill me.”

She looks down and her bottom lip drops slightly. Her eyes lift
r mine.mine. “Why aren’t you touching me, Nicholas?” She glances down. ‘
nbshelllooks like you want to.”

I stand still under the spray, making no moves to invite her further in
nell I’m I put a hand on the tile wall, the urge to reach for her too strong
have no control. I can’t take her for the first time this way. The
lks andstrong, aggressive—it’ll be hard, merciless against this wall and I w
that to her.

She sees it. I know she does. Her glare meets mine in this unders
course toand she presses herself against the wall. I put my hands on either side
and she gives me one wicked grin before she slides down on her knees
e sink. I My jaw clenches. “What are you doing?”

ne from She looks up at me through her long dark lashes. “Rule number four

I press my hands harder against the tile as she wraps her hands arou
making me groan before I manage to say, “I vetoed that one.”

s doing “I reinstated it.” I swear just looking at her kneeling before me
givingshower is enough to make me come.

looking “Cora, get up.” My voice is strained and unconvincing.

Ignoring me like the defiant kid she’s always been, she opens. I his
tip enters her warm mouth.

And it’s just about all I can take. I glide into her and she takes me
deeper. I resist the urge to pump. It’s apparently a skill I didn’t realiz
ny dickresistance.

“Jesus Cora, how the fuck are you so good at this?” I don’t w
answer to this.

Actually, I do.

There's amusement in her eyes when she pulls out momentarily and back to me a sinful grin. "Practice. Lots of practice."

"It sure I look down and jut my hips against her mouth and she welcomes it me deeper. Satisfaction written all over her face.

1. This wasn't part of our deal and I'm going to regret this. I'm supposed and I'll be pleasuring *her*. Being her first so it's done right. So there are no need is I'm not supposed to be teaching her how to deep throat for Christ's sake on't do I'm close. I'm going crazy. "Cora," I breathe. "Cora, just use you now."

standing She doesn't stop and I wrap her hair around my hand and pull e of her pressing her against the wall and pressing my mouth to hers as I finish . off. "You're in so much trouble."

She smiles up at me. "Promise?"

:" I yank up one of her legs and press her against the wall. Then I ind me, fingers up her thigh until they reach her entrance. Her breathing acc as she watches me, waits for me to do something.

in my I decide Cora's anticipation is now something I *live* for. I crave see wait for me, want me, and who knows, maybe even beg me. I pre fingers carefully against her clit, putting just enough pressure to dr s as my wild.

"Do you want me to make you come, Cora?"

further, Her eyes are closed like she can't take it and nods. My fingers dip i e I had; and she moans. God, is she a fucking pro at this? Because I can't ev teasing her any longer.

ant the I pump in and out of her, kissing her to muffle the sounds I pull out The shower is running but my sister is still just down the hall. She

d gives hard on my fingers and I hold her up as she goes limp. I wait a few
before removing them, tempted as fuck to lick them clean.

, taking But I don't know how she'll take that.

"I think I like your idea of punishment," she breathes. "Can't wait
used to what you'll do when I really cross the line."

regrets. I lean down to kiss her and slide my hand down her back, giving
a quick smack. She yelps and giggles in response before stepping
our hand grabbing my towel, wrapping it around herself.

I stand corrected.

her up, *I'm* in so much trouble.

myself

run my

accelerates

hitting her

press two

give her

into her

then bare

of her.

comes

hard on my fingers and I hold her up as she goes limp. I wait a few beats before removing them, tempted as fuck to lick them clean.

But I don't know how she'll take that.

"I think I like your idea of punishment," she breathes. "Can't wait to see what you'll do when I really cross the line."

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I stand corrected.

I'm in so much trouble.

Nicholas

“I’M LEAVING FOR SEATTLE tomorrow,” I tell Cora as we drive. “Three days, right?” I forget she knows our travel schedule.

“Yeah. No band boys while I’m gone.”

“Does that go for you too?” It’s so tentative, if my heart didn’t hurt a little, I’d think it was cute.

“Of course. I’m not really into band boys.”

Cora back hands me and I laugh, catching her hand and holding it. I have no intention of being with anyone while I’m with Cora. For as long as I’m doing this, I’m all about her. But I don’t need to put it to her that way. “It goes for me too. Jesus, you’re worse than a real girlfriend.”

It’s a quick flash and gone before I can realize it, but my stupid comment definitely affected her.

She clears her throat. “I’ll let you finish up whatever it is you’re doing every morning. I’m going to go...check on Nicole.”

Way to go asshole.

I find Cora with Nicole downstairs. It's snowing and they're both drinking coffee. Nicole looks tired but bright. Her skin glows and her hair is looking shiny today. She looks good. I walk up to her and kiss the top of her head.

"How'd you sleep?"

She raises a brow. "How'd *you* sleep?"

I hear Cora kick her under the chair and shoot her a look.

I'm returned with an innocent shrug and I roll my eyes as I reach for my coffee mug. I can't bring myself to care that Nicole suspects something because, I'm ninety percent sure Nicole suspected something before I even got here. Second, I'm too relieved seeing my sister herself again.

I grunt, losing myself with all the estrogen in the room. "What day is it?"

"Sunday," Cora answers sharply. "And Jace has already texted three times today asking about..." she glances at Nicole, "um...breakfast."

"Can I give you a ride?" I offer.

"No. I'll walk. It's just the other side of the lake." She winks at me. I know she wants someone here with Nicky and quite frankly, I'm not sure I want to go alone yet either.

"I'll walk you out," I say, knowing I'm only making things more complicated with my sister, but I don't care.

"Yes."

"Tell Jace I'm feeling better today," Nicole calls out, not buying my coverup one bit.

I have

Cora winces, slightly embarrassed about her lie. "Ignore her," I say, putting my hand along her back. We step out into the cold air and I tuck my hands against the wall of my garage.

do here

“Sorry.” Cora rubs her forehead. “I don’t usually think straight mornings.”

sipping “It’s not you. My sister has some weird telepathic power. She can te
ong and you’re thinking just by looking at you.”

ead. “Oh God, I hope not.”

I brush my thumb across her lips. “Why? You starting to hav
thoughts when I’m around?”

“Yeah...*starting*.” She rolls her eyes.

h for a And with that, I snap back into where I need to be. Reminding mys
ng. For Cora’s had a crush on me and I’m getting too close. She needs to kn
ren did. we’re temporary. That my only mission here is to be her first.

So it’s done right. So she’s not taken advantage of. Or hurt.

s it?” I also wanted to apologize for the girlfriend comment upstairs but I
e times it was for the best. We both need the reminder that this isn’t that.

“I should go. Thanks for last night.” She reaches up to kiss my

“And this morning...”

I know I grunt. “Would I be a dick if I said you’re welcome...no pun intend

want her She laughs. “A little bit yes.”

obvious Deciding I can live with a little bit of a dick, I say, “Then
welcome.”

Cora’s



I say,
uck her “You know you can’t bring me to practice every day,” Nicole says
way to the arena for a scrimmage we have scheduled.

in the “Why not? Coach started bringing his kid to practice.” I shrug, trying
hell to play this down because I don’t want to stress her out. I’m holding
all whatshit together right now—but once I have a minute alone, I have
intention of calling her therapist to ask what the hell that was about.

And how I can keep it from happening.

the dirty Cora isn’t always going to be there to tell me how to deal with it.

“I’m not a five-year-old girl whose nannies keep quitting.”

“That’s because he keeps hiring bimbo’s. He needs a Ms. Doubtfire
herself thatof nanny. You know, someone old and isn’t only taking the job to get
now thatCollins.” I shake my head.

Where does he even find these candidates?

I see Nicole stare out the window and already know that I’ve so
decidemanaged to offend her.

I sigh. “But no, you’re not some kid I need to keep an eye on. I just
cheek.not ready to leave you alone. I’ll be worried sick and it’ll be a
practice. I’m supposed to be setting an example for my team.”

led.” “Have you considered that maybe *I’d* be the distraction for your
I’m there?” She brushes her hair back and bats her lashes dramatically.
you’re I laugh.

“Hey!”

“What, no, I didn’t mean it like that. My team knows that you’re off
Just like—”

Shit.

She grins and I know what’s coming. “Like Cora?”

on our “Yeah. Like Cora.”

She turns back to her window. “I hope you know what you’re doing

“What’d she tell you we were doing?”

ing like “Nothing. I don’t ask questions I don’t want the answers to. I’m just
ling myyou...whatever it is, I hope you know what you’re doing.”

every “Care to elaborate?”

“Do you?”

I take in a deep frustrated breath. “No. But I will tell you that I
going to hurt her. It’s why I’m—never mind.”

She frowns and I see the disappointment—like she’s just realiz
re kindwhole thing with Cora is a bad idea. “Yeah. Never mind.”

close to Nicole’s been making fun of us having a thing for each other an
she’s against it? I decide it’s not a safe subject to ask, so I focus on t
and let it go.

mehow Because I know she’ll only give logic and reason as to why we’l
work. And even though I know it, I don’t want to hear it.

st—I’m

wasted



team if

. Having Nicole at eye level is helping, but my focus is still off.

Way off.

It’s rare that I have a girl stay over. When I do, fun times in the earl
f limits.of the day is typically okay with me. But it’s never been the main so
my distraction on the ice. It’s not just the fact that I was with Cora la
—and this morning. It’s the image I get of her in the shower, in my t
laugh that rings in my ear when all my senses should be focused on r
move.

.” SLAM

telling I take a hit against the boards and drop. It takes me a minute, but sharp head shake, I'm on my feet again. I start slow—but I'm not looking at the puck. Naturally, I'm out for revenge.

I'm quick as I move across the ice—and cross check Garret, the one I'm not who hit me.

“Not cool,” I mutter to my own teammate.

ed this The whistle is blown.

Garret throws his arms in the air. “It's just a practice, what are you mad now out of shape for? I was just trying to wake you up.”

he road Coach kicks us off the ice until the scrimmage is over and I move to where Nicole sits.

I never After a moment of letting me cool off, she leans in. “I thought my presence here would help you stay focused...”

“Be quiet.”

She hums. “Not about me is it? I'll try not to be offended...”

I shoot her a hard glare.

“I mean I did feel like I was possessed by the devil last night...but it was good.”

I sigh and drop my head in my hands. “I'm sorry.”

y hours She jerks. “Oh my God dude, I'm joking. I'm actually so relieved because I didn't freak out. I mean I was half expecting to find you standing on the ice last night.”

ed, her I shake my head, then look at her. “Are you alright? Should we start talking or something?”

There's a beat and a flash in her eyes before she waves me off. “Of course not. I don't do the talking thing—remember?”

“Right.”

with a *That's what I thought.*

king for “But you know, if you need to...”

She smiles. “I know. Now please get cleaned up so we can get
player here.”

“I’ll be right back.”

I’m halfway toward the door to the locker room when I glance
quickly in her direction.

She’s watching the others clear the ice and the Zamboni machine
only see her profile—but the smile she feigned so well a moment ago
With no one watching, she’s solemn again—maybe a little bit scar
stares at the

being machine and puts her jacket on, then sinks slightly in her seat.

I’m about to go back but apparently, I wasn’t the only one watching
Coach Collins is making his way down the aisle. He says something
smirk and I see her straighten and laugh.

I breathe a sigh of relief and turn back to the locker room.

To be honest, I don’t trust anyone with a dick near her—but at least
Coach, she’s safe.

ed you

ver my

we...be

course

That's what I thought.

“But you know, if you need to...”

She smiles. “I know. Now please get cleaned up so we can get out of here.”

“I’ll be right back.”

I’m halfway toward the door to the locker room when I glance back quickly in her direction.

She’s watching the others clear the ice and the Zamboni machine enter. I only see her profile—but the smile she feigned so well a moment ago is gone.

With no one watching, she’s solemn again—maybe a little bit scared. She stares at the

machine and puts her jacket on, then sinks slightly in her seat.

I’m about to go back but apparently, I wasn’t the only one watching her.

Coach Collins is making his way down the aisle. He says something with a smirk and I see her straighten and laugh.

I breathe a sigh of relief and turn back to the locker room.

To be honest, I don’t trust anyone with a dick near her—but at least with Coach, she’s safe.

Cora

THE FOLLOWING SUNDAY NIGHT, Angel, Nicole and I grab before the game. We originally had plans for a “take 2” girls’ : Nicole is very set on it for some reason—but the guys convinced us to watch the game tonight since the next two are travel game apparently, tonight is when Nicholas Kane is being interviewed photographed for his feature in the magazine. Which means, lots of lots of VIP’s, and lots of people surrounding Nick, in general tonight naturally, my motivation is slim tonight knowing I’ll be the least concerns.

“You look cute,” Angel points out.

I shrug. “Why should the guys get all the attention tonight?” I wearing anything that stands out. A black blouse and blue miniskirt knee-high boots. They’re the only thing *leather* I’ll ever wear again with fur on the inside since it’s been ridiculously cold out and very low

“I think it’s too modest,” Nicole counters. “Show some skin babe.”

I point to the space between the skirt and the top of one boot. “Skin.

Angel puts her fork down. “Excuse me, who is it that you think looking at her while her obnoxiously overprotective brother is around?

Nicole shrugs. “Someone with a death wish.”

“Oh stop,” I tell her.

Angel’s eyes bulge. “You two have been holding out on me—do I get a streak in my hair to be in the know?”

“Yes, a blue one.” Nicole challenges, her eyes narrowing.

“There’s nothing to tel—” I start, and immediately get cut off.

“And...” Nicole leans in, facing Angel. “One day on the ice—with I Angel frowns and leans back in her seat. “Keep your secrets.”

Nicole shakes her head, her eyes still narrowed but with dinner disappointment.

night— My eyes shift between the two of them and I laugh nervously. “You o come missing anything, really.”

s. And As if I’m not even in the room, Nicole stays focused on Ange ed and crossed in front of her. “And it’s juicy too...”

media, “Don’t care.” Angel twists her head.

ght, so “Jace would be absolutely liiiivid.”

of his “Oh fucking fine—one hour at the rink and no one else can be arou one.”

Nicole and I stare at Angel—who neither of us have ever hear I’m not before.

irt with Nicole looks to me, almost apologetically and I know what she’s . Lined me.

v heel. “Well, you have to now,” I say.

Nicole grins. "You do it."

" I sigh and take a small sip of wine, then turn to Angel. "It's Nicola
will be

"



need to The Buffalo Blades win and we're up in the rooftop suite, which
really on the roof but has access to an extended terrace. The lighting
blue, the décor is minimal with a few chairs lined up in front of the
wall window view of the arena, a bar along the back wall, and a few
ne." tables.

It's far more elaborate.

l vivid And far more expensive.

"What's the matter? You're usually a little more excited at these games
I'm not I shrug. "I've had a long week." That and all the Nick Kane pra
cheers and tall, smoking hot ice-girls surrounding him for the photo sh
l, arms me slightly irritable.

"I wouldn't worry about them," Angel says, following my gaze.

And here I thought I was being super cool—only looking
occasionally.

ind. No "Easy for you to say," I mutter. Since Angel could *literally* fit r
Hell, she's probably still even got her old uniform.

d curse She moves behind me and grasps my shoulders, shifting me slight
worry about *her*."

asking I frown. "The reporter?"

"Her name is Lori Conrad. We always suspected something was going
with those two. I'm willing to bet it was a one-time thing—two at be:

poor thing just can't let go."

s." *Great.*

Although it's not really Lori I'm worried about. Nick made it clear he doesn't want her—and I believe him.

I just have a feeling that I'm going to be in her shoes someday soon.

"Yeah," Nicole chimes in. "I was here earlier for Nick's interview. I know that woman dragged the damn thing out on purpose to knock me out. She could take advantage of your man."

wall-to- "He's not my man."

around Most of the camera crew starts to clear out, and I'm instantly reminded. How many shots of Nick and the cheer squad did they really need?

I glance around. It made sense that they'd save those shots for up his romantic lighting, the crisp blazer over his shoulders. God, he looks like a man enough to eat.

ise and With that thought, I turn away—taking a sip of God knows what. I know just what I need.

"Ice water," she says. "You need to cool off."

"I'm fine."

g over *Or at least I was before all this Lori talk.*

I hate feeling insecure. It's against everything I've taught myself over the years. Instead, I look for my brother, who is rarely in a suit, but tonight's events, the entire team is suited for the occasion.

ly. "I'd I take a breath and just enjoy the girls' company. A few months ago, I would have felt out of place in a setting like this. I would have felt like a kid sister. Tonight, I feel different. I feel like I belong. Like I'm here with the players—the team captain. Who has yet to approach me—just to talk—and understand it.

We're a secret.

And he intends to keep it that way.

clear he When my eyes shift to my brother, I remember why. Years of
friendship flashes before me and I break a little inside knowing what
do if I ever dare ask Nick to unmake us a secret.

I swear Given that he's only looked my way a handful of times tonight, to
so shecount of eight seconds, I know making me feel like I mean more to him
last thing on his mind.

The last few times I was here, all I had to do—though unintended
believed.talk to a few of the players off to the side, and Nick would just show up

But I'm not doing that today. He didn't only approach me because
ere, theterritorial. He's into me. Not because someone else was playing with
is goodhe thought he didn't want.

I push down the pain I feel building and swallow hard.

Angel *He likes me. I know he does. He respects me.*

"Hey, are you okay?" Nicole asks. Angel isn't with us and I assume
gone to congratulate her dad on the win.

I blink up and nod. "Of course."

"Well chin up, girl. Looks like Ms. Hot Stuff is making her rounds."
over the I frown, then follow Nicole's glance. It's her again. Lori. I'd have
t giveshe'd leave with the media crew. Then again, she looks like she's dressed
a party in that tight white cocktail dress. Her long, blonde highlights
s ago Igrazing her round ass.

ace's She's talking to Royce Collins, and he looks as disinterested as ever
with onethat my eyes trace the shape of her curves. She really is something to look
, but I "Do sports reporters dress like that?" I ask.

"Nope." Nicole pops, eyeing them again. Then drops the ice cube from

mouth back into the cup.

Angel finds them and slips her hand into his arm. “Hey, Dad, the of their are. I need your help with something.” She pulls him in our direction I could from the femme fetal.

“Hello, ladies,” Coach Collins greets us. “If it’s too crowded for talking awe’ve opened up the deck, there’s some heat lamps out there and n is the cider.”

“Oh, that does sound good,” Nicole says. “Maybe in a little bit.”
d—was “I guess I have to go say hello to my old team,” Angel says. “I’ll s p. girls in a bit.”

se he’s My eyes shift to Lori who’s moved back to Nick. They’re talking the toysomething, and he seems so into it. So into *her*.

His smile is so genuine that I have to look away to breathe.

“Breathe,” Nicole reminds subtly.

“What?”

ie she’s “There’s no pouting in hockey.”

I chuckle at her words and from the corner of my eye, see Nick look direction with a grin. I turn and hold his gaze for a beat. His smile wide
, *I knew I was being crazy.*

thought “Uh-oh,” Nicole mutters.

ssed for “What?”

ed hair Nicole looks up and away as she speaks, as if we’re undercover. “S him basically stare at you.”

. I hate “So?”

ook at. She shakes her head, still watching Lori with her brother. “My g she’s going to approach you at some point tonight. Head up. Don’t om her trap you into telling her anything—remember she’s a reporter.” She t

me. “And most importantly, don’t get sucked into a world where you are yours better than you.”

1, away “You’re being paranoid, but I appreciate it.” I want to hug her but I would be weird here. “Do you want to go outside now? I could use some air for you, “Yes. I’m just going to go grab us some cider from the bar.”

I warm “Sounds delicious, I’ll meet you out there,” I tell her.

I manage to sneak another glance at the duo on the other side of the bar and catch Nick nodding at every word she says. His focus is so sincere that if someone blocks my view, I realize there’s still one cameraman circling me. I’m not sure if Nick notices, but as soon as the camera moves, his expression flattens and he’s turned away from her.

“Oh,” I mutter to myself with a breath and shake my head at myself. *is not healthy.*

I see Nicole hold up the drinks and nod for me to meet her outside the bar. I back and turn to set down my water.

“Can I get you another?” I jerk back as Lori approaches me from behind. With Nicole’s warning fresh in my head, I refrain from swallowing. “I’ll take this bitch on.”

I put my hand on her arm. “Oh good, they finally sent someone, wow. Thanks.” I smile brightly.

She saw She grins knowingly, but I can see the skin tighten around her face. “Conrad, Hollyville Sports Mag, I’m sure you remember me from the bar room.” She nudges me and winks obnoxiously.

I guess is I blink flatly.

let her “Anyway, sweets,” she touches my shoulder and I shiver internally. “I’ll be on the radio for a fabulous interview with Nicholas Kane today and I’m just going

u thinkasking his friends and family more about his personality. Care to shar
words?”

know it I want to walk past her but it will only prove my insecurity and fear.
ne air.” “Now I know it’s a school night so I’m not going to take too much
time. You’re his kid sister, right?” She nods as if answering h
question.

ie room “No.” My eyes shift, and I see Nick looking in our direction. His br
. Whenpulled together. But he doesn’t approach us. I don’t even know if he’
ng. I’mto, because one of the team owners just approached him.

ression I turn back to the woman, who I refuse to let treat me like a child.

“Oh, well you’re definitely someone’s kid sister.” She puts her p
lf. *This*polished finger to her matte red bottom lip. “Oh, Jace Knight. That’
sorry dear, I get my boys mixed up all the time.”

