

*Famous
Last Words*



C.W. FARNSWORTH

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BLURB

Harlow Hayes loves water. In its liquid form.

The chlorinated kind she swims in. The perennial droplets soaking her adopted hometown. The waves she ventures out on to observe the ocean.

Water, in its frozen state, holds no appeal to her. That's not the only—or most divisive—difference between her and Conor Hart. The arrogant, arresting captain of Holt University's hockey team spends every second not picking fights or partying atop a sheet of it.

Plenty of girls fall for the charming lines and that cocky smirk. Harlow knows better. Knows more.

The fuel for the fury that makes him such a dominant force on the ice. The reason he ignores her as resolutely as she pretends he doesn't exist. The history they share but didn't write.

Knowledge meant to ensure he's the one guy she could never —*would* never—like, much less love.

Famous last words.

To falling in love in unexpected places.

Or with an unexpected person.

CHAPTER ONE

CONOR

Ice is *not* a forgiving surface. I learned that truth when I was five, and the knowledge has been affirmed hundreds—maybe thousands—of times over the past seventeen years.

Doesn't hurt any less when I connect with the surface that feels a lot like cement. It might explain why I love being atop frozen water so much, though. Forgiving isn't an adjective anyone would use to describe me, either.

I pull myself upright, letting the blades of my hockey skates slide under me in a familiar motion. The sharpened metal glides forward effortlessly, as I do my best not to let Robby Sampson know that hit pretty much leveled me out. I'm going to have to scour the freezer for some peas tonight.

"If you manage to limp over to Gaffney's, I'll buy the first round," Hunter Morgan offers as he stops next to me, sending an icy spray that arcs across the center line and coats me from helmet to skate.

I pull off my right glove so I can flip my best friend off. "I'm fine. Never felt better. It takes more than ice to damage iron." I flex my arm for emphasis. *If you've got it, flaunt it*, right? I've never gotten any complaints.

Hunter snorts at the obnoxious move, unimpressed. "Save the lame lines for the ladies, Hart. I'm the one who's going to

be stuck listening to you groan about that bruise for the next few days.”

“I don’t groan,” I grumble.

“Need me to grab you a walker, *captain*, or can you make it back to the bench all by yourself?”

“Dick,” I mutter as I skate toward the boards.

Hunter laughs. He heard me. Good.

I take a seat on the bench and squirt some Gatorade into my mouth, wincing as my side throbs with what I’m sure will turn into a nasty bruise. The third line gets into position for the continuous in-zone drill we’re running. I watch as one of the sophomore wingers, Cole Smith, enters offside.

Seconds later, “Smith!” is bellowed across the ice.

Cole receives the lecture that—if I had to guess—involved lots of colorful vocabulary and at least one reference to skills learned back in the Peewee days, and then play resumes.

Two more shifts, and my line is back on the ice.

I breathe deeply as I skate between my linemates toward the blue line. The pain in my ribs fades as I inhale and exhale, letting the cold air saturate my senses along with my lungs. The signature scent of sweat and frozen water found only in a hockey rink has always been like that for me.

A salve.

A relief.

On the ice, I’m untouchable. Metaphorically speaking. Hockey isn’t known for being a non-contact sport.

Dean, the assistant coach, drops the puck between me and Aidan Phillips. Aidan earned his spot in the center of the

second line. He's always quick to react to the face-off and fight for possession.

I'm faster.

The second the puck hits the ice, I'm in motion. I swipe the black circle into the sweet spot on my stick and take off toward Willis, who's trying to cover every inch of the goal he can with his six-three frame. I could send the puck right to him. He's favoring the left side because I'm veering that way. I doubt he'll have a chance to correct if I shoot right. I've got a seventy-five percent—hell, eighty if I go top shelf—chance of this puck going in.

It'll earn me a lecture from Coach Keller on teamwork. Not the first; most definitely not the last.

Holt University's men's ice hockey team has plenty of problems.

My ability to score goals isn't one of them.

That's what convinces me to slow, circle, and send the puck over to Hunter rather than shoot myself. He glances between me and Louis Jamison, trying to decide who to send it to next. One of us hasn't managed a single shot between the irons all practice, and that person is not me.

Hunter is running through the same calculation I just made and comes to the same conclusion. He passes to Louis, who manages a slapshot that almost makes it past Willis. Our goalie snags it out of mid-air at the last second, tossing it out of his glove and against the boards with a harmless bounce.

A shrill whistle pierces the cold air. "That's a wrap, boys."