2. I nod “Oh that’s okay Linda, I’m sure they could care less. Excuse me.”
past her and make my way past the crowd and onto the cool deck. It’
where. but I need it right now. There’s less of a crowd here. Maybe six o
ing andpeople. I don’t see Nicole or Angel, so I move to a quiet spot to take a
gripping the rail for support.

uld you “Did I say something to upset you, sweetie?”

drinks. I turn. My teeth clench, but not from the chill.

“Sorry I didn’t mean to scare you.”

2. “Lori “You didn’t.”

3. locker “Oh, are you feeling nauseous? Alcohol tends to do that to newbies.
be fine. Sorry for the misunderstanding earlier, I just thought yo
Nick’s little sister, but I guess you stopped by the other day fo
, “I hadreasons?” She raises a brow.

around I swallow hard at her patronizing voice. The one that makes me

and a few grab the leftover drink on the nearest table and splash it in her face.

When I don't respond, she grins and takes another step toward me. "I can give you some advice, woman to..." she scans me "woman?" she offers of yourshe's doing me a favor. "We've all had crushes on men we can't have our ownpoint or another so I get it—"

"I don't have a crush on Nick," I say, and wish I'd kept my doors aremouth shut, feeling my cheeks burn.

She says about "Right. Okay well then in that case, take my advice for what it is, don't waste your time chasing something or believing something that isn't true. You must have misunderstood that you're his sister because I see the way he looks perfectly at you." She scrunches her nose and shakes her head pityingly. "It's not right,romantic, it's more like..."

My throat is clogged and suddenly, I can't speak or swallow. What do I pushfine, because I'm afraid of saying something that might get Nick in trouble? Coach Collins is big on keeping unnecessary information out of the locker room and I won't be the one to screw with that.

I take a breath, So I stand here.

And let her tell me that I'm basically worthless. Also fine—because at least Nick is protected.

"There's my girl." The voice is husky and breathy, but there's an edge to it—or maybe I'm imagining it.

Nick breezes over to me as if Lori isn't standing directly in front of me. You'll puts his hands on my waist, swiftly tugging me against him. "I've never seen you, baby," he murmurs as if I'm the only one who can hear him. He presses his lips to mine.

The kiss is shocking and deep and passionate. Like he's been waiting forever to devour me just like this. His hand moves to my hair and

strokes the side of my face, lifting my jaw then slowly breaks our kiss
“Can I had just about enough, you want to get out of here soon?”

rs, as if I clear my throat and glance at Lori. He follows my eyes.

at one “Oh hey,” he mutters carelessly at the woman. Then his brows jump
he’d just had an idea. “Hey Lori, you mind taking a few shots of me
defensive girlfriend?”

“I’m not a photographer,” she grits. “Also I don’t think it’s good
. Don’t—”

there. I “Yeah, you’re probably right. Hey, thanks again for the spot today.”

he looks “Just doing my job,” she says flatly then turns. “Gotta run.”

It’s not When she’s out of the room, I look up at Nick apologetically. “I am
—”

which is “Go get your coat,” he says sharply. His eyes are not on me. They’re
trouble. focused on someone else.

media I frown and follow his gaze to the door.

Jace is standing there glaring at us. His jaw tight.

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strokes the side of my face, lifting my jaw then slowly breaks our kiss. “I’ve had just about enough, you want to get out of here soon?”

I clear my throat and glance at Lori. He follows my eyes.

“Oh hey,” he mutters carelessly at the woman. Then his brows jump as if he’d just had an idea. “Hey Loris, you mind taking a few shots of me and my girlfriend?”

“I’m not a photographer,” she grits. “Also I don’t think it’s good for you ___”

“Yeah, you’re probably right. Hey, thanks again for the spot today.”

“Just doing my job,” she says flatly then turns. “Gotta run.”

When she’s out of the room, I look up at Nick apologetically. “I am so so ___”

“Go get your coat,” he says sharply. His eyes are not on me. They’re dead focused on someone else.

I frown and follow his gaze to the door.

Jace is standing there glaring at us. His jaw tight.

Nicholas

MY HEART IS STILL pounding against my chest. I've been plenty in my lifetime. Angry to the point of a complete break and turned perfectly set dinner tables upside down. Nearly smashed a face to a pulp for saying something wrong during a tough time in my life. I've never—and I mean ever—felt the urge to knock a woman off her heels.

Something primal came over me when I followed the girls out here and found Lori talking to Cora like she was vapor, not worthy of someone like me.

When in reality, the reason I'm keeping my distance is because *I'm* unworthy of someone as extraordinary as Cora. Sweet, innocent, beautiful heart-of-pure-gold, Cora. It's unlike her to stand there and be basically silent.

No—she was holding back.

For my sake.

And I don't deserve it. I've never deserved anything Cora thinks I'm worthy of. And I know her brother would feel the same way.

We wait until Cora is inside and Jace approaches me. I'm ready to be punched in the face. His fists are tight and he's angry and I'm thankful Cora is not here to see any of it.

He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. Then his forehead sweeps past me and places his hands on the rail, looking out into the city.

"Thank you," he says in the quietest of voices.

I blink.

He shakes his head. "Man I saw your face turn red and I was afraid for Lori for a minute there...but what you did..." he grips his hands tight. "I don't know why I'm thanking you but—just take it and never mention my name again."

I'm angry

breakdown "Don't thank me," I say.

a man's He finally faces me. "The fuck was that shit about? Why was she at life, but her?"

her high I don't answer. I have a feeling I know why, and Cora didn't deserve it.

ere and "I'm not finished with her yet." I pick up my phone and dial my number.
me like "Yeah, listen. I did an interview today with Lori Conrad. Make sure it gets published. I hear she's getting false information and is ready to run with it. It's null and void and I'll deny it."

the one "No recordings?" Doug asks me.

beautiful, "No."

shed in "Done. I'll contact the paper now."

"We should talk to Coach and see what we can do about denying access to the team," Jace says.

“Yeah.” I put my phone in my jacket pocket. “I’m going to go find
I’ll call you later,” I mutter without a care in the world to what he means
that and walk away.

All I care about—all I want—is to make her feel worthy, sexy, beautiful
that want her to know how much I can’t resist her. Show her that it’s
who’s out of their league here.

I swallow down the anger brewing when I picture the look on Cora’s
face. She was so strong—and determined. Silently refusing to give in to
the woman was prying out of her.

But I can see her break a little bit with every word.
And now it’s my sole mission to build her back up.
I find her standing outside with her coat wrapped around her shoulders
on it to “Baby,” I breathe when I reach her. “You alright?”

Her eyes are full of emotion. I see gratefulness, doubt, fear. She
lets me take her hands in mine. “Jace—is he…”

“Everything’s fine,” I assure her.

“I’m so sorry. Is there a lot of damage control needed now?”

I’m not surprised that she’s worried about how this affects me—it
she stood there and took all this shit. I cup her face. “Probably, but I
doesn’t can make it better.” I bend down and kiss her again—this one not
in front of an audience.

She eases into me. “I don’t mean me.”

“Come on. I want you in my bed tonight.” Silently, we drive to my
Silently, I bring myself down from a state of fury, so Cora doesn’t have
it. Someone like Cora should never feel less than a petty reporter like I
I’ve been there once. I’m not doing that again. I debate on telling Lori
Lori and I were a one-time thing and she never has to worry about her

d Cora.Or any other girl I'd been with for that matter. But there are better ways to make of prove this to her.

And I plan on doing each and every one of them.

Beautiful; I know it will be a challenge.

Not her. Tonight, I don't want Cora to think of me as the one and done guy she knows me to be. I want her to think of me as her savior, protector. The one whose face makes everything better. The one who erases all the things that make anything bitter.

If only for a short time.

I want Cora tonight. I don't want to have sex with her for the sheer thrill of being her first or showing her how a man should treat her in bed and the way she should expect anything less. Tonight, I want to be one with her, to officially show her what she's been becoming for a while now.

Gods and *Mine*.

Because I doubt that after tonight, I'd be able to keep my hands off her. I hold her hand tight the entire drive back to my house. I realize it's not as tight as it needs to be when she says, "Nick. I'm not flying out the window."

I think I release a little. "I know. I just can't let go yet."

Want for She smiles and squeezes my hand.

I pull up to my house, knowing it's empty and Nicole is coming home later. Angel later. Max greets us at the door. I make Cora some tea, feel like I need to calm her, even though I'm the one who needs to relax.

Want to see "How's the tea?" I ask.

Lori. She looks up at me. "I'd rather you be the one to warm me up."

Want her that I smile down at her and take the cup from her hands, setting it on the table again. "Come on."

ways to She looks up at me with a playful pout and puts her hand in mine.
room?”

I yank her against my chest. There isn't a trace of amusement or t
my voice. “My bed.”

guy she I take her upstairs. I don't recognize myself around Cora right now.
The onekeep my hands off her. I'm already having visions of all the ways I'n
ake herto please her. Where I'll touch her first. How long I plan to make her

How many times before the sun comes up. How I plan to wake her t
hallway upstairs is dark with motion footlights coming on as we kiss c
sake ofto the double doors of my master bedroom.

o never She pulls back as I kick my door open.

y make “Nicholas, you don't have to prove anything to me just because s
those things. I'm not easily burned.”

I hate that there's a touch of relief that washes through me to hear
er. this. Like I know I'll hurt her and there's no way around it.

ighter “I want you, Cora. I want to make you feel good. It doesn't have to
e openanything that happened tonight.”

It's true. All Lori did was piss me off. How strongly I felt about
made me realize how much I care for Cora. How wrong that vile wom
Because I want Cora just as much, if not more, than she wants me.

ne with Mostly it made me realize that I'm just about ready to level anyo
ing thecomes between us.

I'm well aware that one day it might be my best friend. And I'll de
it when the time comes.

“I want you too,” she whispers.

down. “Do you need anything?” I ask, cupping her face and kissing her ag
waiting for a response. “Want anything?” I press my lips to hers again.

. “Your help myself. She’s delicious. Everything about her; her smell, her
trace my lips around her face and down her neck, intoxicating myself
ease in everything Cora. All five of my senses heighten when she’s with me
was my sixth sense earlier that told me I needed to get her the hell
. I can’t there.

n going “Like what?”

r come. I shrug. “Lights off, freshen up, a minute to breathe? None of which
up. They need but offering if it makes you more comfortable.”

our way She shakes her head. “Just tell me what I need to do.”

I grin. “Your part’s easy, baby. You just relax.” I lift the hem of her
and pull it up over her head, skimming my fingertips down her arm
he said come back down. I unhook the miniskirt and let it fall down her leg
continue to run my fingers down the curve of her hips. Remember
her say urge to graze her skin with my fingertips just like this that night she
home drunk.

do with I move behind her, pushing her hair to one side and leaning to kiss
the back of her neck. She shudders in response, and I want to tell her
it only good she’s being. How amazing she smells. How it intoxicates me, but
an was me to another world where only she and I exist and nothing else
pleasuring her matters.

ne who I reach around and lift her chin, bringing her lips to mine. I lick the
and push my tongue to collide with hers before really kissing her. My
al with slides from her chin to behind her ear while my other unstraps her bra,
it fall to the floor.

She gasps as I turn her abruptly, taking one pert nipple in my mouth
ain, not sucking hard, releasing a moan I’ve been dying to hear all night.

. I can’t The first of many.

taste. I “Nicholas,” she breathes. “Please. Don’t go slow.”

elf with I look at her.

. But it “I won’t break. I’m so ready. Just fuck me.”

l out of Her words unleash something inside me. I don’t know what it is, strong and fierce...maybe a little harsh as I growl back.

“I decide when you’re ready. And we’re not *fucking* tonight,” I say. I think I don’t bother telling her what we are doing. I’m not telling her I’m love to her. But for lack of a better word, I am.

Taking my time, showing Cora how special she is, proving to her how much she drives me crazy, showing her how someone needs to treat me as if I need to never accept anything less.

We both know this isn’t forever and that tonight was initially interesting to her more of a milestone for her.

But I’ll die before I show her what it’s like to be fucked.

She’s going to remember this night as the best experience of her life. None no man can or will ever compare to. And if I do this right, it will be the hardest, longest orgasm of her life.

She bites her bottom lip and nods.

“I told you to relax.”

She closes her eyes and breathes, bringing out a satisfied grin across her open face.

Lifting her, I moved her to my bed, where she’d been before, letting her be completely naked. She saved that for the shower that next morning.

The morning she did to me what I plan on doing to her tonight—*with her for anyone else*.

I toss my shirt off and my eyes dip to the rise and fall of her chest as she watches me undress.

I don't stop until I'm as naked as she is and cover her with my body
"You're so beautiful," I whisper in reassurance, feeling her relax un
touch. Her eyes closing and the heaviness lifting.

but it's "Cora."

Her eyes open.

y, but I "I need to know that you're sure." I'm not asking if she's ready to l
makingvirginity. I'm asking if it's me she wants to take it.

"I'm more sure that I want you to do this than I'd like to admit. Sc
er howdon't stop."

t her in It's everything I need to hear. I scoop down and take her lips with
a ferocious kiss. Her skin is soft against mine as we grind in need. I
nded totaste every inch of her skin.

Breaking our kiss, I trace kisses down her chest, her stomach a
move to her hip. I feel her tighten as I reach her entrance and shoot
fe. Theback up at her.

always She smiles knowingly and breathes. "I'm totally relaxed," she lies.

I have every intention of getting Cora ready for me. For that, I need
relax—even if I have to put off what I planned to do just now.

On impulse, I flip her over onto her stomach and she yelps but seen
ross myon board. "Slight change of plans, sweetheart," I say as I stroke he
thigh softly with my fingertips, which only makes her clench with need
but not She turns her head to look back at me, biting her lip, and it's the
vision in the world. In fact, I want a picture of it.

ruining "What's that?"

"Just a little something to get you where I need you. Don't worry a
t as sheFace in pillow."

"Sounds relaxing," she mutters but does as instructed.

I reach up to the folds between her thighs, gently swiping my finger between them to feel how wet she is.

I can do better.

I press a little harder and draw circles against her clit.

Cora gasps loudly. She fists the sheets beneath her, pressing her face against the pillow, moaning louder and louder as I press a little bit harder, drawing out the orgasm I desperately need her to have.

“Please,” “Nick, Nick I’m—”

“It’s okay baby, I need you to,” I encourage, and push my fingers into her.

She trembles uncontrollably as I push in and out of her. Seconds later, I hear a muffled scream, and her legs go rigid—and I have my girl exactly where I want her.

Slowly, I turn her around, facing me. She digs her fingers into my hair and smiles.

The sight of her like this makes me the exact definition of a hot man. I can’t focus on anything except how much I want her.

I push myself up, taking a nipple into my mouth.

“Nick,” she whispers, arching up from the mattress. “Now, please.”

I move from one breast to the other and then down to her navel in a series of slow and lazy kisses. I’m so hard that it’s painful nudging against her.

I’m right there with Cora, where I want to be inside her more than I’m willing to admit.

I take a condom from the box beside the bed and slide it on—without asking Cora for any hint of hesitation.

Not a shred. She’s ready.

Settling myself at her entrance, I look into her eyes, I want her to

thumb how hard I am for her. To see the heat in my eyes before I slide in slowly. I pause at the first hint of resistance.

“Take a breath for me,” I whisper.

She closes her eyes and inhales, then releases slowly. I kiss her forehead, push through her walls. Her breath hitches and I still. I don't ask if she can go harder, pain, I know she must. She releases another breath slowly and opens her eyes.

“I'm good. I promise.”

I resist the urge to slide in and out of her, but she rolls her hips forward, taking me in a little bit at a time. I start to move again and her eyes flutter later, with lust and need as she watches me. This feeling, this connection is completely new to me and I don't know how to break free of it. I don't know how to disconnect. I feel like shit that I'm searching deeply for it as if it's the rarest and most precious thing this girl has to offer.

My senses are heightened, the pleasure magnifies by each second. I know how long I'll last but I almost don't want to finish. I love her body against mine.

It fits.

Like it's made for me.

Slowly, I pick up speed and let her guide me to how much she can take. I feel how close she is. Through her moans, the tremors through her body, I'm ever tightening around me, the pained expression that she needs to come—it's time.

It occurs to me that she's holding back for my sake. That she's waiting for me to tell her it's okay to let herself go again.

But I won't.

I want to see her do it.

nto her I need to see her surrender to the pleasure—for it to be more powerful than her resistance. I want to own every part of her. The need so deep below makes me thrust harder in and out of her, drawing out her cries, which multiply as louder and longer with every stroke. I groan, her name spilling out from my mouth as she feels in a jagged breath as I come so hard, my thighs shake.

ens her My eyes sweep over her underneath me; sated, sweaty, and a picture of perfection.

How am I not supposed to want this every fucking night for the rest of my life?

My eyes fill I lean down and kiss her forehead and roll myself beside her. The rest of the world is entirely lost somewhere at the bottom of the bed and we're both exposed.

to find I'm surprised by the jolt against my body as she rolls herself over to make the burying herself at my side, and tucking her head under my arm.

I chuckle and feel an unfamiliar flurry in my stomach as she does. "I don't blame you for shyness," I say.

er body She looks up at me. "Thank you."

I feel like I should be thanking her but I don't say as much. Cora's my first virgin, but I feel like I should be thanking her for giving me the most beautiful thing anyone's ever given me.

in take, I see her eyes shift somewhere and I know there's a question in the air as she's going to be asked to answer. I stand corrected when she speaks.

I know "I don't know why, but I feel like I did okay."

I laugh and kiss the top of her head. "You were in-fucking-credible. I'm not going to worry about how you're feeling and if you're sore, but you seem good."

She nods. "Should we shower now?"

I grin as a thought crosses me. This is the part where I typically go to the shower and not expect anyone to follow me—not unless I explicitly

ful than them. “Not yet,” I say, standing to dispose of the condom and returning to that warm, relaxed body in my bed.

The relaxed part only lasts for about thirty seconds.

“So what now? Is there such a thing as pillow talk? Do we wait minutes and then do it again? Are you sure we shouldn’t be showering?” I press my finger over her lips, waiting for her to look at me. “Cora, you nervous?”

She huffs. “No. I’m cool.”

“There’s no such thing as pillow talk. Not for me. We will do that later but not now. And the last time we were in my shower, you got naughty so you’re on probation before I allow you back in there.”

She doesn’t laugh. Instead, she presses her lips together and there’s a moment before she asks the question that’s been on her mind. “Do I leave now?”

Any hint of amusement is wiped off my face and I realize why she’s nervous. “No Cora. You don’t leave now. You can if that’s what you want but if you’re asking what I want—it’s to hold you all night. You can’t if you’d like but I prefer to breathe you in just like this for as long as you’ll let me.” I release an exaggerated breath and roll my eyes. “And I suppose you can talk about whatever’s on your mind and I’ll listen until I pass out.”

Her eyes smile and I feel the tension in her ease as she curls into my arms. I’m instantly relieved. I can’t pinpoint what the relief is. But I know that being here in my arms, happy, relaxed, satisfied, and safe, has everything I’d ask for with it.

Cora doesn’t make it very far in her idea of pillow talk before she’s asleep.

I have my nose in her hair when my phone vibrates. I reach for it, and it’s nearly one in the morning.

g to her

Jace: *Cora didn't come home tonight. Did you find her after you left?*

Nick: *I think she and Nicole fell asleep watching a movie.*

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Jace: *Alright.*

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I feel like I need to say more. Like I need to tell him she's safe here then another message comes though that shuts me down.

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Jace: *Thanks again for what you did for her tonight.*

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Jace: *Cora didn't come home tonight. Did you find her after you left?*

Nick: *I think she and Nicole fell asleep watching a movie.*

Jace: *Alright.*

I feel like I need to say more. Like I need to tell him she's safe here. But then another message comes though that shuts me down.

Jace: *Thanks again for what you did for her tonight.*

Don't. Fucking. Mention it.

Cora

IN THE MORNING, I give myself a “don’t make a big deal of this” talk in Nick’s massive bathroom. I’m prompted to do so when I’m showering alone. Nothing like I’d envisioned it.

He is gone in fact. Out for a run, I suppose. When I fell asleep in his arms, it was heavenly. And I wasn’t imagining it—Nick held me like he cherished me. He kissed my forehead, he stroked my hair, his body was relaxed. I shouldn’t be surprised to find him gone, knowing his reputation, but a little bit.

Although in all honesty, I can’t bring myself to be upset over it. I’m happy. Last night was better than anything I could have hoped for. I’m not feeling slighted by what the self-righteous journalist had to say. I’m not feeling abandoned by the man who took my virginity last night. I’m liberated but at the same time, I want to cling to Nicholas for as long as he’ll let me.

I realize I'm dangerous...giddy.

I take in a deep breath, reminding myself not to expect a certain level of attention and time.

Hell, I don't even know if now that the deal is done, *we're* done.

I step out of the steamy bathroom and wrap myself in one of Nick's blue oversized towels. Already missing the smell of cedar and pine, of course Nicholas comes in as I breathe in the towel, hoping to get a view of me. He looks at me for a moment, then looks down at his watch.

He leans against the doorframe with a smirk, breathless and sweaty, looking at me head to toe. He's in one of the jogger pants I've seen him in a few times. He stops by to raid my refrigerator for an OJ after his run.

"I would have gone for a run with you."

He scoffs. "Yeah. Because seeing you sweating and panting beside me is my idea of releasing tension."

I scan him and give him a wicked grin and a coy lift of my brow, turning to my clothes.

He puts a hand on my arm. "What do you think you're doing?"

I shrug, concealing the teasing grin threatening to spread across my face. "You're right, maybe I should just go home in your towel."

He gives me a knowing look, like he can see right through me. "You're getting dangerously good at this." He wraps his sweaty arms around me from behind.

"At what?" I squirm against him and try to control my giggles.

He flips me to face him. The intensity of his gaze makes it clear what he wants. "Making yourself so fucking irresistible to me."

I try to control it, but I can't help myself—the smile spreads across my face before I can stop it. I don't want Nick to think I'm falling. Or that

risk of it.

To my surprise, he smiles back. “Well good morning, beautiful. They are.” He leans into my ear and whispers, “Don’t hide yourself from me for the blush in your cheeks.”

“Hmm...and the bat of my eyelashes?” I tilt my head and bat my eye. Of like a creepy life-size doll.

He chuckles and leans in to kiss me softly. “Yes. That too.” He sighs going to shower, but just a warning, Nicole’s up and she knows you’re staring. “Oh.” I’m not sure what to say. It was hard enough pretending after he happened the last time I spent the night in Nick’s room. But at least I have an excuse to be here last time. I spent half the night in Nicole’s room while she slept.

I look to Nick for guidance.

He shrugs. “It’s your call. I don’t hide anything from my sister. But before if you want me to.”

I shake my head. “I don’t.”

He winks and disappears into the shower. I pull off his towel and dress myself.

Nicole isn’t the one I’m worried about.

“Hey,” she greets me as soon as I descend the last step in the hallway.

I gather my damp hair in a bunch and push it aside, not making any difference to it, considering my hair is shoulder length and just bounces.

“Hey.” I hate that my voice sounds sleepy. Or sultry.

“I made you coffee,” she offers, pushing a cup on the table for me. I’m pulling up a chair. I stare at it but can’t bring myself to look her in the eye for some reason.

She releases a heavy breath and comes up to me, throwing her arms
ere youme briefly before pulling back and making me look at her. “I’m sorr
e. I livewhines with so much sincerity, it shocks me.

“What? Why?”

lashes “For leaving you yesterday. Jesus, I turn around for one second a
sinks her claws into you. I thought we must have exited from opposi
is. “I’m of the room, so I went back in to look for you. Anyway, Jace told me a
here.” Are you okay?”

nothing “Oh, I’m over it.” It’s quite the miracle, but I really am.

had an She releases a breath and sits back down, raising a perfectly shape
atching “Mmhmm, I bet you are. Tell me more.”

I take a sip of my coffee. “I’m not a kiss and tell kind of girl, Nicole

She narrows her gaze. “Yeah, but you weren’t kissing, were you?”

it I will “I’d be careful, Nicky. I might tell you things you’ll never be
unhear about your brother...”

She scrunches her nose. “Yeah, you’re probably right.” She scoots
and getme. “What did that bitch say to you? And not that I want to bring yo
or anything. Because you’re clearly high right now, but I’m very curio
my brother was able to kiss you in front of Jace and the guy en
thanking him.”

y. “Are you serious?”

kind of She nods. “That’s what Jace said.”

is back. I shake my head. “She said I’m just a kid with a crush and to stop v
for anything more.”

me and I wait for Nicole’s reaction but there isn’t one. She just stares into s
eye for like she’s considering it.

“Nicole?”

around She blinks. “Sorry, I...” She shakes her head. “You’re not a kid
y,” she crush. But...”

“The second part?”

She bites her lip.

nd Lori I brush it off. “Don’t worry, I’m not expecting anything. We pre-di-
te sidesthe arrangement.”

about it. She breathes a huge sigh of relief. “Oh good. I didn’t think he’d be
dick to you, but still, you’re my best friend and I’m protective.”

I blink. My eyes fill with unshed tears and I don’t understand
d brow.happening right now. “I’m—your best friend?”

She scrunches her face as if she slipped. “I mean, yeah, is that okay?
.”

I let a tear fall and wrap my arms around her then pull back. “Really

She laughs. “Of course. I mean I know I’m no one’s ideal friend but
able to “You don’t think of me as just...a kid?” Like her brother, Nicole a
seven years apart. I’ve always felt like she was so much older than
over to want me hanging around her, and it’s been different the last few week
u down hadn’t expected this.

us how “We’ve gone shopping together, we both have neon-freaking-spra-
ded upon our hair, and we talk about sex. We’re besties whether you like it or

I wipe at my tears and shrug. “I like being your friend.”

She hugs me. “Thank you.” She pulls back. “But listen, if this thi
you and my brother—like if you start to feel more than you both
wishing unquote, *agreed on*, you should tell me. I don’t want you getting hu
could probably offer some helpful advice.”

space— I frown and take a sip of coffee. “Not that I plan to or anything, I
don’t think I should tell Nicholas?”

Her eyes bulge. “No. Oh no—if it happens. He’s the last person you

with atell you're starting to fall for him.”

I nod as my heart sinks. “Okay.”

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tell you're starting to fall for him."

I nod as my heart sinks. "Okay."

Nicholas

Cora: *Are you opposed to sexting?*

Nick: *Yes*

Cora: *Why?*

Nick: *This is a hands-on kind of arrangement, babe.*

Cora: *But your hands are far far away.*

We're playing Seattle tonight and Boston after this one.

I haven't seen Cora in a few days between her school schedule and hockey. It was never an issue before, but I've been steering clear of house the last few weeks. It's hard enough facing him at practices and but hanging out with him in his kitchen isn't exactly ideal.

Not to mention I'd be too sick with guilt for screwing his sister that be able to eat anything—giant red flag.

I realize she's three hours ahead in Buffalo and probably in bed. Well, happy that she's turned on thinking of me, I want her to wait until I get home. I'm about to write back 'good things come to those who wait', but I decide against it. I don't need to turn myself on in the process.

Nick: *It's late. Go to sleep.*

Shit. That was cold. For a moment, I feel like writing back my thought, but then a message pops up.

Cora: *Mmm...kay, in a few. Got something I need to take care of first.*

I stare at the message and try to think of what she could possibly take care of at this hour—besides the fucking obvious.

Nick: *What's that supposed to mean?*

That's the last I hear from her until I have to get back to the game.

I'm feeling like a hell of a better captain than I was last week. My players are on point. My hits hard. We just finished second, where forty-three of the opposing team wanted to fight me, so naturally, when we step back on the ice, I drop my stick and gloves and welcome him with open arms.

and my No one's calling me a pussy tonight.

of Jace's I get in a good two punches before Brandon steps up to finish his first game and number seventeen while he's at it. I might be in the penalty box, but at least we've got our goal.

I won't ignore Coach's bark telling us to keep our heads on straight and p
fucking game or whatnot. The guy's been bothering me lately and
while I'm quite put my finger on why.

at back. For whatever reason, my sister comes to mind. I shake it off once a
out then knowing I'm delusional. I need to stop being an overprotective bastard
my buddy over there.

I look over at Jace as he slams the puck to Roger. My buzzer ring
get back on the ice.

7 initial At the next face-off, Rog passes right and I catch it, gliding it as I h
the net on the other side of the ice. I smirk as I watch the goalie fr
peripheral swivel left to right, trying to predict my move. I shift awa
st. an intervene and know I have zero time to get this off my hands befo
do.

need to Blindly, I slam and hit the net. Goalie falls on his ass.

My team jumps around me as we celebrate the win right here
opposing team's arena.

When we step off, the media is all over us. I plaster on the camer
smile and answer a few questions. When they move on to Coach an
r passes members of the team, I sign a few autographs.

e of the I try to give everything that surrounds me the attention it deserves,
on the only thing on my mind is getting back to my phone so I can call my—
I swallow.

Cora. So I can call Cora.

n off— “Where we going to celebrate tonight? It's a beautiful night; we go
κ but at the town,” Garret suggests. “Strip Club.”

“No,” Jace vetoes without missing a beat.

“Fine. Pris probably wants to go to a wine bar or some shit.”

play the “Why does it have to be one or the other?” Jace asks defensively.

I can’t I chuckle. “It’s true. You’re a little bit high maintenance when it comes to going out.”

again— “So I like the occasional red wine, gourmet cheese and jazz; that kind of thing doesn’t make me any less of a jock than all of you.”

I cough. “Yeah, it does.”

Jace eyes me and throws a punch against my arm. I wince but almost immediately it was a little harder.

lead for

from my

side from

where they

Cora

in the I swallow the hard lump in my throat at his dismissal. I’m not hurried, but a little bit angry, actually. But I can’t a-ready let him think that I’m getting too emotionally involved. Of course he’d other want to sext.

Who even does that?

but the *But also, come on, Cora. Paper trail!*

Being the big girl that I am, I don’t cry about it. I get even.

Cora: *Mmm...kay, in a few. Got something I need to take care of first.*

My lip curves and I set my phone down and walk away. The laundry in my bathroom has been bothering me for days. I put a load in and then I sit in the shower, distracting myself from looking at my phone, which is

every time I get a message. Forcing myself to ignore it, I take out my
comes to skin care regime and take my time applying each one. Needing every
that goes by to display an unread message on whoever has been texting
doesn't *No check signs for you, buddy.*

Finally, after a solid hour, I check my phone; smiling as I scroll up
top of the first missed message.

st wish

Nick: *What's that supposed to mean?*

Nick: *Cora?*

Nick: *Jesus Christ, Cor. I don't know what you think you're doing
positive you're not doing it right.*

Nick: *Will you just wait for me? I'll be back Sunday.*

t. I'm a The last message was twenty minutes ago. I bite my lip as I type bac

doesn't **Cora:** *If that was wrong...it sure felt right.*

Nick: *Fuck. That's exactly what I need before the final period.*

Oops.

Nick: *You'll just have to make it up to me later.*

st.

Cora: *How?*

ry piled **Nick:** *Let me worry about that.*
id jump
vibrates

entire Nick wasn't joking when he said I'd have to make it up to him later
secondhalf his team goes out to celebrate the win after the game in Seattle, I
g me. back to his hotel room and calls me—waking me up at one in the n
and making me walk him through everything I did...or rather pretende
p to the Starting from taking my clothes off to making myself come..
apparently, I did twice.

The amount of questioning was unrelenting. To say I was unpr
would be an understatement. Nick didn't say anything, but I learn
lesson. Don't fuck with someone who's teaching you how to fuck.

“Why didn't you go out with the guys?”

but I'm “Conflict of interest.”

I frown. “What does that mean?”

“It means that some weren't interested in the options available to us.

“That's not what conflict of interest means.”

ick. “Then why did you ask?”

“Forget it,” I digress and change the subject. “I had dinner with
earlier.”

“How is she?”

“Enjoying the breathing room.”

“Hmm...” There's a beat before he asks. “What about you?”

“What about me?”

“Are you...enjoying your breathing room?”

I smile. “Is this your way of asking if I miss you?”

“Well it's obvious you miss me. I mean two times in the span of or
sweetheart, that's impressive shit.”

“Mmhmm.” I'm starting to doze off again.

“Cora?”

: When “Hmm.”
he goes “I’ll see you Sunday.”
morning I yawn. “Sunday,” I repeat, halfway to dreamland.
d I did. “I miss you. Goodnight.” Is what I think I hear him say before t
..whichdisconnects.

epared,
ied my

.”

Nicole

ie hour,

“Hmm.”

“I’ll see you Sunday.”

I yawn. “Sunday,” I repeat, halfway to dreamland.

“I miss you. Goodnight.” Is what I think I hear him say before the line disconnects.

Cora

FOR TODAY'S GAME, NICOLE and I sit down by the ice. Collins got us great seats and though I've got my eyes on n killing it out there, my new bestie has hers on the big angry guy curs barking at his team.

"Really? You like that sort of thing?"

Nicole blinks. "What? What thing? I'm watching the game."

I nod slowly, letting her have this one. "Okay."

It's the second intermission and Nicole is silent. I let her be for a r before asking if she's alright.

"Cora," she starts. "Do you think—never mind."

I wait and watch her. "Remember when you said I should come when I feel like I'm in over my head? It goes both ways. If somethir your mind, I want to help."

She takes a breath but doesn't look at me when she asks. "Do you people in this town will always see me as...the one with...you know, issues?"

In many ways, her and Angel's problems are similar. Angel, though deny it to death, will always be embarrassed about her fall on r television much less half the city. And then the rest of the city who dic it live but caught it on social media clips for the weeks that followed.

I take her hand. "I think that the right people won't and that the re matter."

She smiles. "Right. Thank you."

The team loses by one and the media is all over them.

"I don't think I'm going to stick around. The guys are going to rough mood anyway," I tell Nicky.

Coach She agrees and stands. "Late dinner?" she asks.

ry man "Sure. I'm just going to run to the ladies room."

ing and "That should be a good hour with the exit rush. I'll wait for you lobby."

I'm not even halfway around the west end of the arena, and I already the line of women along the wall. Deciding against it, I run to the oth of the building and down the stairs. I have an access pass to the sta noment level—and the female bathrooms are empty—just like my bladder wi about five minutes.

I look at a quick map of the floor on the wall outside the stairwell to you out where I am. Somehow I ended up at the entry doors from the i ig is on back to the locker rooms. It's not the way I usually come down he good to know for the future.

Unfortunately, the ladies room is on the other side of the floor. I'r

u thinkto pass the entry doors from the tunnel and step aside as the medi
, all themarches in.

They all zoom past me but one very specific and determined blond
h she'llin her tracks when she sees me.

ational Lori Conrad has the nerve to smile at me. "Hello, sweetheart."

ln't see "Don't call me that."

"Oh don't be so sensitive. It's not very womanly."

st don't I don't know which direction they're headed but I know from Jā
Nick refused to publish the interview. "Where do you think you're ge
demand.

She turns. "Oh to see Nicholas, of course."

be in a "I'm sure he doesn't want to see you. Besides the team is changing."

"Oh I know. But he's still under contract. I called him to remind h
one way or another, I'm getting that interview... and wouldn't you ki
asked me to meet him here to finish what we started."

i in the I frown.

"His words. Not mine."

ady see "You must have misunderstood." *Or just lying.*

ner side "Hmm. Mickey, I'll see you guys back at the van. Like I said, I l
iff onlycatch up with someone just down the hall." She turns to me. "It w
ll be inchatting with you again, dear. Call me if you reconsider chatting with
a more 'on the record' level."

o figure She heads toward the locker room and my teeth clench hard. The
ice rinkway she's telling the truth.

ere, but I find the bathroom, empty my bladder and text Nicole.

n about **Cora:** *Oh my way out—just need to check something quickly.*

ia crew I don't see the camera crew. But hear a bunch of familiar players l
in the other direction. None of which are Nick.

le stops He's still in the locker room.

Quietly, I wait off to the side to see if he exits. A few more
including my brother. But no Nick.

Shit.

I imagine that she has him cornered inside. That she's making
ultimatums, throwing legal shit in his face and I can't hold back any lo
ing?" I I burst through the doors, expecting to see just that, but find nothing
empty, quiet room. Nothing but the sound of my panting.

I hear a toilet flush and someone come around the corner. He sees
a smirk spreads his face.

im that "Garret," I breathe.

ow, he "Not who you were hoping for?"

I roll my eyes. "I thought—" I'm still out of breath and take a se
inhale. Jesus, they need windows in here. "I thought I saw someone c
here." I glance around, realizing I seem like a crazy person.

He frowns. "Pretty sure it's just you—oh and Nick is still here..." h
have to up to me and whispers in my ear. "But I'm guessing you already knew
as nice His condescending tone surprises me and my chest heats with ange
me on lost Garret."

He laughs and picks up his duffle bag, leaving me alone in the
re's no Seeing Nick's stuff still here, I walk around toward the shower room,
hearing one running.

I wait outside for him. I don't know if she made it to him, but if not
to warn him about the contract.

reading He could do something. Call his lawyer or agent or prepare how to
to her threats.

The shower is turned off. The towel that hangs over the door is swi
leave, a second later, the door is pulled open.

Nicholas blinks, finding me standing against the tile wall, waiting f
He opens his mouth as if to ask me a question but then decides not
threats, flashes me a deep dimpled grin instead.

nger. “Are we alone?” he asks.

; but an “I think so, but—”

me and “Good.” He reaches out and grabs my hand pulling me against him.
on in here.”

“Nick—”

Pressing me against the shower wall, he leans his damp body aga
and kisses me so deeply, it hurts again. I’ve come to dislike these pas
cond to kisses, these *I want you so bad* kisses. It only makes my stomach flut
come in make me fall deeper for him.

Because that’s what’s happening—I think.

e walks The idea of losing him hurts so much I don’t want to feel good w
that.” anymore—if that makes any sense.

er. “Get Now I know why Nicole insisted I come to her when I develop f
She’d help me make sense of what’s going on between my heart a
; room. mind.

faintly “Stop.” I push against his chest. “Was she here?”

“Who?”

, I need “Lori. I saw her down the hall and she said she was coming over her
A slow grin spreads his face. “You know normally jealousy is a turn
me, but I kinda like it on you. It’s hot. Come here, I think you nee

respond reassurance.”

I groan. *Damnit*. His charm is starting to soak my panties.

ped and *Focus*.

“I thought she wasn’t allowed back here.”

for him. He pulls back with a low growl from his throat. “Babe, she might
to and for the other team, not for us, I promise you. You have nothing to
about.”

He leans in to kiss my neck and I press against him again. I feel hot.
know if it’s the shower room or his body heat or the rush of anger I feel
“Come I’m not the one who should be worried. She—she said the agreement
signed makes you accountable for the interview. And that she’s going
it one way or another—and that you asked her to come here—w
inst me course I don’t believe.” I pause to catch my breath and he steps back
sion at then—then she came this way, and I thought...”

tter and “Okay, stop.”

I don’t bother for the prompt and take a deep breath. “Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize.” He presses both palms against the wall w
ith him between him, his head is down and he’s considering something. I don
for him. I’m too worked up.

eelings. “Nick, just let her have the interview—forget what happened, I’m o
and my “I’m not,” he snaps. “I’m not letting her career thrive after she v
assaulted my girlfriend.”

I blink.

He lifts my chin. “I’m not giving her any of it. And the agreement
e.” and void because she’s not unbiased. All I have to do is tell the paper t
i off for and I slept together and it wouldn’t get published. But I spared her rep
d some and just said she had false information.”

“But how does she think—”

“She doesn’t. She’s too smart for that. Lori was just trying to get a r
out of you. She wanted the last word.” He grins.

My eyes water. “I really don’t like her.”

be here “I’m sorry. But I’m really glad to hear you didn’t believe her, be
worrynever plan on talking to her again. Much less invite her within fifty
me.” He kisses the bridge of my nose and holds me. And as has com

I don’t routine with him, he instantly makes me feel better. Safer. Happier.

el. “No. We both jerk at the sound of footsteps just outside the shower stall.

ent you Nick opens the door and steps out first. I’m behind him but he pus
g to get back in and closes the door with me still inside.

hich of “Hey, man. What’s going on?” Nick’s voice is remarkably calm.

κ. “And “You seen Cora?”

My eyes widen. *Jace?*

There’s a beat before Nick responds. “Why do you think I’ve seen h

Jace’s voice is ridged when he answers. “Because Garret passed m
with megarage. He said if I’m looking for my sister, I should check the locker :

o’t wait “That’s odd. I didn’t know Garret saw her here.”

Oops.

ver it.” It occurs to me that Nick has yet to deny seeing me.

verbally “I’ll uh—I’ll let her know you’re looking for her.”

There’s silence before Jace asks, “You done with your shower?”

“Come to think of it—I don’t think I am.”

: is null More silence.

that she My heart thumps.

otation *Dear God, what is happening...*

I jump as the door is slammed open and Jace walks in staring me

face.

reaction Nick leans against the back wall, tightening the towel that's been w
around his waist.

He looks back at Nick. "Oh, I think you are," Jace rasps. He turns
cause I me. My eyes amplify as I take in the blazing disappointment in his,
feet of mixed with anger and betrayal.

ie to be "Cora." His voice is quiet but hard. "What are you doing in here?"

Nick steps up. "Jace. Let me explain."

"Back off," he growls then looks back to me. "You get particularl
shes me when I demand answers from other people when *you've* lied to me, s
one's all you." He crosses his arms.

It takes me a second to realize he's referring to the time he wouldn't
get a word in and blared at Angel for taking me to Broken Glass. And
Nick for sky diving.

er?" He's right. Those situations, along with this one, are all entirely
e in the And I'm going to own them. *Sort of.*

room." "I don't suppose...saying none of your business is going to—"

"Try again."

I suck in a breath. "I came in here to warn Nick about something.
Lori—but apparently, she was just playing games with me. That's all."

Jace sighs like he's bored with my response. "Well, I tried. But
you're still too much of a child to own up to what should really be di
between grownups."

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face.

Nick leans against the back wall, tightening the towel that's been wrapped around his waist.

He looks back at Nick. "Oh, I think you are," Jace rasps. He turns back to me. My eyes amplify as I take in the blazing disappointment in his, they're mixed with anger and betrayal.

"Cora." His voice is quiet but hard. "What are you doing in here?"

Nick steps up. "Jace. Let me explain."

"Back off," he growls then looks back to me. "You get particularly upset when I demand answers from other people when *you've* lied to me, so—this one's all you." He crosses his arms.