That's all he says. Unless one of us is running a play incorrectly or late to practice, Coach Keller is a man of few words. Rumor on campus is he had higher aspirations than

coaching season after season of spotty records under a perennial rain cloud. Literally. Sunny days are a rare occurrence in Somerville, Washington, where Holt University is located.

“Do you think Coach will crack a smile if we win on Friday?” Hunter asks as we step off the ice and stomp along the rubber mats that lead to the locker room.

“He looked passably amused before we lost in overtime during playoffs last year,” Aidan calls from behind us. “What day was that, Sampson?”

“March tenth,” Robby answers as we step inside the locker room and start stripping off our sweaty gear. Sampson has an uncanny ability to recall dates no one else would ever think twice about. He’d make a good detective.

Aidan shrugs as he unlaces his skates. “I’m shit at math. Seven months ago? Whatever, he’d better sport something besides a scowl if we beat Rockford on Friday. I can’t remember the last time some part of my body didn’t hurt, and the season hasn’t even *started* yet.”

“You and Hart should form a support group,” Hunter suggests, smirking. “I can already hear him complaining about his ribs for the next few days. Thanks a fuck ton for that, Sampson.”

Robby laughs. “No pain, no gain.”

“Hart is our only hope of a championship. Be careful with him,” Aidan instructs.

“I hate you all, besides Phillips,” I state before heading for the showers.

Despite the lackluster water pressure, the warm spray feels like liquid heaven against my muscles. It’s not just the hit from

Robby earlier. I've spent the same seven months Coach has been humorless putting my body through the ringer. Regular runs. Extra weight sessions. Endless laps around the rink. I'm in the best shape of my life. Seeing as how I've dedicated my entire hockey career to always being the fastest guy on the ice, that's saying something.

Unlike Coach Keller, *my* higher hopes are still in the mix. Professional hockey teams don't sign players from schools like Holt on the off chance they might stumble upon the next Wayne Gretzky amidst mediocrity. If I want a shot, I need to make noise. Noise scouts and managers can't tune out. Noise of the jaw-dropping stats, outstanding season, national championship sort.

I'm good. The problem is hockey is a team sport, and as much as I love the guys in the locker room, none of them could have played at a school with a better hockey program than Holt's. I could have, and the fact that I'm not is one of many things I'm bitter about. Along with the untimely—to say the least—summer skills camp concussion that made me miss the combine and the draft two years ago. Getting signed as a free agent is my only hope of playing professionally now.

I soap my hair and watch as the white suds disappear down the drain, then shut off the water and grab a threadbare towel. Holt spared expenses when it came to their athletic facilities. I pull on a matching pair of *Holt Hockey* sweats when I return to my locker—pretty much all I wear—and ruffle the ratty towel through my short hair as I wait for Hunter to get his stuff together.

My car is in the shop, so it's either rely on him to get around or walk in the rain.

“Gaffney’s?” Hunter asks as he pulls on his own *Holt Hockey* sweatshirt.

“Yeah, sure.” All that’s waiting for me in our shared house is a bag of peas and a pile of homework.

“Gaffney’s, Sampson?”

“Hell yeah, I’m there,” Robby replies.

“Me, too,” Aidan adds.

“How about you, Williams?” Hunter asks Jack Williams as he exits the showers.

“Can’t, man. Study group tonight.”

Hunter and I exchange looks, and it’s a miracle neither of us burst out laughing. Jack is the sort of preppy do-gooder I picture playing golf, not hockey. He’s a decent defender but an outlier on the team. Unlike the rest of us, he seems to have higher aspirations for his college years than getting drunk and screwing around. And playing hockey, of course.

Word of our post-practice plans spreads rapidly among the rest of the guys. Hunter finishes getting ready and we head out into the light sprinkle that’s falling from the sky. Holt’s athletic complex consists of three buildings: the ice arena, the basketball gym and weight rooms, and finally the pool and generic exercise equipment like treadmills and ellipticals.

Unlike at larger and more sport-centric schools, Holt doesn’t grant preferential treatment to its student athletes over the rest of the school or surrounding town. We have to schedule our ice time around the Somerville Sharks—a local youth hockey team—and open ice-skating sessions for the general public two nights a week. Time in the weight room is a tense negotiation between us and the basketball team.

The only upside is that the University's apathy toward its athletes is shared by most of the student body. We're fighting for time and space against other sports teams and elementary schoolers. Few other Holt students make the long, often wet walk to the sports complex on the fringe of campus to work out on any sort of regular basis.