It takes me a second to realize he's referring to the time he wouldn't let me get a word in and blared at Angel for taking me to Broken Glass. And then at Nick for sky diving.

He's right. Those situations, along with this one, are all entirely on me. And I'm going to own them. *Sort of.*

"I don't suppose...saying none of your business is going to—"

"Try again."

I suck in a breath. "I came in here to warn Nick about something. About Lori—but apparently, she was just playing games with me. That's all."

Jace sighs like he's bored with my response. "Well, I tried. But clearly you're still too much of a child to own up to what should really be discussed between grownups."

Nicholas

CORA'S FACE IS FLUSHED. Her eyes blaze with rage like I've seen. I don't think she saw the tiny flinch of Jace's brows at her words.

But I caught it.

I can almost feel her entire body tense from where I stand. Her chest and the seconds of silence are deafening before she pushes herself against the wall and firmly presses him against the other.

He lets her with the same bored expression.

In the softest of voices, she tells him. "Nick and I are having sex. We've done it in our house, in his, down this hall right after a practice." She looks at him. "And we were probably going to do it right now if you didn't storm in here like I'm your property."

He swallows. His muscles tensing everywhere.

“I’m not. I was your sister. But now you can consider me a relative.”

She pushes past me and storms off.

Jace and I glare at each other the entire ten seconds it takes for the locker room to slam shut behind her.

“Fuck!” Jace hisses.

I hate being a dick here, but he made a mistake confronting her. I guess he was trying to do—but putting her on the spot wasn’t the best call.

I put my hands out like a smug asshole. “Wanna try me now?”

“Fuck you think you’re doing, messing with my sister? How in the hell do you think this is okay? This is *Cora*. Not some puck bunny you can mess with and forget the next week, Nick.”

I blink and nod. “I know that.”

He runs a shaky hand through his scalp and looks down. “It’s not his own sister.”

“She’s—”

“Don’t fucking tell me what she is,” he hisses. “You know what’s the second Garret spoke the words, your face came to mind. I had a hunch that if something was going on here behind my back, it was going to be you.”

I bite hard on the inside of my cheek, and I look at him.

He scoffs. “I suppose I would have gotten another ‘Cora’s with tonight’ message later?”

“Maybe.”

I stand still as he throws a hard punch at my jaw. Jace is a big stronger than most of us. I’m not surprised it tosses me to the wall.

I blink a few times, trying to regain my composure—I’m used to

distant hit. But this one hurts. I pick myself up and look my best friend in the eye.
“I’m not going to hurt her.”

“How is that even fucking possible?” he shouts with a little bit of a door to
“You haven’t been with anyone more than two weeks since high school
swipe red on your phone like you’re surrounded by fruit flies.”

I’m looking off to the side now, knowing that my commitment issues are
et what *no one*’s biggest concern here.

He crosses his arms in front of his chest. “How long?”

“It’s only been a few weeks,” I mutter, my eyes lost in the floor tiles
hell did “I mean how long before you end it?”

I screw I look up at him with a scowl.

“You don’t think I believe that this is serious? I’ve seen you break
off with girls you moderately liked because you didn’t want them to de
my little your anger issues. So I know for a *fact* that you’re not suddenly decid
Cora is the one who you’re choosing to have to deal with it.”

I shake my head. “You’re wrong.”

funny? “Am I? You don’t worry about something triggering you and *C*
feeling happens to be standing in your way—”

be with “Stop it.” My voice is low, but my tone is razor-sharp.

His brows jump at my growing anger. “Oh, is it that easy now? *Y*
you guys have a fight? What if—”

Nicole “Enough,” I snap. “My temper’s been out of control plenty with m
sister, my mother, *you*. You’ve seen me in a complete state of rage, a
never hurt any of you.”

guy— “No,” he agrees calmly. “But *seeing* you like that was no good for
us either.”

getting I lean my head back against the wall and stare at the ceiling. My

he eye clogs and I work at swallowing it down. “I care about her,” I rasp out.

“You hurt her...I won’t pay you the same respect you did when you laugh your temper around me. I will fucking break you.”

ol. You I nod. “I’ll be waiting.”

ues are



3. “She’s upstairs,” Nicole tells me as soon as I’m in the door and she

She peeks in at me from the den. “Ohh...you want some ice for that?”

I run my fingers against my throbbing jaw. “Nah I’m good. His things jealous mine’s more chiseled than his.”

deal with “Yeah, right...*that’s* why he hit you.” She turns back to her making that Violence of any kind is a sensitive topic for Nicole. I glance up there where Cora waits for me in my bedroom, but move to the den and sit my sister.

ora just “You alright?”

She shrugs. “Yeah. Just talked to Cora for a while. We were supposed to get dinner but she wasn’t hungry. We came back here...she spilled her What if out and then she was going to go back home.”

I frown. “Really?”

ny own “Something about proving she’s her own person and isn’t afraid of anyone.”

I chuckle. “Yeah that sounds like her.”

any of “But I made her some tea and told her she should wait and talk first.” She runs a thumb against my jaw. “What a jerk.”

7 throat “I’ve taken worse hits on the ice. He went easy on me.”

“Well, he didn’t on Cora.”

“He didn’t mean it. He was just upset. Jace tends to lose all his
when it comes to her.”

“Hmm...wonder what it’s like to have a brother who loved me that

“Ouch. You know I’m already in pain.”

She laughs and hugs me. “Nick.”

“Hmm?”

“Don’t be everything Jace is expecting you to be.”

ir later.

I push open my bedroom door and find her on my bed, exactly
e’s just pictured her. Worried, nervous, sexy.

Cora jumps off the edge of the bed but stops when I glare at her. I c
gazine. door behind me. “Something you forget to mention earlier?”

e stairs “I’m sorry, I wasn’t thinking about us being a secret. I was worrie
next to you—also the fuck’s up with that guy?”

“It’s personal.” And if I had to guess—Cora has a lot to do with it.
the distance between us and wrap her in my arms. “And anyway,” I sa
osed to kiss the top of her head, “Garret did us a favor. You’re not my dir
ier guts secret anymore.”

She smirks and looks up at me. “You mean, you’re not *my* dir
secret.”

raid of I hold onto her waist. “Were we really going to do it in that shower :

“It would have been a sin not to.”

Just hearing her say the word sin makes me want to throw her
to you shower. But her fingers along my jaw remind me it’s not the right time

“I hear you’re planning on going home?”

“Yeah. Just for tonight. Then I’m going to go stay with my da
senseswhile.”

I run my fingers down her waist and kiss her shoulder. “You kno
much.” closer.”

She smiles. “I know. But it would only fuel his fire.”

“Are you alright? I can go with you.”

She shakes her head. “I can handle Jace.”

I scoff. “He said that same thing about you a few months ago and I l
at that too.”
how I

lose the

d about

I close

ay, then

ty little

ty little

stall?”

in my

!.

“Yeah. Just for tonight. Then I’m going to go stay with my dad for a while.”

I run my fingers down her waist and kiss her shoulder. “You know, I’m closer.”

She smiles. “I know. But it would only fuel his fire.”

“Are you alright? I can go with you.”

She shakes her head. “I can handle Jace.”

I scoff. “He said that same thing about you a few months ago and I laughed at that too.”

Cora

IT'S QUIET BUT CALM in my house—or rather my brother's house. I take my boots off and set them neatly on the side of the door instead of kicking them off and quietly go upstairs.

I gasp and jump when I find Jace in my room.

He glances over at me and then goes back to what he's doing. An oversized duffle bag rests on the bed and he's stuffing it with my things.

“What are you doing?”

He opens another drawer and tosses in a few pairs of socks. “Packing.”

“For me?”

He moves to my bathroom while I step over to the bed, check the contents of the bag.

Jace returns with my vanity travel bag and stuffs it in.

“Do you mind telling me why you're packing for me?”

He doesn't look at me. “Your threats won't work here. Not today.”

“What threats?”

“Your ‘I’ll move out’ threats. Makes sense if you think about it. Who would make the person you live with, who takes care of you—the one person who would do anything for you—be the very last one to know anything about you?”

He takes a breath before zipping the damn thing closed. “May as well be living with a stranger.”

Lifting the handles, he comes around the bed to me. “You hate it here so much,” he says, shoving the heavy bag against my chest. “By all means, get out.”

“You can take a few minutes to collect anything I missed,” he says, then he’s marching out of my bedroom.

I take a minute to look around my room—feeling empty. I’m not sure I was expecting. I’m not even sure why I came here tonight. Why I’m here instead of home. I should give him a few days to cool off. Give myself a few days. Maybe I felt that maybe it felt wrong to just *not* come home. Maybe I thought it was a grownup thing to do.

ng. An I remember his words again and my eyes sting.

s. I pick up my cell phone and dial a friend. “Hey,” I sob. “Could you pick me up?”

g.” Despite what he says, Jace knows me very well. He’s packed everything I could need for a few days. My curling iron...even some of mom’s jewelry. He knows I don’t wear but like to keep on the vanity or my nightstand.

My heart hurts.

The doorbell rings and I make my way down the stairs. Jace opens the door and for once in their life, it’s just a cold stare between Angel and my brother.

No cheap shots, no jeering comments.

“It’s for you,” he says and walks off to the kitchen. No goodbye, not even a glance in my direction.

I pull my car keys and Jace’s credit card out of my pocketbook and put them on the console table.

Angel watches me and picks up my bag for me. “I’ve got it. Come on, we’ll be here in a minute.” I follow Angel out and turn to close the door behind me.

ere that
s.”



before “You know what would be hilarious?” I say to Angel as we sit on the bedroom floor of her father’s house. We’re drinking wine and eating a variety of midnight snacks she set out. “If like tomorrow, Nick tells me I didn’t do well, it’s been real...thanks for the fun times...” I hold up my glass and say, “I’m guilty, would be funny.”

was the She shakes her head and takes a huge sip herself before responding, “That would be life. Life is shit. Just when you think you’ve got everything, everything comes crumbling down...or you know...you come crumbling down in front of a lot of people...”

“Ooof.”

nothing I She holds up her hands. “I’m good. I’m good.”

relry he “Nicole’s gonna be so mad at us.”

Angel throws popcorn at my open mouth, and I miss it. “Stop worrying about everyone else in your life. Just take care of you right now.” She says, “We’ve been up for two hours. I’ve been ignoring Nick’s calls and messages. I know if I tell him Jace kicked me out and I’m at Angel’s, he’ll be here

nothing in minutes—or worse—knocking down Jace’s door. I’m too emotionally exhausted for any of it.

and set I text him that everything’s fine and I’ll call him tomorrow. But I’m not convinced. He knows Jace and me too well to believe that.

n.”

Nick: *First lie of our relationship.*

“We should go to bed,” I say.

She nods sleepily. “Dad’s got a guest room, but you can stay in here with me. This bed’s big enough for an orgy.”

I laugh. “Yeah? Has that been proven?”

on the “Oh God no. I only moved back in here temporarily to help dad with
ing the I’d never be dumb enough to bring a guy here. My mom’s house, m
lls me; but Dad would annihilate anyone he’d find in my bed.”

is. “That I decide that’s a conversation for another night and go brush my teeth

“Thanks for letting me stay here tonight.”

ing. “No “I’m sorry about Jace. I knew he was a dick but—so cold.”

it all— I narrow my eyes at her. “Do you really think he’s a dick?”

imbling She gives me a coy grin. “Well, I do now.”



worrying **Cora:** *Morning.*

yawns.

texts. I **Nick:** *I’ve been worried sick.*

for me **Cora:** *Sorry dad.*

tionally **Nick:** *Don't start that kinky stuff now.*

he isn't **Cora:** *Breakfast?*

Nick: *I've got an early practice.*

Cora: *Go easy on Garret.*

re with **Nick:** *Fine. He can keep one limb.*



h Rory.

aybe— “God, that was amazing,” I tell Nick after a nice hot shower
bathroom. Not that it's been a while—but two days without is a long t
h. me.

“I'm jealous of my shower now,” he says, pulling down the cover
bed.

“I can't believe you didn't call me last night.”

“I wanted to get hammered. Is that so bad?”

“Oh please, I got better shit than Angel's cheap wine.”

I slip under the covers and curl against him. Even though thi
amazing, I feel empty and defeated somehow. “How did this happen?”

He breathes into my hair. “I don't know, but you were a lot happ
days ago—I don't like this one bit.”

“Nick?”

“Hmm.”

“Isn’t this kind of a deal breaker for us? Remember? As long as it doesn’t find out?”

His expression is serious when he lifts my chin. “We’ve broken a few rules at this point, Cora.”

“What about that last one?”

“Refresh my memory.”

“That nothing about us is permanent.”

He puts an arm around me and pulls me close. “I don’t know about that’s permanent. But I know that I’m not ready to let you go.”

I smile. “Me too.”

in his
time for



of his It’s been two weeks since I left Jace’s house. I’ve been staying in a room at dad’s most nights. Thankfully, I had a few older clothes left in the house that I hadn’t worn in years but at least I’m not wearing the same outfits that Jace packed for me.

With my school schedule and unpaid internship, I don’t have time for a part-time job, so have to make do with what I have.

I’m studying end of semester finals when there’s a knock on my door.

“Yeah.”

“Hey, Cor.” Dad peeks in.

“Hey.”

He comes in tentatively. “You skipped dinner.”

I shrug. “I’m okay, I had an apple earlier.”

as Jace “So it had nothing to do with Jace coming over?”

I stare at my notebook. “Nope.”

ll those “Okay...” He walks around my room with his hands in his pockets.

“When you’re done being awkward, I need to get back to studying.”

He slips something out of a pocket he’s been fumbling with, setting it on my table. “Jace wanted me to give you this.” I look down. It’s his credit card.

“I don’t need it.”

nything “You know it didn’t even occur to me that you’d need money.” He looks at me with a head uncomfortably. “I just thought you had that job or maybe you’re—”

“Dad. I’m fine. I’ll come down for dinner if you want. Is he gone?”

The idea of seeing him makes my chest ache. He was so cold and so distant. I don’t recognize him and it would hurt too much seeing him that way.

He frowns and sits on my bed. “You know, I checked out of parent school for a little bit there after your mother died.”

A little bit?

my old “Jace, uh...he did a lot of the raising part while I worked to provide for you both. He knew your class schedules, came to your soccer games, and helped with your homework.”

ie for a My eyes sting and I decide I’m not in the mood for this. “Dad. I know you did this—I was there.”

or. “Right, all I’m saying is...if he’s treating you like he’s one of your friends, it’s a little too hard...it’s because, he was both for a while there.” He points to the card. “It’s why he thinks of these things when it didn’t even occur to you need more than just a roof over your head.”

I’m just about finished with this conversation when there’s another knock on my already open door.

I look up from my notebook, finding Nick leaning at the doorway.

“Hey.” He smiles at me then looks at dad. “Hope it’s okay, the door was unlocked.”

Dad stands. “Nick you’ve been waltzing in through our doors since you were sixteen. Why stop now?”

He chuckles and walks in. “Everything alright?” he asks me.

I nod. “Dad was just being emotionally awkward.”

He grunts. “Yeah, it wasn’t pretty. It’s a good thing you’re here.”

“I get it, Dad. But it doesn’t mean I’m ready to sit through a dinner with him.”

“Just don’t go hungry for it.” He pats Nick on the shoulder and walks away. “How about dinner with me then?”

I narrow my eyes at him. “You already ate.”

“Like I couldn’t eat again.” He holds out his hand.

I take it and shake my head. “The sacrifices you make for me.”

He bends to kiss me. “Anything for my girl.”

I lick my lips. “I’m your girl now?” Our relationship has become more than a fling. It’s helped a real couple than two horny consenting adults. And it’s just about the best thing that warms my heart these days. Between Jace, finals, and the holidays now all coming up, it’s been hard letting myself go and enjoying what we have. For the most part, he makes me feel happy, safe, loved. And regardless of what happens or how he answers this question, I’ll always be grateful to him for this time.

He pulls me against him. “You’ve *been* mine.”

He knocks

the frame.

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Nicholas

WE LOST ANOTHER ONE tonight and Coach pulls me
“What’s up with Jace?”

I shrug. “I don’t know Coach.”

“Figure it out and fix it,” he growls.

I heard Coach ream him out after our last game and his patience is Angel has been taking care of Rory almost full time, from what I understand since the nanny hunt has been less than fruitful and being a single dad raising five-year-old isn't exactly ideal, so I seriously don't blame the g

“I got it, Coach. He’ll be on point tomorrow.”

He mutters a few curses and storms off.

It doesn’t take more than a nod and a glare for the guys to know need to do and casually make their way out. Jace doesn’t pretend notice and shakes his head.

“Let’s just pretend we did this and you can leave me alone.”

I nod. "Is that what you would do?"

"I'm not you. I have boundaries."

"You're right. Let's pretend we had a pep talk about your plays few games and what I know you're capable of."

He stands. "Sounds good."

"But that means we have about ten minutes to kill." I cross my arms and lean against someone's locker.

He sits back down, his head lowered. There's two whole minutes of silence and I feel like a shitty captain with every second that ticks by.

But a good friend.

"How is she?" he asks.

"She's alright," I answer with a breath. "I've seen her...happier." I have been solid with Cora and me. And as good and free as we've been together these last two weeks, there's a sadness in her eyes. And it's pulling me apart.

"Something Cora said has been bothering me." He looks up at me. "She said you're having sex. She didn't say you're dating. What the hell are you doing—you just fucking her?"

It's a fair question so I sit on the bench across him to answer it honestly. "We're together. We were a...fling, I suppose. But it's more now. When we have dinner, she spends the night, I took her jogging with me—probably won't do that ever again..." The humor is lost on him and he stares at the floor.

"She's my girlfriend, Jace. And now that our relationship is no secret, I'm not hiding my feelings for her."

Not from anyone.

"I went to see her the other day. She wouldn't come down..." He looks down at his head. "I know, shocker, right? I mean I called her a child in the workroom."

possible. Packed a bag for her and kicked her out with zero hesitation.
rubs his eyelids.

the last I frown. "Have you been sleeping?"

"I sit in the kitchen in the mornings half expecting her to come down
And then realize she's not and wonder where I went wrong." He looks
at me. "You're where I went wrong. I trusted you."

My jaw hardens. I'm not sure if I'm offended or hurt. "I'll treat her
with more silence than anyone else can."

He stands. "You get angry."

"I know."

He takes two steps toward me. "Don't get angry with my sister."

Things "I know."

end with He shakes his head in defeat and walks out of the locker room.
tearing

she. "She
are you



honestly. *Another week later.*

we have "Is Cora coming to dinner?"

won't do "No," I tell my sister as I set our plates. "I think Jace is going to try
by Bruce's house again to see her. I didn't tell her that, but I told her
that I'm busy tonight so she's there when he shows."

"That's not cool."

"She has to talk to him eventually."

shakes "Isn't that like...tricking her?"
first way

on.” He “Shit, maybe you’re right. I’ll text her.”

The doorbell rings and Nicole jumps off her stool. “That’s probably my sister says, mid-stride, “figuring out what a jerk you are...”
nstairs. On instinct, I follow her through the hall and into the foyer, regarding up at Nicole telling me I can start letting her answer doors without babysitting

My head is buried in the text I try to craft to my girlfriend to convince her better that I didn’t set a trap for her and that I’m just helping fix the relationship broke...

Delete.

I should just call her.

“Nickles!”

What the hell? I look up from my phone. The front door is open and she shouts, “I told you to stay away.”

I race over. “Nicole get away from the door.” She spins back to look at me but doesn’t move from the door. Her eyes aren’t fearful. They’re outraged.

“No. I’ve had enough. I’m not letting you control my life from a computer anymore. This ends now. Tell me what you want. How can I get you to leave me alone?”

Terry’s eyes fill with tears. “I just want your forgiveness.”

“Go to hell.” She turns and I move to stand in front of her.

to stop “I thought I made my last warning clear,” I hiss.

r I was Terry holds up her hands. “I’m not here for money. Look there’s someone here with me. I think it will help Nicky forgive me if *he* also apologizes to me.”
I frown. “Who?”

A tall man, old enough to be our father steps out of the unfamiliar car parked in my driveway and starts to approach the front door.

Behind me, I feel Nicky’s grip on my shoulders loosen and she

away.

ly her,” “Hello.” The man looks and sounds creepy. This is exactly the
people I imagine Terry hanging out with back in her day, I was hopin
less of started to change her ways.

ing her. “Who the fuck is this?”

nce her “This is—”

onship I I hear my sister’s shrill scream behind me and turn. Nicole’s fac
dramatically before she crumbles to the floor.

“Nicky.” I sprint over to her and turn back to the intruders. “Don’t n

I hear the stranger mutter “I knew this was a bad idea. I’m getting
here.”

Nicole And then a lethal voice behind him. “He said. Don’t. Move.” I do
this tone often. But I know it anywhere.

k at me “Nicky,” I whisper with urgency. “You have to get up. Come on. I
ged. you.” I hold her face as her eyes flutter open. “I know it’s not ideal bu
listance you to tell me who this person is right now.” I’m growling at her but
o leave help it.

She looks back at the man that Jace has pinned against the wall and
me to let her. She looks back at me with liquid-filled fear in her eye
him.” Her voice is hoarse. “That’s the man she used to leave me with
his friends.”

omeone “Go to your room and lock the door.”

s.” After she’s upstairs, I turn back to my own mother. “I’m sorry, M
withdraw my phone and dial 911.

liar car

It wasn’t easy getting Nicole to open the door. We needed a sta
from her before everyone left. I’ll never unhear the things that Nicc
e backs

them about the man.

kind of In some demented world the woman lives in, our mother thought t
g she'dway to get close to her daughter again was to bring around the m
terrorized her so he could apologize.

Apparently, Terry offered the man a good chunk of the money I g
to do it. Which made me feel like even bigger shit. I basically paid the
e palescome here and haunt my sister after nine years.

It was merely because Jace and Nicole were here that I didn't beat
nove." to death as we waited for the police.

g out of From what I understood from the officer, Terry will likely be out i
months; having violated restraining orders, trespassing and drug posse

o't hear The man identified as Frank Lidowsky, is going away for a long tim

I make Nicole some tea and bring it into her room. I don't stay to cl
'll help too big of a mess to even try right now.

t I need I almost forgot Jace is here when I come back down.

t I can't "Thank you," I breathe.

He shakes his head. "I'm just glad I was here."

l it kills "Why are you here?"

es. "It's "Cora's refusing to take anything and I know she needs it. I parked
th. And in your driveway and was just going to drop off the keys." He pulls th
of his pocket and places them on the bench by the front door.

"There's some cash in the glove compartment too since she's s
fom." Using my credit card."

I run my fingers through my hair. *Shit.* I hadn't even thought abo
Cora might be missing by leaving home.

atement "I'll make sure she gets it."

le told He watches me. "Are you alright?"

I shake my head. “No. I don’t think so.” I inhale. “But it doesn’t
he onlyBecause right now, I need to go take care of my sister and watch her
an whohawk all because I gave my mother a shit load of money the last time she
here.”

ave her “This isn’t your fault,” he tells me.

man to I can barely see straight. I can’t focus on Jace right now or making
right. I don’t want anyone around me. The only person I want close right
the guyis the same one I wasn’t allowed to punch to death—if you can’t get
that, I don’t need anything. “Thanks for coming by.”

n a few He nods and walks out.

ssion.

e.

at. I’m



The whistle blows as soon as my gloves are off. I don’t even know
fight with this guy is warranted, but it’s too late now. The game’s over
and I let him take the first punch.

her car *I’ve fought you before. You won’t knock me down this time.*

iem out I remember his moves and as expected, he misses. I make mine—he
he’s bleeding on the ice in seconds.

still not *Too easy.*

ut what I picked the wrong guy—I’m barely satisfied and now missing good
time for it in the penalty box.

“Trouble in paradise, Kane?”

The jab comes from my own teammate. The one who’s been after
for months and I’m only now seeing it.

matter. I swallow hard. I can probably control it, but why the hell should
r like fists ache and I rub my knuckles. Still debating if he's worth it.

she was "Take it easy, man. I was talking about Jace, not Cora." He chuck
apparently, it's the only push I need.

I whack Garret in the face, and he goes down hard. I wouldn't be su
; things if I gave him a concussion.

ght now "Kane," Coach barks.

give me I ignore him and the second Garret stands and comes at me, I pun
him again.

"Kane, enough."

"Jesus Christ, Nick, I was joking. Get a fucking grip." Garret ba
throwing his arms in the air. No doubt going easy on me because h
about the drama that went down the other night at my house.

I look up and see Coach's angry face just barely. It's the girl who
the first row behind him that has me snap back to reality. The
ow if a expression on Cora's face hits me in the chest and then drops to my st
stopped making me sick.

I turn away with a curse.

ard and But the second my eyes are back on the ice, Jace glides by. His ey
from Cora in the stands to a hard pointed glare at me—

He doesn't have to say it.

d game I already know.

my girl

I swallow hard. I can probably control it, but why the hell should I? My fists ache and I rub my knuckles. Still debating if he's worth it.

"Take it easy, man. I was talking about Jace, not Cora." He chuckles and apparently, it's the only push I need.

I whack Garret in the face, and he goes down hard. I wouldn't be surprised if I gave him a concussion.

"Kane," Coach barks.

I ignore him and the second Garret stands and comes at me, I pummel at him again.

"Kane, enough."

"Jesus Christ, Nick, I was joking. Get a fucking grip." Garret backs up, throwing his arms in the air. No doubt going easy on me because he heard about the drama that went down the other night at my house.

I look up and see Coach's angry face just barely. It's the girl who sits in the first row behind him that has me snap back to reality. The pained expression on Cora's face hits me in the chest and then drops to my stomach, making me sick.

I turn away with a curse.

But the second my eyes are back on the ice, Jace glides by. His eyes shift from Cora in the stands to a hard pointed glare at me—

He doesn't have to say it.

I already know.

Cora

I KNOCK ON HIS bedroom door with a little more force this time. I stood me up after the game but I'm not holding it against him. I know I had a bad night.

And he's suspended for two games, which hasn't happened since his first days in the league.

"Nick? It's me, will you open up?"

Nothing.

I know he's home. Nicole—who was here with Angel during the game—told me he came straight home after the game and after quickly checking on her, disappeared to his bedroom without so much as a glass of water from the kitchen first.

I don't know why he's hiding from me. I don't know why he's shut himself out. But I'm not going away.

I sigh and wait another minute. Wondering if there's anything else do to get him to open up to me.

The door is pulled open and he glares at me as though I've done something horrible to him.

His eyes are red. Pupils dilated. He scans me and turns, walking back to his bedroom.

I don't hesitate to follow him in and close the door behind me.

"Nick. Talk to me. I know you're upset."

"I'm not upset, Cora." His voice is strained.

"You haven't called me in two days. I feel like I had to bribe Collins to let me sit in the front tonight just to see you up close." I laugh, even though I don't find it funny at all.

"Well I'm glad you had front-row seats for that show."

me. He I move to stand in front of him. "It wasn't a show, Nick. You're hurting

now he "No, Cora. I'm angry. There's a difference."

I touch his chest. "Don't be."

is early He looks down at my hands on his chest. "You shouldn't be here. Not now. I need a minute."

My face falls. "I'm not afraid of you. And I'm not leaving you to do this on your own." He turns from me and I come around him to face him again. "Let me do this with you."

king on He takes my hands and pulls them to his lips. "Cora. Please—"

rom the "Fine. Let's just go to sleep. We can talk tomorrow."

ting me He paces away from me, pulling on his hair. He stops to look at me. He's considering something. Something that hurts him. He's been so close to me the past few weeks that I want to do the same for him.

He takes my hand and pulls me against him. "I don't want to sleep"

I could you.” He draws closer. “I want to make love to you.”

My eyes widen as I take him in. My lips part but I don’t have
nethingspeak. His mouth is on mine, pulling me into one heated, passionate ki
tension of tonight hasn’t lifted yet. Not from either of us, but he isn’t l
ick into stop him from being with me.

There’s a feeling of home when his lips are on mine like this. Wl
wrapped up in his arms the way I am now.

I may not have much to compare it to—but I already know it’s bet
anything I’ll ever experience with anyone.

Coach

almost

Nicholas

t.”

ot right *I’m making love to you tonight.*

I repeat in my head. Knowing I didn’t just feed her a line. I move he
bed and undress her. Every second that passes, I’m mesmerized by her
al with

She’s so good. So trusting. So delicate. So giving. She moves w
ice him reading me, understanding my speed, my desires. She knows where I
be touched. How fast or slow I need to go. She knows she can stop m
second and change course and I’d be on board as long as it’s what she

I don’t know how to make love, but it comes naturally with Cora. It
ie, as if helpful to me that I’ve been making love to her since our first time in this bed.

It’s not just our situation that makes her different. Her body, her mi
ep with smile, her trust. It’s the little things that she’s done over the years that

how special she is.

time to I kiss her deeply as I enter her and put my hand on her neck. Lov
iss. The vibrations from her throat when she moans. Our bodies are flush be
etting it want to feel every inch of her. I want to remember the way her sk
against mine.

en I'm Because I'm going to miss it so damn much.

ter than

Cora

The curtains are pulled apart when I wake up in Nick's bed. He
keeps it closed for me when he goes out on his runs so this is odd.

I frown, wondering if I overslept. I push myself up and check my
It's only eight o'clock on a Sunday.

r to my "Morning." Nick's voice is flat when he comes out of the bathroom.

. "Hey. It's...ugh bright in here."

ith me, He looks out the large windows. "Yeah, we get pretty good light
like to side of the lake."

e at any "I guess I should get dressed now." I scrunch my face and smile shy

wants. His features go soft for a fraction of a second before indifferent

: occurs "Yeah. I've got to get to the rink."

My voice is still hoarse from sleep. "Aren't you suspended?"

ind, her He stares at me. "Still gotta practice."

tell me

“Right.” I pull myself out of bed and he turns, moving around the r
ing theI put my clothes on.

cause I I move directly behind him and touch his shoulder. He’s stiff w
in feelsturns. “Are you alright?” I ask tentatively.

“I will be. Once I get moving, I suppose.”

But you just went for a run.

I don’t bother pointing it out. Something isn’t right. My heart beats
my chest and I grasp at the first thing I can think of to see if we’re stil
same page here. “Last night was...amazing.”

I mean it. It was incredible. While we’ve never just plain fucke
night felt special. I felt cherished, loved. Like I was irreplaceable to hi

He runs a thumb across my lip, but it’s different. It’s almost col
there’s no feeling behind the touch.

usually I frown in response.

phone. “They’ve all been incredible. I just hope the next guy can do i
justice.” He winks.

Wait. What?

“What...next guy?”

on this He looks back at me. “I don’t know. Isn’t there some kid you were
out just a few months ago?”

ly. My face flattens. “You mean Eric?”

again. “That’s it.” He snaps his fingers. He pulls on a hoodie from the clo
tosses it to me. “It’s cold out today. You should put this on under that j

I feel a sharp pang against my chest. “Why do I feel like I did whe
in my bedroom in Jace’s house and he was packing a bag for me and
me out?”

His expression softens and he walks behind me, sliding the zip-up

loom asup my arms and over my shoulders. He turns me. “I’m sorry, Cora.”

The creases of my eyes release and I look up at him. “This is rule 1 when hethree, isn’t it?” The important one that I wasn’t supposed to forget.

Nothing about us is permanent.

He says nothing.

“What is going on? What—what happened? Did Jace say something against the way he was here the other night?”

He shakes his head. “You are young and so beautiful. You’re going to break hearts everywhere you go—”

“Nicholas—I’m yours.” My eyes search his for any clue that he is serious. He looks away of his mind and doesn’t mean any of this. Or it’s forced somehow.

He breaks our gaze and looks past me. “You were mine. *Temporary*—like that. It adds with a cold whisper to my ear.

My eyes water. I can’t stop them and I’m not sure I want to.

“You’ll do much better than anything I can ever offer you, Cora.”

“Did you know?” I ask, just barely holding back the tears.

“Know what?”

“Did you know last night?”

He doesn’t answer. He goes to the top of his dresser and pulls out a set of keys. He puts them in my hand. They’re my car and house keys. “I’ve dropped these off for you. You should take the car and stop being so stubborn.”

“Nick,” I whisper at what I know will not be my last attempt at talking to him.

He inhales a deep breath, his eyes distant.

I take his hands, but his focus is still somewhere else—anywhere. “Nicholas.” The tears fall and I don’t bother swiping them away. “I’m

but I warned you too.” He looks down at me, his brows drawn together. “I told you I break rules. And I started with number three. Because I fell with you.”

He pulls his hands out of mine and turns away. Stepping to his window.

“And I—I really thought that that’s what you were trying to tell me when Nick, that—that you felt the same way. Why would you do that?”

He turns sharply and takes a harsh step toward me, making me flinch. “Because that’s what men do—I hated being the one to have to show that, but it’s a classic, Cora.”

My lip starts to tremble and I take in a breath to keep it together. I slowly and pick up my jacket. My hand shakes as it reaches for the handle of his bedroom door. “Men don’t do that. Boys do.”

a set of

is. “Jace

being so

getting

re else.

am sorry,

but I warned you too.” He looks down at me, his brows drawn together. “I told you I break rules. And I started with number three. Because I fell in love with you.”

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“And I—I really thought that that’s what you were trying to tell me last night Nick, that—that you felt the same way. Why would you do that?”

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Cora

I SIT IN MY old bedroom in my father's house. He's gone on Cynthia or whatever her name is. I spent most of today hiding crying, when I know I should be studying for finals.

The doorbell rings downstairs and I groan. It's after nine and I'm shape to answer. I've turned off my phone, needing to disconnect everyone and everything tonight. Nicole called a few times earlier, prompted me to turn it off but a part of me hopes it's Jace.

I miss my brother.

We haven't spoken in nearly a month, and I'm not even sure why I at him anymore. Right now, it doesn't seem to matter. My brother has been the one to calm me when I'm upset. He'd make me laugh or some soup. Then he'd stay up with me and watch a romantic comedy j don't feel alone.

I tear up again but it's for a different kind of heartbreak.

The one I've been ignoring for weeks.

Despite my appearance, I open the front door, finding Nicole with bag and a tentative smile.

"Hello, beautiful," she says.

We're on my bed, against the headboard, each with a carton of ice cream.

"Sorry I ghosted you earlier," I say. Feeling terrible for abandoning my friend when she needs someone as much I do right now.

"Sorry I didn't take no for an answer and showed up at your door," I grin widely, not looking very sorry at all.

I dig a spoon into my mango sorbet. "How do you do it, Nicole?"

She scrapes against her raspberry one. "Do what?"

ut with
in here
n in no
ct from
which
'm mad
always
fix me
ust so I

"Not crumble? How do you go from having a full-blown panic attack then wake up good as new the next day? Or see someone who hurt you in the past and bounce back?"

"It's an unfortunate skill."

I stare at her. "How do I get it?"

She sets her carton down on my nightstand and twists to face me.

"Remember when you asked me about my bedroom experience and I told you I'll probably be single for life because I'm hard to please?"

"Vaguely, yes."

"It's not because I haven't found anyone who knows what they're doing."

It's because..." She tenses and looks back up at me. "I don't like being *touched*."

I frown.

“I’m not curious—never really have been. But I can’t imagine even a paperit or enjoying it. When I was sixteen, I was inappropriately touched by men my mother left me with on a few occasions. I wasn’t raped, but enough to make me hate intimate physical contact with men. I didn’t make a big deal out of it so I never really told anyone until a few night ream. “I’m so sorry.”

ing my She shakes her head. “I guess my point is, it’s not that I bounce back that I’m used to dealing with shit that you never had to. It’s why Nic r.” She scared to be the one to take you down a path that could ultimately—ru innocence.”

My brows jump. “Well I appreciate him *sparing* me.”

ack and “Yeah.” She sighs sympathetically. “Just remember, what doesn't k makes you stronger.”

u in the “I hope you're right because right now, I don't know what to do.” I around. “I don’t want to be here. I feel even younger than they all sa when I’m in my old room. My father’s been doing this thing where he in and tries to give me pep talks about family values and that he di things right and to let him know if I need anything. I just...I just wa d I told left alone.”

She peeks at my sorbet. “First, finish that. Second, take a shower smell fine, but it will make you feel better—I don’t know why—it just e doing. I nod and set the half-eaten sorbet down. “I’ll finish this later t e to be shower sounds nice. Will you stay?”

“I’m not going anywhere. When you come back, I think I have an ic might be just what you need.”

r liking
r grown
t it was
want to
s ago.”

Nicholas

ack. It's
ck is so
in your

I bang hard against his door. I know he's sleeping—but since I need to do this now. A light finally turns on and a moment later, the door is pulled open.

ill you,

Jace takes one look at me and sighs, rubbing a corner of his eyelid who I was hoping for but—” He lifts a hand in the air, resigning.

glance
ay I am

Taking advantage of the fact Nicole wasn't home tonight, I cracked open a bottle of whiskey and replaced a meal with it. I know he can tell I've been drinking—a lot—but I don't care.

comes
dn't do
nt to be

“I lied.”

He glares at me.

“I hurt your sister. Pretty bad.”

er. You
does.”

He sucks in a tired breath and looks to the side. But doesn't say anything.

“I suspect you can guess why.”

He looks at me with pity.

hen. A

“This is the part where you break me,” I shout, my arms spreading.

lea that

He scans me and looks like he's considering it. “You're already broken.”

I scoff and shake my head. “You're both so fucking weak.”

He simply nods, leaning against the doorframe. “Yeah, that's it. We're both weak ones.”

Giving up on the reaction I was hoping for, I turn and walk back block to my house.

Cora

can't, I

door is

d. "Not

open a

ve been

thing.

ken."

e're the

It's been three days and I've finally stopped crying enough to makeup and regular clothes instead of Nick's hoodie—which I've cover my face as I sat in the back of each class taking my final exams.

It's Wednesday and Julia had switched my days around so I work around when Bradley had a scheduled session. I'm relieved to go in center. Otherwise, I'd be stuck dwelling on my broken heart—or work calling or texting Nick like the damn fool I always swore I wouldn't be

I've been meeting with Bradley in what's become our spot; the room. He knows I work here so it's no secret what I'm doing, but he me and we've been able to help him through his challenges the last weeks.

"Do you like your dad's new girlfriend?" I ask when he mentions her

"She's alright. She's got a kid though."

"So? You're a kid."

"Her kids are like four and seven."

"That's annoying," I say, partially relating. Having babysat once in and swore against it as a part-time job.

"I know. I hate kids."

up the “You’ll like your own one day,” I try to assure. It’s also a way to
thinking about the future. Or find out what he plans for his future.

He shakes his head. “No. Not having kids.”

“That’s quite a decision to make at your age.”

He shrugs. “What’s there to think about? You should be married
kids, right?” he asks and I don’t bother touching that one right now. “/
that’s never going to happen.”

“So you’re already swearing off women for life?” I ask lighthearted
put on a soft laugh.

used to “I’m swearing off a lot of things for life.”

“Like what?”

ould be “Wife, kids, jobs that work with people...”

nto the “Wow. Aren’t a lot of those things the best parts of life?”

rse, try He shakes his head and shrugs at the same time. “I have a problem.

e. —I just can’t be around that.”

waiting “Around what? People? Gee thanks.”

e trusts “No, you’re cool. I mean people that would have to...be around m
ast few and stuff.”

I nod, understandingly. “A permanent place in your life?”

r. He nods, looking down at his hands. “I just want to be alone. Som
where no one can piss me off and I can break whatever I want without
know, hurting anyone else.”

My face falls. “What gave you that idea?”

my life “A few months ago, I almost hurt a little girl in the family I’m
with. She’s like the only one I like there. Anyway, I threw a candle
across the dining room and...I missed her by a hair.

I release a breath. “I see.”

get him *I think I need Julia for this one.*

Cora: *I need to swing by. Do me a favor. Don't be the one who c
the door.*

to have **Nicole:** *Don't worry. I won't be coming to the front door for a while*
And I—

I put the car in park when another message from her pops up.

lly with **Nicole:** *For the record, I think this is a bad idea.*

Too late, I think as I approach the double doors to his house. I take
breath, reminding myself he can't possibly hurt me anymore than he
has. I ring the bell repeatedly for about three minutes before he answer
I can't His eyes are tired, and he blinks rapidly when he answers. As if I
sure if I'm real. "Cora?"

"You're afraid to hurt me?" I ask.

ie a lot, There's a faint sigh as he leans against the doorframe. "Not anymc
answers flatly, looking past me.

"Jesus, why won't you look at me?"

ewhere He lowers his gaze to me. "You look good."

it...you "I wish I could say the same for you."

"Have you called Jace yet? I think it's safe for you to go back home

I don't have a home. But I'm not here to talk about me so I don't
staying telling him that.

holder "This didn't come out of nowhere. We were so good. It was real
That arrangement changed almost as fast as it started and I'm not tl
one who felt it."

He releases a breath and looks past me into the darkness again. I know that he's leaving me out in the cold instead of wrapping his arms around me tells me I could be completely off-base here and don't have to stand on.

"I know what happened here last week was traumatic, and not just Nicky. But you're ..."

I suck in a breath, partially from a chill in my chest. "You're being a coward."

"I'm not a coward, Cora." His eyes are back on mine—as if he needs to hear this. "I'm just not interested."

I'm too focused on the intensity of his gaze. The sharpness in his tone and a deep, undeniable lack of self-doubt in his voice that I apparently miss my chance to already respond.

"If it helps, I don't think you are either." He shuts his eyes. "I think your little crush has gone too far and you don't know how to move on." He looks at them again. "Unfortunately, that's one department I can't help you with. I'm so sorry, Cora. You're on your own with this one." He closes the door behind him, and the hallway light is shut off.

I was wrong.

My heart did break a little bit more this time.

"

It doesn't bother

Cora: *Hey.*

l, Nick.

he only **Jace:** *Hey! Are you okay? Where are you?*



he fact **Cora:** *I'm better. I wanted to let you know I miss you.*

n arms

re a leg

Jace: *Come home.*

Cora: *I left Dad's house yesterday, but I don't want you to worry.*
just for

the air. My phone rings almost instantly. I don't answer because I'll ju
crying. But I will go see him soon. It still hurts—the way he'd packed
s me to pushed me out the door. The way he'd put me on the spot and calle
child.

ne. The And yes, maybe I'm demonstrating that by staying so upset, but I c
cue to deal with one heartbreak at a time.