Or drive here. The parking lot is empty aside from a few cars when we arrive at Hunter's SUV. Aidan heads for the shiny, red truck that provides an endless supply of teasing from the rest of us. It's a shade similar to a fire truck. Against the muted, gray backdrop of a Washington fall on the brink of winter, it stands out. Aidan isn't one to blend in either, so I guess it fits. And his vehicle is functioning, which is more than can be said about my car.

The trip to Gaffney's is short. We're already on the periphery of campus closest to downtown Somerville. It's a straight shot down the originally named Main Street to the small collection of buildings that serve as the town hub. What could be described as a mall contains a few box stores and a supermarket chain, followed by the town's library, post office, and elementary school. Just past it is where Holt students spend the bulk of their time. There are a couple of coffee shops, an Italian restaurant, a bookstore, a popular doughnut place, and then Gaffney's is at the far end.

Hunter parks in the lot located alongside the outdoor patio that doesn't get much use. Drinking a cold beer with a hot girl is a much less enjoyable experience in the rain, I've found.

Aidan's assault to the eyes slides into the next available spot a few minutes later. We loiter around in the parking lot for a while to wait for what turns into most of the team. There's a blatant shortage of options for entertainment in the evenings,

especially on a weeknight. Also, despite—or maybe because of—the significant amount of time we spend together, we’re a close-knit group. Hanging out off the ice isn’t a rare occurrence.

Half the guys here aren’t twenty-one yet, but it won’t matter. Hockey players rarely are short or scrappy. Few of the guys on the team look underage. We’re also within walking distance of Holt’s campus and the neighborhoods where most students live. The most dangerous drunk decision you could make would be to walk south rather than north, toward the Sound’s icy, dark depths.

We head inside as a boisterous mass of freshly showered testosterone.

Gaffney’s has a casual feel that’s natural, not curated. It’s scuffed floors and old country songs and trivia nights. The restaurant is already busy when we enter, packed mostly with other Holt students. Tuesdays are an opportunity for wings and beer at half price, an easy sell for students dismayed the week is only half over. Usually I’d be one of them, but our game on Friday has me second-guessing a wish that time will speed by.

Seven months of preparation for one hour on the ice.

It’s the first game of my senior season. There will be more of them. Thirty-four, to be exact. But Friday is my chance to put plans in motion. There is no such thing as a second first impression. An explosive start before other storylines eat up the limited college hockey coverage is my best shot at drawing the attention I desperately need to. I have no other viable option.

“Hey, Harlow.”

I'm distracted from my turbulent thoughts by Aidan's innocent greeting as we pass one of the occupied high-top tables. Several of the other guys I'm with repeat it, cheerfully acknowledging the redhead I stalk by without a word. If I wasn't both stressed and distracted, it wouldn't have taken me so long to notice her.

I may act like she doesn't exist, but I always notice her.

Harlow Hayes and I share history.

It's not the sort we wrote ourselves. That makes it complicated. Messy. Conflicting.

It was one thing freshman year, when I would, at most, catch a glimpse of her fiery hair in the dining hall or out on the quad. Our paths didn't cross. Holt isn't a big school, but it's large enough to avoid someone if you're motivated enough. We both were. Are.

Sophomore year, she dated Jack Williams, my strait-laced teammate. They broke up after a couple of months, but their brief fling somehow resulted in a camaraderie with several of my other teammates strong enough they refuse to follow my lead and act like she doesn't exist.

When it comes to most things, they'll follow me over a cliff. A girl who made the team cookies *once*? Laughed at a couple of their more amusing jokes? They could care less what I think.

Hunter gives me a confused look when he plops down beside me at the table I chose. The rest of the guys take seats as well. Hunter says nothing, but I know it baffles him—the whole team, actually—why I refuse to talk to Harlow. I've got a short temper on the ice. I'm usually the first to drop gloves when someone starts chirping. But off it, I tend to be an easy-

going guy. One random girl inciting my wrath doesn't make much sense.

They're equally puzzled by the way she matches my perpetual rudeness. The few times we've been in close proximity, Harlow has been just as insistent about ignoring me.

Our cold war is frosty on both fronts, which the guys notice, even if they don't get why.

Explaining would require sharing parts of my past I don't discuss. Painful truths I'm sick of letting define me and resolved to stop letting do so as soon as I left the small town I grew up in. No girl is going to change that.

"Nice to see you being so social, Hart," Aidan quips as he takes a seat. For what I'm assuming is a hormone-driven reason, he harbors a soft spot for her.

I scoff. "I'm plenty social. With people I *like*."

"What's not to like about Harlow?" Robby asks, raising both brows. "I mean, if Williams hadn't gotten there first..."

There's murmured agreement around the table.