I haven't had to do this since...

ink this Mom.

e opens

ith. I'm

Jace: *What about Christmas?*

r gently

Cora: *I love you. I'll call soon.*

If not for all the lights and holiday cheer surrounding me the mor
semester ended for winter break, I'd have forgotten Christmas altogeth

Cora: *I'm better. I wanted to let you know I miss you.*

Jace: *Come home.*

Cora: *I left Dad's house yesterday, but I don't want you to worry.*

My phone rings almost instantly. I don't answer because I'll just start crying. But I will go see him soon. It still hurts—the way he'd packed up and pushed me out the door. The way he'd put me on the spot and called me a child.

And yes, maybe I'm demonstrating that by staying so upset, but I can only deal with one heartbreak at a time.

I haven't had to do this since...

Mom.

Jace: *What about Christmas?*

Cora: *I love you. I'll call soon.*

If not for all the lights and holiday cheer surrounding me the moment the semester ended for winter break, I'd have forgotten Christmas altogether.

Nicholas

BY SOME FUCKING MIRACLE, my game—and Jace’—has hit 100 points the last two weeks.

Nicole is here tonight for the first time in over three weeks. She hasn't been here since the incident at the house. Hockey can get violent, and she made the right choice staying away.

She and Angel are in the suite. Coach assured me that they're keeping a close eye on her.

I don't deserve the support I get around here. Including Garret, who stopped by to see me days after I bashed his face in to apologize and work out our differences. He played it off like he'd been hit harder by his nickname than that he'd egged me on—so we were even.

I don't doubt that he's also noticed the strain between Jace and me, and he's suddenly acting like we're best buds.

Garret slaps my back with his t-shirt as I walk by. "Going up this time"

I've been skipping out on the parties in the suite the last few weeks since Nicole is there and I need to start looking more like a leader, I nod.

"Yeah, I'll be up in a few."

Like a pathetic fool, I check my phone again for any messages. I check social media.

No activity for weeks.

It's become somewhat routine for me to do this.

I'm guessing by the lightened mood Jace has—and his focus—that he's back home and I'm relieved for it.

Maybe things can get back to normal—at least for her.

I don't feel good in a suit, but at least I make an appearance. Jace and Bruce are here and I consider saying hello. I look for Cora out of habit, but she's been on I'm not an idiot. She's not coming.

Bruce sees me approach them and smiles. "Hey, Nick. Nice game to come to." I haven't seen Jace's eyes move to me and he stiffens, taking in a breath as if he's afraid she's sput up with me.

"Was a good game to come to," I say, absently turning to Jace. "Can you give me a ping antalk for a minute?"

He shrugs and follows me onto the terrace. "To be honest, Nick, unless it's about my sister, I'm not interested in talking much."

He looks out. "It is."

He nods and waits for me to start.

"How is she?" I ask.

Immediately, his brows draw together, and I hold up my hands. "I know I have no right to ask—I just need to know she's alright."

"How is she?"

ks, but “What are you talking about?” he snaps, then steps up to me. “I
d. she was with *you*. I haven’t seen my sister in over a month—my father
she left two weeks ago. She missed *Christmas*. In fact, he’s here
eck her because he thought she’d be here...with you.” He huffs out another
“It’s the only reason *I’m* fucking here.”

I stare blankly at him until he turns sharply and takes out his
pushing numbers frantically.

Cora is Against my better judgement, I walk off and grab the only other
who might know.

“Where is she?” I demand from Nicole.

ace and
bit, but “Hey,” she whines and tries to free the arm I’m gripping.
I release immediately.

Coach steps up to us. “Is there a problem, Kane?”

I ignore him and glare at my sister. “Where is Cora?”

day.” She rubs her elbow. “I—I don’t know.”

has to I take a step toward her. “You know I can tell when you’re lying.”

Can we Coach puts a firm hand on my shoulder. If he squeezes even a
would be enough to qualify as an injury. “She said she doesn’t know.”

“She does.”

ess this “Why don’t we step outside, Nick. You need to cool off.”

I brush his hand off and stare at my sister. My chest tightens in shock
shake my head. “I’m sorry, Nicky,” I mutter before marching out of the
and down to the parking lot.

know I “Kane.” The call comes from behind me in the lot. It’s loud and sharp
meant to stop me in my tracks.

I turn. “What?”

Jace waits until he’s close enough before he speaks. “Where do you

thought you're going?"

her said I blink rapidly—my mind barely functioning. "I don't know. I need
e today her."

breath. Jace's brows rise steeply and he crosses his arms. "Why don't you j
her?"

phone, I stare back at him, my mouth slightly open, puffs of my breath com
into the cold air. "She won't answer."

person He nods, as if he already knew the answer to that. "She's safe."

My eyes level his and I wait for even a shred of more information.

"I just spoke to her. I didn't tell her you asked but to answer your q
she's just fine."

"Can you tell me where she is?"

He shakes his head and walks off.

little, it

Cora

ick and I I've been staying in Nicole's apartment alone for the past two wee
ne suite location is in a decent, busy neighborhood in Hollyville with great
restaurants. Parking's been a bit of a bitch though. A few days after I t
arp and new best friend that I needed space to just be by myself, she gracior
me up here for some solitude.

I missed Christmas dinner at dad's and have been feeling horrible a
ou think I didn't plan to. In fact, I'd bought presents and fully intended on show

But recovering from heartbreak has a way of sneaking up on you—to find doesn't check your schedule in advance.

I sent an apology via text and that I'll be in touch soon—using the usual call that I'm still recovering from final exams.

Now, after hearing Jace's voice when he called me last night, I'm feeling outready—and hopeful—to work this whole mess out.

The doorbell rings and I'm excited and nervous. With a deep breath, I push that door open like it's a band-aid that's been on way too long, expecting nothing for a second.

Question; But it doesn't.

"Morning." He offers me the same bright smile he does every morning when I come downstairs into his kitchen. He bends to pick up a large bag of coffee—that's when I notice the surrounding of paper bags overflowing with groceries. He strides past me into the apartment. "First things first."

I'm still in one of Nicole's sleep shirts and fuzzy slippers. "What's this?"

Jace walks in and out of the kitchen until all the bags are settled on the counter. "It's all your favorite things," he says, pulling out a mug from the cupboard and pouring hot coffee into it. "You'll sit and have one cup while I unload. Then I'm making you eggs."

ks. The I close the door and lean against it as my tears release. "Jace."

nearby He stops at the sound of his name and walks around the counter to tell me. "Cor," he breathes.

usly set I throw myself at him and he embraces me expectantly, holding me tighter than he's held me in a really long time. I feel tension release in his shoulders. I feel myself let go in his arms. "I'm so sorry."

ring up. I try to release but he holds on tight. "I love you so much, Cora."

—and it I repeat the apology to him between sobs and he shakes his head, me go. “You did nothing wrong.” He presses his forehead to mine. “I’m sorry, excuse—I handled it all wrong. I was angry and in shock—I’m a madman who comes to you.”

beyond I laugh. “You are. I’m so grateful for you.”

He hugs me again. “Thank you for letting me come see you. I hope that, I ripokay, I told Dad where you are too.”

ing it to I nod and peek at the countertop. “How’d you know I hadn’t had yet?”

“It’s before nine.”

morning I move to a barstool and watch him unload. Transforming Nicole’s refrigerator cartonfridge to resemble ours at home. “You didn’t have to do this.”

ed with “You will not go hungry. Do you have enough money? How’s school?”

“How much time do you have?” I chuckle.

at is all There’s no humor when he looks up at me and responds. “For your day.”

on the I get out another mug for him and pour. “Let’s just go sit on the couch for a bit?”

of these He pulls out a box of donuts from one of the bags and follows me into the small living room. We talk for nearly two hours. About the internship, the offer they gave me after graduation, the slight hit I took on my graduation toward last semester and a few minutes on Nick.

The elephant in the room was getting too thick—someone had to bring it tighter up.

oulders. He stays long enough to make us lunch and dinner for me for later. He sits at the kitchen counter eating grilled cheese sandwiches.

“I missed you,” I repeat for the fifth time.

letting “Have I really been hard on you?” he asks, as though it’s been on h
m sorryfor days.

when it “It’s hard to say right now because I miss you being hard on me.”

He smiles. “Would it be too cliché to say if you come home, things
different?”

ope it’s I laugh. “Yes. But I will anyway. Just not yet. I kind of want to lay
a bit. Get some end of school year planning in order. Explore independ

l coffee He nods, but he can’t hide the look of dread on his face.

“I can’t live with you forever, Jace.”

“Not forever. That would be weird. Just until you’re twenty-five.”

s empty I shake my head.

“Do you know the cost of living right now?”

ol?” “I’m just considering it. My new job won’t be paying much to sta
but at least I’ll be working. And if inflation really hits, then maybe yo
ou? All your wish after all.”

uch for



e to the

the job **Nick:** *Hey.*

les this **Nick:** *Do you think we could talk tonight?*

ing him **Nick:** *I can come to you. I just... don't know where you are.*

We sit I’m not sure if it’s ironic that Nick pays for this apartment or if it ju
because it keeps me from feeling completely comfortable in here.
want to have anything to do with him.

is mind When his messages go unanswered—he calls. I hate it when he calls. I'm
so tempted to answer. So tempted to hear his voice. It would be so
wouldn't even have to talk back just...hang up a moment later.

will be When it goes to voicemail, I want to delete it before listening just
him. But instead, I stare at my phone as I pace the entire apartment, d
low for listening to it.

lence.” I imagine him saying. “*Sorry I was abrupt but you needed to hear
things.*” Or “*Stop being stubborn and tell me where you are—so we can
like grownups.*”

Or maybe it's not that deep. Maybe he's calling to tell me I left my
toothbrush at his place.

Against my better judgment, I play the message.

rt with, “Hey, Cora.” I melt at the voice. The tone I hadn't heard in weeks
u'll get same one he used when he told me he was going to make love to
thought it would be good to talk. I know you're upset with how I breathe
breath. “I know I messed up. There was a better way...and I chose to be a
asshole. We need to talk. Please tell me where you are. Or if you want to be
hidden, then please call me.” There's a beat and I feel like he's going to say
more, but the message ends.

I'm having trouble sleeping. It's nearly midnight and loud outside. I miss
like my quiet neighborhood back home. I hear teenagers laughing, people
shouting, car alarms going off, dogs barking. The windows are shut and it's
freezing out. *Why are people out?*

st sucks I jump when my phone vibrates. I'm not sleeping. Most nights I
I don't doze off until after one. I consider noise-cancelling headphones, but I'm
scared to do that.

lls. I'm I miss his call thankfully, and a minute later, there's another vo
easy. I from him.

to spite "Hey, it's me again. Listen, I know when you came back here—yo
ebating that night I..." I hear him swallow hard, "left you outside to say wh
came to say...I made it worse... I put you down and made you feel lik
r those broke that faith you had in me. The strength that brought you back he
can talk voice shakes a little. "I promise it won't be like that if you just talk
Please tell me where you are. Please...let me do this right." Click.

left my *Do this right?*
He wants to break up with me the right way?
For the first time in a week, my chest tightens, my eyes sting and my

ks. The clogs.
me. "I *Go to hell.*
I—" A I hit delete and block the number.

o be an
to stay A few days later I make dinner with some of the groceries Jace h
; to say over. He'd apparently scheduled a re-delivery of some of my favorit
and living alone had become somewhat satisfying—minus the sleepin
I still get.

Nothing I go back to school tomorrow, after winter break and I'm excited
ng and getting out of the apartment. I keep the television on in the backgroun
and it's I prep my backpack, set my alarm, and get into my pajamas. Shuttin
the living room lights and television, I start to head to the bedroom an
I won't when there's a knock on the door.

I'm too *The hell?*

icemail I tiptoe to the hallway and turn on a small table lamp in the foyer a
quiet by the door. It's a safe neighborhood so I'm not overly concerne
I've never been alone. A thought crosses my mind that maybe
u know someone from Nicole's past that she might owe money to. My heart
hat you little faster as another...slower knock sounds.

e shit. I "Cora," Nick's soft voice slices me in the chest. My face heats in
e." His while my heart flutters in relief. "Cora, it's me, I'm—maybe I'm taki
to me. of a long shot here, but I was hoping we could talk?"

I start pacing the small space between the apartment door and the
and see my phone flashing a message on the counter. There's a miss
and a new text message.
y throat

Nicole: *Hey, I tried calling. I think Nick might be on his way
apartment. I swear I didn't tell him where you are. Turns out he get
on utility usage since everything was transferred to his account.*

ad sent After I didn't respond, she sent another one.

e items **Nicole:** *He just asked me about it and I froze. Then he left - So sorry
g jitters*

to start "Judging by the light that went out a minute ago, I'm guessing yo
there."

d while *Shit.*

g down I can't shut this off. I can't block this like I did his phone number.
id jump keep him from saying things to me that will hurt me.

And I can't handle any more of it.

I know he has keys to the place, and I pray that he doesn't use the
why I'm so afraid to walk away from the door. I'm cold suddenly a

nd stayhim shifting and breathing on the other side. Refusing to give up and l
ed...but “I’m not good at this Cora. I’m not even prepared. I just—I had a su
this isof where you are, and I swear, there was a blue streak behind me as
beats aover here.” He laughs, while I focus on breathing silently.

I hear him release a breath. “I know I’m the last person you wan
n panicright now. And maybe it’s better this way. Maybe it’s better that I ap
ng a bitto a door. Then maybe I have a shot at actually getting the words out.”

I feel him lean against the door. “I just want to say I’m sorry. I s
kitchenthis up...” then mutters, “Just like I knew I would. I was overwhel
sed callmy...how much I care for you... that I ended it before I could hurt y
you know, do something completely toxic to your mental health.”

I hear him sniffle and then in a strained voice, he asks, “I did bot
to the things didn’t I?”

s alerts He clears his throat. “You should know that uh...you were right
coward.” It sounds like he swallows hard because the next words
painful. “It’s why I said those horrible things to you.”

I’m sitting on the floor against the door with tears streaming do
’ face, remembering the cruelty. The words that broke everything for n
hope that what we had was real. It was all the proof I needed.

ou’re in I sniffle involuntarily and press a hand to my mouth.

I close my eyes, having no doubt he heard me. I hear him shift. He
again a moment later, this time, the voice that comes from the other
I can’t the door seems closer to where I’m settled.

“That, as you can imagine, was the result of a grown man
defensive. Because you called me out on it. Like the tough, no t
em. It’s honest, fearless, beautiful woman you are.”

s I feel We sit there for another few minutes before he speaks again.

ave. “Are you still with me?” he asks softly.

uspicion I don’t respond.

I raced “I know you’re still there, but considering it’s one in the mornin
could have fallen asleep, I suppose. It would be oddly comforting to
t to see you could still fall asleep beside me. Even if there is over a hundred
ologize of solid wood between us.

I hear him groan slightly and stand. “For whatever it’s worth,
crewed didn’t make love to you that night. I’ve been making love to you si
med by day we started.”

ou...or

h those

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ie. Any

speaks

side of

getting

ullshit,

“Are you still with me?” he asks softly.

I don't respond.

“I know you're still there, but considering it's one in the morning, you could have fallen asleep, I suppose. It would be oddly comforting to know you could still fall asleep beside me. Even if there is over a hundred pounds of solid wood between us.

I hear him groan slightly and stand. “For whatever it's worth, Cora. I didn't make love to you that night. I've been making love to you since the day we started.”

Nicholas

S HE DOESN'T JOIN ME for dinner again so if I can't do medium rare steak, I decide to bribe her with blueberry cheesecake, my favorite.

I find Nicole in the den and walk in with a plate. "There you are. Want something up for you." I put the plate in front of her on the coffee table.

"Thanks!" She scoops up the plate and takes a bite.

"Tell me how I can get her to talk to me."

Her eyes roll and she takes another forkful.

I sink back into the sofa. "Nicky, come on. You know I screwed up. Help me fix this."

I expect her to laugh in my face. Because she's enjoying this too much. But she doesn't. Instead, she sets down the fork and plate and turns to me.

"I heard you that night with her," she says quietly with pity in her eyes and disgust in her voice. "Unfortunately, that's one department I can't help with."

with, Nick.” She leans in close and I already know what the next
“You’re on your own with this one.”



The lights are on and movement stops the second I knock. “It’s me
I wait for a response that I know isn’t coming.

“You know I realized last night on the way home...as I r
everything I said to you...I never actually told you my intentions. At
thought I was just here to check on you, make sure you’re alright. Ap
for being a dick—I don’t know. I just needed to see you.”

I release a breath. *Damnit. I’m screwing this up again.*

it with “I’m gonna sit. Do you mind? Just got out of practice.” I settle w
ke. Her back against the door and hope she’s still behind me. “The truth is,
right. It was all real with us. To the point where I swore I’d never be
/hipped let you go. That you were mine. When that whole thing with Terr
e. down at my place, when I couldn’t keep my head on straight or my
myself with my own teammates, I—I thought I was getting a reality cl
leave out the part about Jace warning me with regard to Cora being in
of fire.

p. Help I swallow the hard lump in my throat. “Yes, baby. I knew I was g
end it when I took you to bed that night. I’m so sorry.”

o much. *Fuck, except I’m not.*

me. “The worst part is I don’t regret it. I just hate myself for making you
yes and us.”

elp you

line is. “I’ve been trying to buy into the idea that I could never hurt the p
care about because of my anger but I did—I hurt my teammate, I hurt
and I hurt the woman I love.”

It’s faint, but I hear her suck in a breath on the other side of the door
“I love you, Cora.”

My mind traces visions of Cora from the day I helped her move into
again.” house three years ago, to the dates I’d watch her go on, to the morn
waltzed into the kitchen with a pink streak in her hair, black tank t
eplayed white shorts—and everything around me, including my best friend
t first, I became hazy.

ologize She’s been the one for longer than either of us realize.

If only I could make her smile right now.

Digging into my pocket, I pull out my wallet, looking for anything
with my use. Receipt—that’ll do.

you’re I pull myself up and walk down the hall, knocking on the first
able to Praying it’s answered by a little old lady who *doesn’t* watch hockey.

y went *Of course not.* A kid about eleven years old answers the door. He
fists to seem to recognize me.

reck.” I “Hi,” I offer with a grin.

the line He stares at me then peeks out into the hall.

“Can I borrow a pen?” I ask.

going to He nods slowly and I wait for what seems like twenty minutes out
door.

“My son thinks you’re Nicholas Kane. He’s looking for his Nok
u regret stick for you to sign. Just humor him.” She winks at me and I nod
smile.

The kid returns and hands me a wooden Nok-hockey stick and a S

people I which I autograph happily. He beams as the woman hands me a blonde
Nicole, "You just made his night." She thanks me and closes the door.

It doesn't take me long to figure out what I want to say.

:

Roses are red.

Violets are blue.

o Jace's

You're my stolen candy.

ing she

It's always been you.

top and

talking,

I slip the note under her door, imagining that one day, I'll tell her about
stolen candy reference and see that smile again.

I clip the pen over a couple of game tickets I had in my wallet and
at the neighbor's doorstep.

I could

it door.

doesn't

Cora

Nick has been here three nights in a row, and I still can't bring myself
open the door. I know that I'm going to have to face him eventually
hurts too much.

side the

Telling me he loves me pulled on my heartstrings and made me cry
also reminded me how he got me into his bed before shattering the
Hockey heart—which then made me cry again for a different reason.

with a

It's after eleven o'clock and I prep for his arrival just in case. To guess
I'm not tempted to open the door, I put my hair in a messy bun, remove
sharpie,

ue pen. makeup, moisturize, and put on the warmest flannel pajamas I could
Nicole's closet.

My back has been hurting sitting on the hardwood floors the last
nights so tonight, I prepared a pillow. Last night's visit was long. He c
to tell me he went to see Jace. He asked his permission to ask me ou
Jace was done laughing in his face, he proceeded to tell him to g
himself.

Then they talked about hockey, Angel—for whatever reason, and
being all weird since the fight. Like Nick knocked the asshole out of h
now he's halfway decent.

I almost didn't believe that Jace made an effort and talked to him
than it would take to curse someone out. But then I got a message fr
brother, which made sense.

Jace: *If this is what you want, I won't interfere. But he'd better do
this time.*

I watched the game from Nicole's small flat screen in the living r
ended late but they won. I send a congratulations text to Jace and h
yself to back a time he's coming over with breakfast.

When it's close to midnight, I'm convinced he's not coming and shu
everything but the small lamp in the entryway and then lock the door.

“You're just locking the door now?”

I yelp and jump back at the voice on the other side.

“I am so sorry.” I know he means it but there's humor in his voice
aranteenot mean to scare you.”

I release a breath.

find in “I’m sorry it took so long. I ran home to grab a pillow. You know—
talk. That’s your thing, right?”

st three I hear him settle onto the carpeted hallway, but he doesn’t say an
ame by Then I hear his head bang lightly against the door.

t. After “I know, Cor,” he starts. “I know this isn’t enough. I know there i
go fuckbig gesture I have to make to prove my commitment to you...but I’m
gesture guy. I’m more of a stalking you outside your door guy.”

Garret I smile and shake my head.

him and “Shit, I don’t know what I am except maybe completely lost without
There’s a beat before he adds, “I know what you’re thinking: How c
l longerbe lost without me? We dated for three minutes before you dumped me
om my I press my lips together.

“But I am—you’ve been my everything for so long. The one who l
me like she sees more than a star athlete. Before that, you saw me a
it right than the guy who needed love because his mother wasn’t around to
Seeing you and turning your frown upside down was always the high
oom. Itmy day.”

e sends “Still is I suppose. Like the day you found Lori in the locker roo
me. One look at your face and I was a man on a mission.”

it down He sighs. “Now I’m on the mission of a lifetime.”

“So how was your day?” he asks after a moment and waits. “Worth
There’s silence for a few long minutes. I hear him fumble on the otl
of the door. The crumbling of paper and then nothing. My eyes are
heavy and I keep blinking them open.
“I did

I think I might have fallen asleep waiting for him. I look throu
peephole and see him resting against the other side of the wall.

He’s asleep, his head on the pillow.

-pillow I bite my lip before carefully and slowly pulling the door open and
step toward him. He's got both hands on his chest. One holds a p
ything, paper, the other a pen. I slip it out of his fingers and read.

is some
not big

Roses are red.

Violets are blue.

I'll be here every night.

Til you say, I love you too.

t you.” I lower the note and see his open eyes looking back at me. A slow,
can you grin spreads his face.

2.” “Hi, beautiful.”

I wipe my face of any expression and stand hastily, but he catches m
ooks at forcing me to lock eyes with him.

is more “You said there's no such thing as pillow talk,” I whisper, a little ha
o do it. He pulls himself up as I stand back, wondering if I'm ready for thi
light of push my door open, letting him inside.

He follows me and glances down, noticing my own pillow by th
m with “And like everything else I say, it doesn't stop you.”

He closes the door and locks it, then turns back to me. “You alright?”

I nod.

a try.” “You're tired,” he says, matter of factly. “Come on.” He walks me
ier side the bedroom and settles me under the covers. “Love the p.j.'s.”

getting “What are you doing?”

“Tucking you in. Then leaving. I'll lock up behind me.”

igh the I nod. We both turn at the sound of police sirens outside the window

I take a
Nick walks around the bed to tighten the window shut and pull the c
iece of closed. He lingers there for a bit, looking out the window, keeping an
the block.

It's the last thing I see before I fall asleep.

The next morning, I wake up later than usual. I can tell by the inter
the glare through the curtains. Feeling oddly rested, I pull myself out
and wash up, applying eye cream before tackling anything else.

I step out into the hall with a yawn and jump. "Jesus."

, sleepy Both my brother and Nick are in the kitchen. Jace is standing beh
island and Nick is seated on the other side of it. They both turn an
flashes me a grin.

ly wrist I run a hand across my face and groan. "What are you both doing he
rshly. "Nick let me in," Jace answers dryly and turns back to fill the
s. Then clearly dissatisfied that he is here.

"Morning, sunshine." Nick slides off the stool and dumps a spoc
sugar in a mug. He walks it over to me and secures both my hands
e door. steamy cup before letting go.

"Did you... stay last night?"

," "Yes. I hope that's okay. I don't know this area well. I just wanted t
sure you were safe." He rubs my shoulders. "I slept on the couch," I
back to loudly with a glance back at my brother.

Jace rolls his eyes, unimpressed, and comes around the counter
"You have breakfast, and unless you want me to kick *him* out, you
company. I'm going to get going."

7. "That fridge is getting out of control, Jace." I nudge him. "You dor
an excuse to come see me, you know."

curtains He releases a heavy breath. My brother's not one to show affection
eye another people. "I'll call you later." He kisses the top of my head. "Dinner
take you out. Then maybe come back here and help you pack?" He gives
a toothy grin and winks.

"Dinner sounds good." I hug him and follow him out into the hall.
nsity of you for coming. You know, I didn't ask him to—"

of bed "I know. In some sick way, I was relieved to find him here. I hate
being alone—don't tell him I said this."

"Well don't worry. I'm not planning on speaking to him much, except
mind the maybe telling him to stop coming around."

id Nick Jace watches me with sincerity, and I can feel him resigning. "You
But you love him. I guess I've kind of always known you have. Just come
re?" favor...be careful. Granted, he's not the worst choice, but he's also
fridge, best, Cora. You're young enough to find someone who is."

I nod and narrow my eyes at him. "Is there such a thing as 'the best
nful of me?'"

on the He considers it. "No. No one will ever be good enough. Not in my
He kisses me again and leaves.

o make I walk back into the apartment, where Nick waits for me. He's holding
re adds my coffee again and I take it—still avoiding his eyes.

Instead, my eyes linger on the pillow and throw blanket on Nicole's
to me.—as pathetic as it may be, I'm sincerely grateful he stayed to watch over
ou have "Thank you."

He takes my free hand and walks me to the couch, settling me into
it need kneels in front of me. "How did you sleep?"

"Better," I say honestly.

around “Then that settles it, I’m moving in.”

ier? I’ll I laugh and spill some of the liquid on his pants. “Sorry. You
ives memoving in. I’m...I’m going back to Jace’s in a few days.”

He puts my coffee down and takes both my hands in his. “What abo
“Thank I glance at the mug on the floor. “Things aren’t looking good for yo
now.”

ate you He rolls his eyes. “Christ woman, here.” He hands it back to me ar
my knees instead.

cept for I stare into my mug before meeting his eyes. “I don’t know. I th
why I want to stay here a little longer. I feel like I completely lost m
can try.you...in what we became and I started believing things that might n
lo me abeen real...”

not the His eyes grow soft and regretful. “Baby, the only part of it that was
were the things I forced myself to say to you when I ended it.”

est’ for I close my eyes. His voice is so smooth and his words convincing,
to believe it. But it still hurts too much. “Do you mind if I stay her
7 eyes.”days, maybe longer? I know technically this is your—”

“You can stay as long as you need.” He stands and moves back
kitchen. “But you can’t get rid of me.”

ling out I press my lips together to keep from smiling as I approach the c
where he’s laid out breakfast for me.

s couch He kisses my temple. “And I’m not giving up on us.”
ver me.

it, then

“Then that settles it, I’m moving in.”

I laugh and spill some of the liquid on his pants. “Sorry. You are not moving in. I’m...I’m going back to Jace’s in a few days.”

He puts my coffee down and takes both my hands in his. “What about us?”

I glance at the mug on the floor. “Things aren’t looking good for you right now.”

He rolls his eyes. “Christ woman, here.” He hands it back to me and grips my knees instead.

I stare into my mug before meeting his eyes. “I don’t know. I think it’s why I want to stay here a little longer. I feel like I completely lost myself in you...in what we became and I started believing things that might not have been real...”

His eyes grow soft and regretful. “Baby, the only part of it that wasn’t real were the things I forced myself to say to you when I ended it.”

I close my eyes. His voice is so smooth and his words convincing, I want to believe it. But it still hurts too much. “Do you mind if I stay here a few days, maybe longer? I know technically this is your—”

“You can stay as long as you need.” He stands and moves back to the kitchen. “But you can’t get rid of me.”

I press my lips together to keep from smiling as I approach the counter, where he’s laid out breakfast for me.

He kisses my temple. “And I’m not giving up on us.”

Gora

FOR THE NEXT FEW weeks, this is how it was. Nick would c
my door just around bedtime with a subtle knock. I'd let him
we'd sit together, talking until I'd doze off. If I was already asleep, h
another poem under the door and come by the next morning with coffe
ride to school.

His patience has been unmeasurable.

Refreshing.

Reassuring.

Each day, I'm tempted to break the wall I put up and kiss him. Each
silently speak the words *I love you*. And each day, he makes it perfect
that I do.

Nicole stays with me for a few nights—mostly when the team ha
games. Her friendship has been a huge part of my growth over the 1
months and I'm grateful for her.

Although in some crazy world she lives in, she tells me she actually
up to *me*.

Her and Nick have been going to counseling together and separate
what I understand. And I can tell how much he's trying for her. And fo

One day, Jace will forgive Nick. It won't be soon, but he's got too l
heart not to.

Regardless of Angel telling me not to hold my breath for it. That
has zero faith in my brother having a soft spot for anything.

"Are you crying?" Jace asks, peeking over my shoulder as I slice an

We're hosting a small end-of-season house party for the team. A
the moment decision since I moved back home a week ago. He
thrilled with my decision to stay at the apartment longer, but underst
ome toned for some independence. Regardless of Nick barely leaving me al
in and more than a few hours.

e'd slip We've invited our close friends in addition to Coach, Rory and...v
e and you know, Jace even invited Angel. In what he insisted was for conv
purposes only. "*We'll need someone to watch Rory while we get
drunk.*"

"I'm not crying. You're crying," I say, wiping at the tears in my eye

He chuckles and nudges me away from the cutting board with h
h day, I "Move over."

ly okay A bunch of the guys from the team walk in through the back doo
stepping in first, Garrett, Cain and Roger behind him.

s travel "Jace, you upsetting my girl?"

ast few "She's still not your girl and no—she was cutting onions," my
answers. There's starting to be a little more humor in his tone when I

y looksto him. But the bite and sarcasm lingers.

Nick steps up to me as I wipe my eyes with my palm. “You know ly fromwere my girlfriend, I’d let you use my shirt.”

or me. My eyes are blurry and red when I look up at the dark blue t-shirt he big of a and a wicked thought crosses my mind as I reach to touch his chest. “C

There’s a soft growl and he wipes under my eye. “Try again.”

woman “Ugh, I think I liked it better when you two were sneaking around brother mutters without looking directly at us.

“I’m going to go clean myself up.” I rub my sensitive eyes and m onion. way to the front of the house.

spur of “I’m going to...go make sure she doesn’t hit a door on the way tI wasn’t hear Nick say behind me.

ood my Turning on the cold water knob, I lower my face to the sink and w one for sting off my eyes. I hear the door close behind me and his hands scoo

my hair to hold it back. I rinse off and pick my head up, my eyes bl what do “Roger?”

enience Nick responds by pressing me to the wall and whispering in r Coach “You’re sexy when you’re trying to be cute.” He backs up and dries r with the hand towel. “Better?”

s. I grin. “Oh, Nick, I wasn’t expecting you...”

is hips. He laughs with a rumble from his stomach and tickles my sides, b out the giggles I’ve been holding in. “Bet you weren’t expecting this e

r. Nick I yelp and cover my mouth, fearing the several guests outside th will hear us. We both take a breath and he rests his forehead against m

smells so good. He smells like the guy I’ve known and trusted for so l brother I want so badly to kiss him right now.

he talks So I’m not sure why I turn my head to the side when he tries to.

He releases a restless breath and pulls back, setting his hands on the table if you and watching me. I avoid looking back at him, but it's hard.

We stand this way for a full minute before he speaks. "Isn't that the night you wore that night I...the night you went out with your friends?"

"No, I don't have to look down to know it is. I press my lips together and he raises a brow and moves toward me.

"You wouldn't happen to be..."

I shrug dramatically and give him an aloof grin.

"Cora..."

"I can't remember if I did."

"Cora, there is a lot of testosterone here tonight. Mine being the threat—tell me you're wearing panties."

He's so cute when he's all worked up...

"You're not leaving here until you tell me."

When he brushes his fingers through his hair in frustration.

"Damn it Cora. I swear I'll check."

"Ooh is there a breeze in here?" I giggle.

"Fuck boundaries." He moves in on me and grips the hem of my skirt, keeping his eyes on me. "Last chance."

"You waiting for a permission slip?"

He shakes his head and runs his fingers up my thighs. I can't tell if I'm relieved or even more frustrated when his fingers reach the lace fabric at the doorway of my skirt.

"Can I kiss you?" he asks, his voice thick.

"No."

Hooking his thumbs into my panties, he yanks them down my legs.

"What are you doing?" I hiss.

his hips He bends and lifts my bare feet off the floor one after the other.

“Nick.”

he skirt Taking my wrists, he holds them together and wraps the lace around tight. Then takes the loose end and ties it to the towel bar before s and heback.

I try to break free with zero success and laugh—maybe a little ner

“What is it that you think you’re doing?”

He scans me and grins as if appreciating the sight. “Leaving you her

“Wait, what?”

He unlocks the bathroom door and turns the knob. “Wait. Stop. Yc biggestleave me here like this—untie me.”

He releases the handle but doesn’t lock the door. “Tell me why.”

“Because if someone finds—”

“Tell me why you won’t give me another chance, Cora.”

I stare at him, my throat clogging. He’s been both patient and refre relentless about winning me back. It’s not that I want to see him st make him fight for me. It’s because handing my heart and body over y skirt, scares the living lights out of me.

But it’s also everything I want...to be his again.

“Because I’m scared.”

if he’s “Yeah. Shocker. What are you afraid of?”

c under “Not now, Nick.”

“Okay, I’ll be back later.” He reaches for the handle again.

“Nick.”

He turns to me with a hard glare. “Cora. Nothing about me has ev simple. When I do something, I give it my all and I can be unconventional about it but I don’t give a shit. I love you. And I’m

you're not ready for this, but I see the fight, I see the resistance and
weakening, I just don't know what is holding you back. Tell me. I will
lead them way to fix it."

tepping I close my eyes, but he approaches me regardless.

"Promises? Reassurance?"

vously. I shake my head.

"Then what?" he whispers.

le." I open them and look up at him, tears sting my eyes. "I'm afraid of
love."

ou can't He frowns.

"I didn't have much to start with before you. I shut down emotion
before I was a teenager. It's why I didn't have any close friends that
around for years, like you and Jace. It's why I didn't have a high
sweetheart or dated long term in college. I'm so emotionally discor
shingly from loving, that I limit myself. Yes, I love my brother and my dad.
ffer or realized I was in love with you, I trusted myself to do it. I *let* myself t
to him risk knowing the facts about us."

He squeezes my hand. "I get it. You took a chance on me and yo
want me to be the last one you take that chance on."

I nod.

He keeps one hand on my waist and his eyes move to the fabric arou
wrists before he starts to work it free.

I watch him. His perfect features, the pain in his eyes—not for him
for me. It occurs to me that it's always been about me. Everything he
er been was because of his affection for me. A warmth that evolved into love c
a little last few months. Something that started as innocent as caring for
sorry if coming up with a cheesy poem just to make me smile.

I feel it And grew into something as selfless as letting me go because of his
I find hurting me.

This man is my everything. "Nicholas," I whisper as he rubs the re
left on my wrist.

"I love you too." I put my hands against his jaw and press my lips t
hard, it might bruise. I wrap my arms around his neck and he li
pressing me to the wall and kissing me just as desperately.

f losing There's a knock on the door, but we ignore it. He sets me down ar
back, our breathing is heavy and we both laugh out of sheer happiness.

His eyes search mine like he doesn't believe it. "Still?" he asks.

tionally "Always."

t I kept

school

nnected

When I

ake that

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And grew into something as selfless as letting me go because of his fear of hurting me.

This man is my everything. “Nicholas,” I whisper as he rubs the red mark left on my wrist.

“I love you too.” I put my hands against his jaw and press my lips to his so hard, it might bruise. I wrap my arms around his neck and he lifts me, pressing me to the wall and kissing me just as desperately.

There’s a knock on the door, but we ignore it. He sets me down and pulls back, our breathing is heavy and we both laugh out of sheer happiness.

His eyes search mine like he doesn’t believe it. “Still?” he asks.

“Always.”

Nicholas

EPILOGUE

(6 months later)

“O KAY, GRADUATE. WHERE TO?” I couldn’t wrestle Jace taking Cora out for a graduation dinner. After all, he’d arranged half the town to come together at one of her favorite spots. But at least I was on board to ditch out after dessert was served and disappear with r

“Paris,” she shouts.

I laugh. “Done.”

“I’m kidding. Let’s move back to your place.” She shakes her head. “I mean go—go back to your place.”

I smile ear to ear at her slip but other than that, I don’t call attention to it. It’s been a touchy subject between Jace and me for weeks now, which she knows nothing about.

Asking your best friend—who often times, still considers you the s
the earth—if you can take his kid sister out of his house and into you
been less than enjoyable.

But I don't want us apart anymore. I don't want to wake up with
and I don't want to have either of us have to text him to let him know
spending the night. She's almost twenty-one for heaven's sake.

“Let's go back to our place—I mean my place.” I grin and she sha
head, blushing.

Twenty minutes later, we walk into my house, which is empty exc
Max. He jumps my girlfriend with all of his affection and tail-wagging

“Enough Max, I don't want to have to tear her away from you too.”

She giggles and follows me to the kitchen. It's pre-lit with c
pendants that hang from the high ceiling. My marble kitchen island is
than it's ever been. There's nothing on the counter but the arrangemen
roses which I'd laid flat along with a few other things.

She stops and leans against the wall, watching me as I fish out our
from the fridge and set them on the counter by the roses. “Oh good. A
I was second guessing our entire relationship because you pulled m
from strawberry shortcake.”

“Do I ever leave you without dessert?” I glance at her as I pop o
bottle of champagne.

She stares back at me and licks her lips. “Do I?”

I groan and hand her a half-filled glass of bubbly. “Oof please hold
any more comments like that until we're done with dessert. Come here

She takes my hand and follows me over to where I've plated our
“Why is it so dark in here?” she gasps. “Are those roses?” She pla

scum of hand over the bouquet. “They’re beautiful.” She gently touches the
urs, has velvet bag I have tied to the ribbon, resting on the stems. “What’s in he

I ignore her and give her a forkful of cake. She eyes me and moa
out her pleasure.

w she’s I hold up my glass. “To a new beginning.”

She rolls her eyes. “Yeah, if I don’t screw up at this new job next w
kes her “You won’t. But that’s not the only beginning I’m talking about.”

She chews slowly and watches me. “Oh, no?”
cept for “No. There’s the beginning of new friendships. You and Nicole and
; have been getting pretty tight.”

She scoffs. “Yeah, right. Bitch gave me an A minus in aerobics.”
limmed “You deserved a B minus, and you know it. Not the point.” I cl
cleaner throat to try and get to said point.

t of red “What’s in that bag?”

I sigh. “Flower food. Will you listen?”

dessert Her eyes shift back to me. “Sorry.”

nd here “There’s the beginning of a not-so-new relationship...”

e away Her eyes glance at the velvet bag again and I sigh, giving up
romantic build-up. “Open the damn bag.”

pen the “Eeek.” She claps. “This is exciting.”

She reaches over and unties it, then pulls apart the drawstrin
removes the first item; a piece of paper.

l off on Frowning, she unwraps and reads out loud.

!.” Roses are red.

dessert. Violets are blue.

ces her I want to share it all.

But only with you.

e small
are?”
ns with

Move in with me.
Start a life that's new.
Not just my home.
But my whole heart too.

ek.” Her lips press together after she reads that last line and looks up at r
eyes start to flood, and I glance at the bag. She snuffles and lifts it, pull
the key chain. It's platinum and shaped like hard candy. There is an er
l Angel poem on one side, the first one ever I wrote her, which till this d
always be her favorite, and a photo of us on the other. She already
keys to my place.

ear my “I love this,” she whispers.

“Is that a yes?”

She nods and slides off the chair to throw her arm around me. “
absolutely perfect. You're perfect.”

I shake my head. “I'm not—but I'll get there. And I promise that
never lose love. Because I've got enough of it for you to last four lifeti
on the I never liked making promises, but it feels right making them to Co
doesn't need them, but I want her to know all the ways I plan to fulfill
keep her happy, to be her partner in every way. Despite Jace always
ig. She part of her life and their close relationship, Cora fought a lot of h
demons growing up. Ones a lot of us never knew about or even cons
Trust, insecurity, fear, loneliness. I made a vow that as long as we're t
—which I plan to be forever, she'll never feel a shred of those things a
And neither will I.

ne. Her
ling out
raved
ay will
has the

'This is

t you'll
mes."
ra. She
her. To
s being
er own
sidered.
ogether
gain.

Thank You

I hope you enjoyed Nicholas and Cora's story. Their journey has been the roller coaster for me and I'm going to miss them terribly. Becomin is the first book in the Blades of Heart series so they'll be back. I'd love to hear your thoughts. Please consider leaving a review. I re and every one!

Stay connected and keep an eye out for Books 2 & 3 in the Blades of Series!

Hatefully Yours – Jace and Angel

(Enemies to Lovers * Forbidden * Coach's Daughter * Forced Prox

Timelessly Ours - Royce (Coach) and Nicole

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— ROMANCE AUTHOR

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THE *Roommate* DEAL

Excerpt

Paige

“Hey stranger,” Bells called from her Volkswagen.

I raced across the street just as her trunk popped open. I hurled my s in, closed the trunk and folded my umbrella before sliding in passenger’s seat.

“Hope your apartment isn’t as tiny as your car,” I criticized. I visited once in the past year and I wasn’t the best at emotional reuni the comment felt appropriate.

“It’s smaller.” She threw back with a grin.

“Fabulous,” I breathed. And because it was hard to ignore her glare, smile spread across my face and my eyes watered. “Hey Bells.”

“Hello friend.” She smiled back and reached over, holding me for as she knew I could handle—which was not very long at all. I w touchy-feely person. Strangely, when she pulled away, I realized I cou used another minute or two.

“So we’ll go to my place first,” she offered.

“I should hope so, all my stuff is there.”

Bella waved a hand dismissively to the side and put on an resembling a character from Downton Abbey. “Not to worry dear, I h placed in a master guest suite overlooking the garden.”

“What?”

“What do you think? I live in a teeny one-bedroom Paige, the st sent is clogging up my minuscule foyer.”

“Ooh sorry. I probably don’t need half of it, honestly. I’ll go throu get rid of a lot of it.”

“Well don’t do that on my account. You know you won’t be able with me for very long. My landlord is super strict—I can barely have much less an entire human living with me.”