I don't know the details—because I avoid the topic of her at all costs—but I do know Jack did not take the break-up with Harlow well. Still-has-feelings-for-her-two-years-later not well. He's dated some since, but nothing serious. No guy on the team wants to rock the boat by getting involved with Harlow, and I suppose that means I should stop making Vineyard Vines sale jokes at Jack's expense, because it's absolutely a best-case scenario for me.

The waitress comes to take our orders. She's a perky blonde who's served us before. Stacey, I remember, thanks to the nametag jauntily affixed to her t-shirt.

“Hey, boys,” she greets, surveying the table. Her brown eyes light up when they land on me. I wink at her, and she blushes.

I grab the laminated menu and look it over as she starts to take the guys’ orders. I get a burger and beer almost every time, but it’s either scan the other options or listen to Robby deliberate on whether he should get wings or pizza for the next five minutes. I stare at the words spelling out Gaffney’s limited offerings so intently they blur.

Finally, I glance up. Turn my head to the left. Fix my gaze on the table I passed and the rest of the guys paused at minutes ago.

She’s not looking this way. Harlow’s attention is on the dark-haired girl sitting next to her, who’s wildly gesticulating a story using both hands that’s got Harlow laughing.

They’re with a group of other people, but I don’t register a single detail about anyone else at the table. I allow myself to study Harlow—the girl I’ve never talked to and never will. She’s hot. Beautiful. Stunning. Hatred doesn’t make me nearly as immune to her looks as I’d like to be. Harlow Hayes is a Canadian import far more appealing to look at than crude oil or maple syrup.

Red hair.

High cheekbones.

Pouty mouth.

But... *What’s not to like about Harlow?*

She’s guilty by association.

CHAPTER TWO

HARLOW

Mist hangs heavy along the craggy coastline in gauzy curtains that prevent a perfect view of the water. I shiver as I step out of my car, mourning the loss of heat as I tug the sides of my yellow raincoat closer together to block out the chill sneaking underneath the coated polyester.

November usually contains a handful of warmer, sunny days.

Today is not one of them.

Salty air coats my hair and little exposed skin. The breeze swirling about is rich with the smell of fish and the bitter undertone of winter approaching.

No one stops me or asks me what I'm doing here as I walk along the rocky shore and down the gangway. Everyone is too fixated on their own list of tasks to worry about me wandering around. After three years, everyone's stopped paying any attention to the lone woman hanging around at all.

Well, almost everyone.

"Ah, there she is!" A broad smile transforms Samuel Prescott's weathered features. The corners of his eyes crinkle, forming lines that droop down into the creases around his mouth. "What a sight for tired eyes."

“Me, or the coffee?” I tease.

Sam chuckles. “As much as I love it, caffeine’s no replacement for company.”

“I won’t tell the boys.” I smile back before holding his cup out to him. “I did get you hazelnut today, though.”

“You spoil me,” Sam says as he takes the warm mug.

I climb aboard the old fishing boat, gripping my cup of coffee tightly as I shift from standing on firm wood to gently rocking plastic. “Please. I stop on my way anyhow. And it’s the least I can do for you letting me tag along.”

“No trouble at all. Brent just called. He and the boys are running a bit late. Timmy’s off fixing a net. We might get off a bit late this morning.”

“I’m ready whenever.”

Sam chuckles. “I know so. That test you were worrying about last week go all right?”

“It did,” I reply. “At least, I think it did. I won’t get the grade for a few more days.”

“I’m sure you did well.” Sam gives me a reassuring smile. “You work hard. When I was in school, me and the guys I hung around with didn’t take tests too seriously.”

“That’s true of plenty of people at Holt,” I tell him. One person in particular comes to mind, but I don’t say that. I don’t ever bring him up. Plus, I know Sam is a hockey fan.

“Net’s good to go.” Timmy appears. He tosses a ball of rope mesh into the back of the boat, then climbs aboard. “Morning, Harlow.”

“Morning, Timmy,” I reply, moving to the bow of the boat where my milk crate sits.

Brent, his brother Jerry, and his two sons all arrive a few minutes later, greeting me with friendly grins. They move about the boat in a well-choreographed dance, performing the tasks deeply ingrained in them after years of completing them over and over again. Every piece of gear is checked. Ropes are untied and knotted before we slip away from the dock. Nets are spread out in preparation for being dropped into the sea.

I yawn, then sip some coffee as we move further away from the shore, hoping the caffeine will wash away the reminder I’m up at this hour of my own accord.

Churning water soon becomes the only scenery as we chug further out into the Sound. Lingering mist paints the shoreline like a watercolor painting, smeared and cloudy. I have to guess at the shapes in the distance. The ones scattered along the coastline we just departed from.