I inhaled and nodded quickly, my anxiety threatening in my chest to understand. I’m sorry to drop in on you like this. I had nowhere else to

She glanced at me, then refocused her attention on the wet road. “I hadn’t talk about it?”

“No. And yes. I’m afraid once I start, I won’t stop.”

Crying.

“I’m all ears. You know I was a skeptic about Evan from the start.”

“I don’t even know if I’m heartbroken anymore. I think I’m just... at myself. Feeling wasteful and used, you know?”

She reached out and touched my hand. “You trusted someone who wasn’t a

“A year I’ll never get back. I’m not giving Evan the satisfaction by his company down on my resume. I don’t want anyone calling him reference or to confirm my employment.”

“Where I come from, that’s called cutting off your nose to spite your

“Ew.” I leaned back in my seat and took a breath.

Sensing my anxiety growing, Bells switched gears. “But the night and living on Park Avenue, that must have been amazing.”

I smiled at her efforts, already feeling more at home, knowing that at this point, I was going to have to call my father to let him know I was

Boston. It wasn’t pressing—he and his wife, Bonnie, began traveling and sometime after I entered my junior year. Both were retired realtors, who

wanted to focus on property investments. After I’d gone to New York, I rented out the house since none of us were ever in town anymore.

to stay “It was. And I enjoyed it. But the best option for me now is to fir
e a cat, degree at Boston U and figure things out from there.”

“Well, we can start with takeout Thai food tonight... a bottle of me
rest. “Ia night of pouring your heart out.”

go.” “That sounds amazing.”

‘Wanna

Before the week was even over, I exhausted any and all energy I h
And it was only Thursday. My only solace was that there would be
minute business dinner or event Evan would be dragging me to.

so mad That was all over. I was free to do what I wanted—be it everyt
nothing.

let you But even now, between racing back and forth on campus trying to
it?” enrolled and apartment and job hunting, with the immense pressure of
putting both soon, I was starting to second guess my rash decision of leaving E
n for a And that was sad.

I sank onto Bella’s sofa, which had been my bed for the past three
: face.” “How am I supposed to enroll in classes if I don’t know what work s
I’ll have?”

htlife... “I don’t know how you’re going to do it. I mean having a side
college is normal, but you’re going to have rent and tuition to cover
at some need something no less than full time and decent pay.” Bells called bac
back in the kitchen just a few feet away.

aveling “Luckily, I have a year’s business management experience. I can
ho now this out.” I plastered a smile on my face, trying to keep myself from lo
rk, dad

ish my Her expression brightened. “Well, while you’re figuring that out, I might have like—amazing news. But we need to act fast if you’re in a hot spot and because once word gets out, there is going to be a line a mile long.”

I shook my head, hating when I got the after-details first. “What is it?”
“I heard from James that *Carson* is looking for a roommate.”

I jerked slightly and frowned. “*Carson Hill*? The same Carson who plays for the Boston Knightwings and probably got a sick starting line-up and left. Why on Earth would he be looking for a roommate?”

no last- “Obviously he doesn’t need the money, but here’s what definitely makes sense,” she balled her hands into fists and pumped them in the air. “He’s looking for a *female* roommate.”

“Ew.”

get re- “What? You just lived with a guy for like a year.”
finding “Bells, he’s clearly looking for a live-in groupie to do his laundry and
Evan. for him. Someone needs to tell him to get with the fucking times, hire a housekeeper and stop trying to play it off.”

nights. “You don’t know that,” she defended, lowering her hands to her hip.
schedule “Why else then?”

She raised a brow and deepened her tone. “I have a few ideas...”

job in I scrunched my face. “My ‘ew’ still stands.”
er. You Truthfully, I never thought Carson would stoop that low in his life.
ck from didn’t seem the type. As if he didn’t get enough attention from females,
he needed to put out an ad for a live-in cheerleader to sing his praises?

1 figure “So,” Bells went on, “he’s keeping this on the super down low. James
sing it. told me because he knows you’re back in town and looking for a place to live.”

James and Carson had been friends since sophomore year at BU. He was a year younger than all of us and played on the BU hockey team. He did

think I to our high school, but he and Carson hit it off right away on the ice.
interested “I told him there’s no way you’d ever.” She waved a hand. “You’re
unlikely candidate. Since, you know, you could barely form a sentence
around the guy in high school.”

“You did *not* say that to him.”

no now “No, of course not. But seriously. I think you should consider it.”
bonus? *You could vote me right now as ‘least likely to ever consider living
Carson Hill’.*

she makes “I’m not going to consider anything that sounds like total bogus.”
t, “he’s She huffed and stood. “Alright, well get up off your ass, we’re going
tonight.”

“No. I’ve had enough fun this past year. I need to sit here and let
work, and,” I opened my laptop with anticipation, “I found all
and cookroommate wanted ads on the BU blog. I’m hitting these up tonight.”

a maid Bells pushed my laptop shut as if I’d offended her in some way
dressed. This is the perfect time for you to get out and see your old crew

s. “You mean *your* old crew,” I muttered.

Bells and I had been close since elementary school and she was
more popular. I was cool only by association, but she was the one everyone
clamored to be around. She was the smart cheerleader, the blond. She was
the only pretty girl in high school who wanted no part of the Carson-clique
fans, preferred to be different—not predictable.

“Okay, you sit here and meditate on that, and I’ll go pick out your outfits
only I was in no mood for socializing but there were many nights back
.” York when I’d craved hanging out with my old friends—when I was sitting
e was in a tight cocktail dress and a drink in hand that I was afraid would
didn’t go

moved an inch. I tossed a throw pillow aside when Bells returned and before she could be an outfit she dug out of my suitcase.

entence “Who’s going to be there?”

“Natty and Nate,” the twins who were always pretty much everywhere, were oddly inseparable. “Nate’s engaged now to this girl Riley. She’s super cute, you’ll like her. James, of course, and probably Becky. And whoever else is coming with shows up.” She shrugged mischievously.

“Ugh, Becky.” I rolled my eyes.

“She’s grown up a lot.”

ing out *Doubt it.*

“Yeah. Okay. It beats staring at a screen all night feeling sorry for myself.” “Plenty of time for that later.” She pulled me to my feet. “I’ll even let you plan your self-induced pity party tomorrow.”

My eyes lit up sarcastically. “You’re the best.”

y. “Get Perking up for the first time since I’d arrived, I hopped in the shower.” I was determined to make the most out of tonight. It was what I needed: an easy time out with old friends, wearing jeans and t-shirts of bands I’d always loved. I hadn’t been around in ages.

everyone Besides, those prospects of available rooms wouldn’t be going away. It was the only chance since nobody normal would ever consider them.

ab. She And I...wasn’t normal.

I was desperate.

outfit.”

in New

stuck in **Chapter 3**

pill if I **Paige**

with an “To surviving your first week back home,” Bella raised her shot glass to me in the tight booth at *All Stars*, a sports bar downtown. Natty, N Riley were across from us in the booth.

ere and “Surviving would be the operative word, since I have no idea what to do next,” I muttered.

er else Bells inhaled her tequila and turned to me. “Seriously babe, you can stay with me as long as you need. I’m not kicking you out *tomorrow*. But if you see a bearded guy with fake hair and tattoos, just pretend you don’t speak English and duck out of the building.”

I shook my head. I knew Bells was trying but it was true; there was no room in there for me and I certainly didn’t want to get her in any trouble. Raising the shot glass to my lips, I threw my head back, swallowing the smooth liquor. With a light cough, I pushed the glass away from me. “I’m sticking to beer now, thanks.”

ver and Becky re-joined us after getting another round of shots. I pushed the glass toward the middle of the table, letting them know it was up for grabs. “I hear half the Knightwings are going to be here tonight.” Natty popped his eyes over our heads and scoping the crowd.

ywhere “What’s the occasion?” I asked.

Bells shrugged. “Paige is back in town, of course.”

I snickered. “Very funny.”

“I actually don’t know, but James is going to be here soon. If anyone else would know.” Bells turned her head to the main door and then scanned the crowd.

Becky held up a hand. “Wait, but Carson is definitely going to be here tonight, right?” She asked, her wide eyes probing us all.

When we all just glared at her, she relaxed her shoulders. “I mean

ass next you guys, but I was under the impression he was coming tonight. I heard
ate and looking for a roommate.” She perked her bust as if prepping for an auction.

Nate laughed. “Yeah, I don’t think that’s true, Beck.”

hat I’m “How did you hear that?” Bells asked, visibly annoyed, considering
had told her this wasn’t a widely known piece of news.

can stay “I just heard.” She shrugged, not willing to give away her source.

t if you Bells looked like she was about to say something until she
t speaks someone over Becky’s shoulder. The widest smile spread across her face.

I turned to find a matching one greeting her from across the room.

was no “Hey beautiful.” James reached our table and leaned over to kiss her
le. the rest of us weren’t sitting right there.

g down I cleared my throat and James glanced down. “Hey, look what
ie. “I’m finally dragged back all the way from the Big Apple.” He winked and
me up for a hug.

d mine “Hi James,” I returned the warm greeting.

“Hey, we’ve got a room in the back. Follow me.” He nodded and
te said, Bells alongside him as he made his way through the crowd.

“Who is *we*?” Becky jumped off the bench, following the couple.

I watched ahead as James gave a name to a guy with a clipboard in
the black curtain. He then turned and pointed to the rest of us
disappearing behind it.

anything, The fairly large man dressed in full black attire held it open for the
ned the us.

What, no smile? I chuckled to myself.

be here Whenever I was led to a back “VIP” room in the city, there was al
lovely hostess with Vanna White teeth welcoming me.

, I love This guy...was such a breath of fresh air. I smiled at the grump

and he's grateful to the stranger for reasons he'd never know.

lition. The vibe inside was most definitely the culture of the bar. I autographed sports memorabilia surrounded the rooms' rounded walls; James cleaner in here. The smell was still of alcohol, but swankier somehow.

There were a handful of people already here. Most college aged or older, but definitely our type of crew. I spotted a few I recognized. And spotted Becky was the only one not tied by the hip to someone else, I sat next to her at a booth across from James and Bella.

"Good to have you back, Paige. Really, we missed you. And remember—as if about..." he coughed and I realized that Bella had nudged him hard on the side.

Boston "Uhh...the job. Sorry, you lost your job," he squealed.

I pulled "Thanks. It wasn't meant to be." *The job or the man*, I thought.

Becky waved her hand frivolously, shutting down our dull small talk. "Are the rumors true about the Knightwing's being here tonight?"

I pulled James glanced at Bella. "Yeah...actually, Carson and a couple of others from the team are here. Bryan Sawyer, the rookie on the team last year, is out." He picked up his phone. "Not sure who else. They were just out of front of when I got here. Should be coming in soon."

before It was at that moment that Carson strolled in. He was with two other guys. They were nothing like him. Carson wasn't huge. He was tall with broad shoulders and chest, incredibly defined muscles beneath a black t-shirt—but nevertheless, more on the slimmer side comparatively. *And his hair was still as dark and silky as I remembered.*

Always a Though seemingly better looking than the last time I saw him, something was different. There was no trace of that polite smile he'd sparkled with as a young man,

people crossed his path and greeted him. He appeared much more relaxed, approachable with his lax swag and tight jaw.

It was His gaze swept over our table; his green eyes faltered on mine for a millionth of a second—more than enough for me to see how dull, some uninviting, and cold they were. Though somehow they were more beautiful since than I remembered.

Not more beautiful in a way that it was more appealing for him with such sad eyes, but they were more honest than I'd ever seen him. Open and sorry and in the open for everyone to see.

This Carson... wasn't trying to cover anything up. There was no fakiness lingering on his lips. No front, no show.

Is this the 'you that you'd been hiding' all those years?

My gaze dropped, memory wheels on overload, trying to remember the look. "So time I saw him and looked into his eyes. When he'd met mine and his gaze, silently letting me in on something no one else could see. What about the othersthey like back then? Were they like this?"

Nothing came. All I could see were the vacant ones he bared right now out front. Becky grabbed hold of my arm, suddenly anxious. "Hey, do you want to grab us a round, I'll get the next." She flashed a smile that made me feel larger suspicious.

I smirked and stood. No doubt Becky needed the spot beside her back t-shirt open.

Sure enough, when I returned with a beer for me and a shot for Becky, the seat next to her was taken.

By none other than Carson Hill.

"Paige," James started, sitting across the booth, pointing to the man. "You remember Carson."

h less I nodded slowly, the fact that he saw me sitting there earlier gnawed at me. “I do. Good to see you again.” I cocked my head to the side, “What do you do now?” I grinned and turned away, but not before catching a half-distant, smirk out of the corner of my eye.

Beautiful Becky shook her head, not finding the humor.

“Carson, beer?” Nate called from behind me.

to bear “I’ll get one in a minute, thanks Nate.”

but here James and Bella followed Nate to fill their glasses and I...was stuck. I had just returned from the bar.

the smile “They might be a while; you may as well sit.” Carson suggested flatly. I took the seat across, making a note to self that as soon as Bella was here we’d find a different booth.

the last “So,” Becky shoulder nudged Carson. “I heard you’re looking for a room. Is that true? Because I’ve been looking for a place all summer. I was stuck with my brother—”

Carson held up his hand to stop her.

ow. *What in the actual...?*

want to If I had ever seen Carson Hill annoyed, this was it. He glanced at someone highly at the bar and then back to the blond next to him.

er wide James must have heard me mention I was looking for a... room decoration.

“Oh.” She frowned.

cky, my I knew this had to be a misunderstanding. I took a swig of my cocktail, savoring the taste of a decent beverage... around decent people. Yeah, Becky beat out some of Evan’s friends.

1 of the “Well,” she shrugged, “I’d love to see your place sometime. Maybe I can recommend some color schemes.”

wing at No shame, this girl. Zero.

What do The side of his lip twitched when I turned my eyes back to him, re
int of ahe'd been staring at me. "That would be...terrific," he an
unimpressed.

But what came next was the real shocker. His head turned slightly,
rolled his eyes.

So...vividly.

since I So *carelessly*.

No one knew more than I did how utterly pesky Becky could be, l
ly. wasn't something I expected from Carson. Even back when I knew
is back,thinking the opposite of what he was showing, he was never... do
disrespectful.

; for a I could almost hear Becky's tiny heart shatter. She was a very
ner andperson. "I... I'm going to go grab a water...or something," she said, :
in her seat.

Carson stood, letting her through, then settled back into the booth,
we were now unfortunately... alone.

omeone With his focus now squarely on me, I was sure I stopped breathing.
challenging me? Well fine.

mmate. "That was really shitty," I said, nearly coming out of my skin v
itor." glare.

"Excuse me?"

ld beer, "I heard the same rumor—and don't act dumb, you hurt her feelings
s, even He didn't flinch. "Becky needs to grow up."

Someone touched my shoulder. "Lovely seeing you again, Paig
I couldlong you in town for?" Olivia, a friend of a friend from college was

her rounds. She reached over and touched Carson's arm, winking
realizing "Hey you."

answered, *Yeah, they slept together.* She wasn't here for me.

"Here to stay," I answered Olivia, knowing my response fell on deaf
and he "That's awesome, we should get together soon."

I responded with my best resting bitch face, and she turned
pretending to spot someone else. "Well, bye."

"You go somewhere?" Carson asked once we were left alone again.
but this "Manhattan. About a year ago." I told him, not the least bit surpris
he was he hadn't noticed.

wright "Graduate early?"

"Didn't graduate."

telling His gaze swept over me. "Don't strike me as the drop out type."

shifting My leg was starting to shake. What the hell was his deal? I shoul
just abandoned this conversation and left. But instead, I willed my leg
, where it and gave him a quick once over myself. "Don't strike me as an ass, y
we are." I grinned and took another sip of beer.

Was he He nodded slowly, his tongue moving against the inside of his chee
he appreciated the slight.

with his I didn't mean to be rude, but his attitude was rubbing me the wrong
exhaled, wondering what I did to deserve such scrutiny. "What *do*
you as?" I finally asked.

." His fingers twined as he rested his elbows on the table and lea
"Someone who spends too much time 'people watching' than worryin
a. How her own shit."

making I glared at him, at a loss for words. But I certainly couldn't sit h
confirm his observations. All this time I thought he hadn't noticed me,

at him. seen me standing to the side, watching him, but not only had he noticed
He was throwing it in my face.

“I don’t ‘people watch,’” I finally said after swallowing the ball
f ears. throat.

“No,” he paused, narrowing his eyes. “You *Carson* watch.”
I away I blinked, half shocked at such a blatant statement... and half *mortif*
When he didn’t move, I turned away.

“Yeah. That’s what I figured.” He leaned back.
sed that My head snapped back. “What, exactly, did you figure?”

“You can’t handle the heat.”
I leaned in. “Heat, I can handle. I like heat.” The corner of my mouth
before it faded and I pulled back. “Frostbite—not so much.” Picking r
up, I slid off the bench and walked away to see what the hell happ
ld have Bells and that drink she was getting.

; to quit
yet here

It was about an hour before I saw Carson again when he joined
k. As if James, Nate and I at the private bar in the VIP room. Bells and I were
on bar chairs and having settled on water for the rest of the night.

; way. I “How’s apartment hunting?” James asked.

I strike I squirmed, wishing no one spoke to me about my personal life rig
“Fabulous.”

ned in. Bella picked up on my sarcasm and changed the subject. “Seriousl
g about to have you back, Paige. It’s been a while since we could all get toget
this. Feels right having you with us.”

ere and

, hadn’t

d... Carson was quiet. I hated that I noticed. I wanted so much to un-not him to be invisible to me. The way I always was to him. The way I th
in mywas.

Well, this was fun...

Just as I was going to suggest leaving soon, James cut me off.

ied. “Hey babe, do you want to go dance?”

Bella nodded giddily and James pulled her off the stool leading he
the main room.

I thought back to Friday nights with Evan when we were out with
It was always his word. He made the next call while I followed suit.
h lifted He’d say, “sushi tonight” and I’d agree. He’d suggest dresses to we
ny beerI thought it was cute. What would it be like to be with someone so
ened toand with me? To ask what *I* wanted.

I’d find out one day when I got my life back.

Carson moved in to take Bella’s seat next to me and it took every o
strength I had in me not to check him out.

l Bella, Because he smelled so freaking good.

e sitting I shot an annoyed expression in his direction, placing my rocks glas
with water down on the bar a little harder than intended. I wished t
beers and one shot of tequila had some effect on me. Unfortunately,
ht now. feel an ounce of it, since my alcohol tolerance had grown remarkabl
hanging out with Evan and his older, sophisticated friends.

ly good But God how I wished I had been even a little buzzed.

her like If I had chosen to have red wine tonight, that would have been an o
different story.

“Not enough Carson-girls around for you? Or did you blow your sh
the only single blond in the house tonight and are feeling remorseful?”

ice. For “I didn’t blow anything. So, tell me more about Manhattan. You have
ought for something?”

I looked around me. Was there really no one else he could talk to?

And then it was like a Godsend. A group of girls walked in—their p
eyes scanning the room, finding Carson almost instantly. Spotting th
let out a low groan and grabbed my hand from the bar.

r out to “Do me a favor and pretend to be engrossed in a conversation with r
I leaned in. “Why the hell would I do that?”

people. “Perfect. A smile wouldn’t hurt either.”

“You think the world owes you something?” I asked, thinking back
ear, and I had to be at Evan’s beck and call.

in tune “I think *you* owe me something,” he mumbled, his eyes cautious
surroundings.

“You get hit in the head a few times playing pro?”

unce of He pulled tighter. “Why were you the least likely to hang around
high school yet somehow...”

He trailed off and I hated that I wanted to know where he was going
ss filled that. “Yet somehow what?”

the two He glanced at the girls—barely. As if to see if the threat was getting
I didn’t “What was in Manhattan?” His green eyes back on mine and even th
y since knew it was just a distraction to get me to engage with him, there
profoundness in his voice that told me to just answer the question.

“Everything.” I gave in to it, whatever it was. “Or so I thought,” m
entirely dropped.

He nodded slowly. “That’s deep. Tell me more.”

not with I shook my head, glancing over at the peering flock of girls. Sor
tugged in my chest. Once again, I was being used.

ve a job And by Carson Hill, no less.

Well I've grown a lot in the past week.

I leaned in closer and dropped my tone as sensual as I could get i
redatoryou seeing anyone?"

em, he He blinked, loosening his grip on my hand and shifting away a b
No."

ne." "Great." I grinned and stood. "No, I'm not interested in a threes
shouted, splashing my glass of water at his chest before flipping my h
marching away. I grinned as the girls made their way to the bar, surrc
to howhim.

End Excerpt

of our Read the rest of Caron and Paige's story here <https://geni.us/trd202>
available in audio)

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y voice

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And by Carson Hill, no less.

Well I've grown a lot in the past week.

I leaned in closer and dropped my tone as sensual as I could get it. “Are you seeing anyone?”

He blinked, loosening his grip on my hand and shifting away a bit. “N-No.”

“Great.” I grinned and stood. “No, I’m not interested in a threesome,” I shouted, splashing my glass of water at his chest before flipping my hair and marching away. I grinned as the girls made their way to the bar, surrounding him.

End Excerpt

Read the rest of Caron and Paige's story here <https://geni.us/trd2022> (*also available in audio*)



The Roommate Deal

A fake relationship hockey romance

The Better Bully

An enemies to lovers college football romance

Sporting Goods

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