A couple of hours pass.

I stare out at the water for every minute of them, never tearing my gaze away from the gray surface of the sea as my eyes strain to look through the veil that never fully lifts. I mark each spot we stop at on the spreadsheet on my phone with a black *X* to note the lack of any cetacean sightings.

“Apologies to the scientist on board,” Sam bellows as we cruise back into the marina. “Fish were biting. Orcas were nowhere to be found.”

“There’s always next week,” I say with a smile, trying to mask my disappointment.

Witnessing whales in the wild is a privilege, never a forgone conclusion. Living in the Pacific Northwest, I know

I'm luckier than most aspiring marine biologists. I've lost count of how many times I've witnessed that majesty in person. It never becomes any less spectacular, though. Which means it's never any less disappointing when an opportunity is missed.

We tie up to the dock, and Sam's crew begins to unload their fishing spoils.

"Thanks, Sam. See you all next week!" I say as I step off the boat and back onto the dock. Most of the slips are still empty. Sam is nearing retirement age, meaning his trips are shorter than many trying to make a living in the seafood industry. I love the water, but not to the extent where I want to spend all day aboard a small vessel. I'm lucky Sam is the one who invited me out after weeks of hanging around the marina freshman year.

The men call farewells after me as I retrace my steps from early this morning. It's not quite as chilly as it was during that walk, but the air temperature hasn't risen by much. I don't waste any time climbing into my car and blasting the heat. I'm eager to get home and shower.

My phone rings as I'm reversing out of my spot in the marina's parking lot. I smile when I see Landon Garrison's name flash across the car's display.

"Hey," I answer.

"Why do you sound so awake? It's barely eight," my best friend grumbles.

"I went for a swim," I lie. "I'm on my way back home now."

For some reason, I've never told anyone about my weekly trips out onto the Sound in Sam's fishing boat. I'm not sure

why. Anyone who knows me well is aware of my obsession with the ocean. Of the hours I spend memorizing species of algae and studying sea currents. That my dream is to make a career of it.

My time on the boat is different. I'll take notes on my phone of the pods we encounter. Their numbers, whether they've been tagged. My observations aren't part of an experiment or any official conservation efforts, though. Being out on the water is freeing. It's always been the place where fears and frustrations can't touch me. Keeping my early morning outings to myself is my way of protecting that, somehow.

And I *do* go swimming most mornings, so it doesn't feel like a real lie. Just a small stretch of the truth.

"Wow. Swimming before eight on a Saturday. You must have had a crazy Friday night, huh?" Landon asks.

"Absolutely wild." I match his sarcasm. "Eve and I had a James Bond marathon."

"Since when do you watch anything besides nature documentaries and romantic comedies?"

"Eve chose. She has a thing for Daniel Craig. I mean, who doesn't?"

"No one is immediately coming to mind," Landon replies.

I roll my eyes at his sarcastic tone. "What are you doing up at this hour, rockstar?"

"Studio time. I was shocked, but not many people want the eight AM on a Saturday slot."

"And you convinced the rest of the guys to show up?"

“I think so? Adam will probably be late, but he promised he’ll show.”

“Are you guys recording new stuff?”

“No. That would require having new stuff *to* record.”

“Ah, right.”

“Dad has started back in on the Plan B talks again.” Landon sighs. “Not even waiting until I’m a senior.”

“Just write a song that will win you a Grammy,” I suggest. “Then you can hold up a shiny gramophone every time he says anything about a back-up plan. Tell him to talk to the Grammy.”

“Oh, *perfect*. Why didn’t I think of that?”

I laugh. “He wants you to succeed, Landon.”

“Yeah, I know. And it’s not like I don’t know music is a hard industry to break into.” He exhales loudly, then falls silent. “Did you see the email?”

I hit the blinker a little harder than usual as I turn onto my street. Not that I didn’t assume it wouldn’t come up. I figured it was the reason he was calling in the first place. “Yeah, I sure did.”

“Did they ask you about it ahead of time?”

“No.”

“I’m sorry, Harlie.” Landon only breaks out my childhood nickname when he’s trying to annoy me or is worried I’m more upset about something than I’m letting on.

“It’s fine. It’s a really nice idea. It’ll just be... tough to get through.”

“Because it’s being run in memory of your parents or because it’s a marathon?”

I laugh. “Both.”

“Well, if it makes you feel any better, I’ll definitely have a worse time than you. Not to mention my parents. I’m going to need to hire a personal trainer. I refuse to finish after them. Dad still goes for jogs all the time. Once a jock, always a jock.” He scoffs.

“You guys don’t have to run the full marathon. You can run the half. Or you don’t have to run at all.”

“Of course we’re all going to run it. They’re raising money by the mile. Besides, that’s what family does.”

A lump forms in my throat as I feel a swell of appreciation toward the people that took me in after my parents’ passing. Make me feel like I still have a home, not just a place to crash during Holt’s breaks.

After twenty years of friendship, Landon can sense I’m overwhelmed, even through the phone.

“Mom and Dad are talking about visiting Somerville,” he tells me. “Mom said you sounded stressed last time you talked to her.”

“Senior year of college is stressful,” I tell him. “You’ll find that out next year.”

Landon is nine months younger than me, so we’ve always been a year apart in school. He’s only a junior, whereas I’m speeding toward the end of my college career.

“Can’t wait,” he deadpans.

“They don’t have to come visit,” I say. “I’ll be home in just a couple of weeks for Thanksgiving.”

“They want to, Harlow.”

“I know, but...”

“They shouldn’t be unable to visit you just because of *him*.”

I’m silent. The dysfunction that could be the plot for a semi-successful television drama is a minefield I do my best to avoid. I’m surprised Landon is bringing Conor up. He rarely does, unless there’s an opportunity to make a caustic comment. Landon is the friendliest, most relaxed person you’ll ever meet.

Until the topic of his half-brother is broached.

“Are you having another movie marathon tonight?” Landon asks after the silence has dragged for a few beats, not even bothering to act like it wasn’t a blatant attempt to change the subject.

“No. Eve wants to go to a basketball game.”

“Really?”

Landon has met my best friend and roommate Eve before. Her many eclectic interests include interior decorating and embroidery. Not sports.

“Yeah. She came up with this list of things to do before the end of college during our Bond-a-thon last night. *Go to a sporting event* made the cut.”

I don’t share some of the other tasks that made the twenty-item list. Like *wear pajamas to class* and *have sex in a study room*. Eve talks a big game, but I’m guessing—hoping—most of them will fall by the wayside.

“And you decided on basketball?”

“Are there other winter sports?” I ask innocently.

“Harlow...”

“I barely see him, Landon.”

It’s the second lie I’ve told him in the course of this conversation. I saw Conor Hart at Gaffney’s four nights ago. He ignored me, and I acted like he wasn’t sucking up all the attention and oxygen in the restaurant.

“Good.”

I stop in front of my house and turn off the car. “I’d better go, Land. I just got home, and I stink like chlorine.”

Make that three lies. Although I do smell.

“Kay. I’ll talk to you soon. You can always come to Brighton. Mom and Dad could visit us both.”

“Yeah, that would be fun,” I reply, despite the fact that there’s a reason I chose to attend Holt and live in sleepy Somerville. Aside from seeing Landon, Brighton holds no allure to me. “Good luck recording.”

Landon snorts. “Yeah, thanks. Talk to you later.”

The call disconnects. I remain in my parked car, staring out at the cloudy sky. I pushed the email I saw early this morning to the back of my mind. My conversation with Landon brought it right back to the forefront.

The tiny town on the west coast of Canada where I grew up hosts a marathon as part of its annual summer events. This year, it’s being run in honor of my parents to raise money in hopes of saving others from the same sad fate. I suppose they decided four years was enough time to commemorate. It’s a thoughtful, considerate gesture I should be and *am* appreciative of.

It's also a reminder of a night I like to pretend never happened. I'm not in any form of denial that my parents are gone. I've never been under a grand delusion they've been off on an extended vacation and will be back any day now. Their deaths are a reality I face.

How one stranger's decision to get behind the wheel drunk forever altered my life.

How things you take for granted—like having parents—can vanish in the same short stretch of time it takes to blink an eye.

I climb out of my car and head up the front walk to the duplex I share with Eve. Aside from Landon, who's known me practically since birth, she's my closest friend. I've done a terrible job of keeping in touch with the kids I grew up with. Just like the upcoming marathon, they're a painful reminder of the past. I'd rather remember the good times with my parents. Not the sympathetic looks for the final year of secondary school. The grief group I attended sporadically.

It's going to make for an awkward homecoming if I follow through on my plan to move back to the town I grew up in after graduation.

I unlock the front door and enter the small mudroom. Eve and I were lucky to snag this place for senior year. Houses close to campus and downtown move fast, and they're usually hogged by sports teams and sororities who have large groups of people wanting to commit. Two-bedroom places like this one are rare finds.

The kitchen is empty when I walk inside. I'm not surprised Eve is still asleep. Spilled popcorn is spread across the countertop, and I sweep it into the trash before heading down the hall to my bedroom.

I'm tempted to strip all my clothes off and take a scalding hot shower. But I didn't go for my swim this morning, and there's no time like the present to see what prayer I have of finishing a marathon.

As far as I can remember, it's been a casual event. There are no prize money or medals offered at the finish line. It's all sponsored for charity.

It's still twenty-six point two miles.

I sigh as I swap my raincoat for a sports bra and fleece. I'll just run downtown and back. Start some place. Swimming has always been my preferred form of exercise. I don't know anyone who runs regularly for fun or fitness. Masochists.

Landon was joking about hiring a personal trainer—I think—but I might need one to motivate me.

There's no sign of activity as I head back outside into the damp, chilly air and start to jog. It's not terrible. At first. The pounding of my sneakers on the asphalt is rhythmic. Air gushes in and out of my lungs easily. I don't know if this is the runner's high people talk about, but I'm feeling pretty damn good.

So good that I extend my original distance and run all the way down Main Street to the edge of campus before turning back on to Spring.

All of a sudden, running isn't quite so effortless.

It feels like the percentage of oxygen in the air has plummeted. Hitting the hard ground feels more uncomfortable than relaxing. My calves feel tight and tense.

Almost there. Almost there. Almost there, I chant to myself as I force myself to keep jogging and not slow to a walk. I don't think I've run more than two miles. Maybe three?

I don't want to know how abysmal of an athletic achievement this is. Just like I wish I could lie to myself about how far I have to run still.

Six blocks.

One block later, I pass Mr. Goodman out walking his dog. I wave at him, hoping I look better than I feel. He doesn't call an ambulance, so I must.

Five to go. Four. Three. Two. I can see my car. The front walk. The front door.

I collapse on the lawn, not caring the grass is wet. It feels good, actually. I pant and heave and stare up at the sky.

Eventually, I talk my legs into more movement. I stand on shaky limbs and head for the front door. My entrance is a ruckus. I toss my sneakers and topple the umbrella stand as I pull my fleece off, then stumble into the living space that transitions to the kitchen.

Eve is standing at the kitchen island, eating a banana.

"What the hell happened to you?"

"I went for a run," I wheeze.

"*Why?*" she asks, looking aghast.

Excellent question.

"I'm running a marathon this summer."

"Why?" Eve repeats.

I shrug. "It seemed like a good life goal. Character building, you know?"

She raises both eyebrows and takes another bite of banana. It shouldn't be a persuasive expression, but it works on me.

“It’s being run back home. In memory of my parents.” I head for the fridge and grab the water pitcher to fill a glass. “The money is going to an organization that works to keep drunk drivers off the road.”

I take a sip of water and glance her way. Eve’s studying me.

“It’s fine. I’m fine,” I assure her.

Eve is the only person at Holt who I’ve confided in about my parents. That they’re dead and how they died. I’ve let all my other friends here believe the care packages the Garrisons send are from my parents, not my mother’s best friend and her husband.

“Do you need someone to train with you? Because I totally will.”

I smile at her, hoping it conveys appreciation and affection. Coming from Eve, that’s a generous offer. She goes for long walks so she can listen to her favorite podcasts, but I know her preferred maximum speed is just that: a walk.

“I wouldn’t make you do that. I went by myself today, and it was fine.” I leave out the fact I’m not sure I’ll be able to move tomorrow. “I’m headed to shower.”

The twenty minutes I spend under a steaming stream of hot water help wash away the traumatic memories of this morning’s exercise. I put on my comfiest pair of sweats and make myself a smoothie before snuggling on the couch.

Eve has settled at the kitchen table to work on her latest art piece. It’s a typical Saturday. I lounge on the couch, alternating between studying and watching old episodes of *Arrested Development*. I only haul my butt up for the occasional

sustenance. Eve's pencils scratch in the background the whole time.

They don't stop until it's necessary to turn on the lights in the living room. Well, I don't turn them on. Eve does. I was content to lie here in the dark watching television. I squint at the artificial luminescence.

"It's time to go!" Eve announces. "Basketball game starts in twenty minutes."

"I thought you forgot," I grumble.

Eve makes a sound of disbelief, then points to the bulletin board to the right of the stove. The senior year bucket list she scribbled last night is prominently displayed beside our small collection of takeout menus.

I sigh and roll off the couch.

"Ten minutes!" Eve calls after me as I head down the hall to my room.

I'm tempted to wear my sweats but resist the urge. I feel gross after lying around in them all day, and I'm guessing we'll go out after the game.

I pull on my favorite pair of dark skinny jeans and a gray *Holt University* hoodie. My red hair is a mess already, so I pull it up in a loose bun I hope looks more purposeful than lazy. A swipe of mascara, and I'm ready.

Eve is already waiting for me. She's changed out of her own loungewear, into corduroys and a pink sweater. Most of her wardrobe consists of articles of clothing I could never pull off, but on Eve, they work.

"Ready?" She beams at me.

"Yeah, let's go."

“I’ll drive.” Eve snags her keys from the kitchen counter.

“Who knew you’d get this excited about sports?” I ask as we head outside.

“Mary said the games are super fun.”

“Mary likes basketball?”

Eve gives me a sly look. “Mary likes Clayton Thomas.”

I laugh. “Oh. Got it.”

I know next to nothing about basketball. I know Clayton’s blond hair and friendly smile make him a popular figure on campus. Unlike the other well-known male athlete on campus—Mr. Hart-breaker—he’s also a decent guy. We had a humanities class together last year.

“I think she’s hoping you’ll introduce her,” Eve tells me.

“And the plot thickens,” I drone as we climb into Eve’s car.

She gives me a sheepish look as she starts the car. “I’ve heard about him for weeks in our painting class, okay? I told her I’d try to strike up a conversation with him. But it’s not like I’m on a first-name basis with all the sports teams the way you are.”

“That’s a massive exaggeration.”

“The *entire* hockey team stopped to talk to you when we were at Gaffney’s on Tuesday.”

Not the whole team. Conor strode past me without a word, and I wish I hadn’t noticed. Although a small, vindictive part of me was glad he didn’t look pleased about his teammates talking to me. He’s rarely around when they do.

“That’s just because of Jack. You know that.”

I don't entirely regret dating Jack Williams sophomore year, but if I could go back and change it, I would. Unlike the rest of the hockey team, he wears button-down shirts and slacks most days. I had no idea he was even on the team until our second date. I'd made a point to steer clear of any Holt hockey players until then. When I learned Jack was on the team, I decided not to let Conor influence my life. Unfortunately, that stubborn stance drew my relationship with Jack out longer than I meant to let it last; something I feel guilty about every time I see him.

"Jack wasn't even there," Eve points out. "Just say hi to Clayton when we see him and if Mary and I happen to be with you, then you can introduce her."

"When we see him? You know the team doesn't usually make chitchat with the spectators between halves, right?"

"There's socializing at the party after, though."

I laugh. "Uh-huh. When were you planning to fill me in on the whole itinerary for tonight, roomie?"

"If you'd tried to leave the house in your sweatpants."

I roll my eyes as Eve parks outside the sports building that houses the basketball gym.

Mary hurries over to us as soon as we walk into the lobby. She's an art major like Eve. Unlike Eve, she's petite, blonde, and quiet. I'm surprised to learn Clayton Thomas is her type. He may not be a jerk, but he has plenty of other stereotypical jock tendencies. I don't think I've seen him with the same girl more than once. He also spent plenty of our shared humanities class hitting on me.

"Hi, Mary," I greet.

"Hi, Harlow," she replies, giving me a shy smile.

“Harlow is on board with the plan,” Eve announces, winking at Mary.

“I really don’t know Clayton all that well,” I tell Mary. “But I’d be happy to introduce you.”

She blushes. “Thanks.”

“Let’s get seats,” Eve decides.

The three of us head inside the gym. It smells like sweat and stale popcorn. Turnout is lackluster, which I’m not all that shocked by. Holt leaves a lot to be desired when it comes to school spirit.

“Not much of a crowd, huh?” Eve reads my thoughts.

“No. But you should have seen the hockey game last night,” Mary tells us. “Completely insane. It seemed like the whole school was there.”

“Since when do you go to the hockey games?” Eve asks.

Mary giggles. “Darcy and Teegan wanted to see Conor Hart play.”

I barely resist rolling my eyes. Of course. “Did Holt win?” I ask.

“Yeah,” Mary replies. “Conor scored both goals.”

“Damn. We should have gone to the game last night,” Eve bemoans, looking to me. “And you should have gone for Conor Hart instead of Jack Williams. Conor is *way* hotter.” Eve’s attention jumps to Mary before I respond. Probably for the best. “She and Jack had a thing sophomore year, remember?” she asks Mary.

“Oh, yeah. Wasn’t...”

I tune out Eve and Mary’s discussion of my dating history.

I may have confided in Eve about my own past, but I've never told anyone about the tangled web that connects me and Conor Hart.

We have no trouble finding seats, and then it's just a matter of waiting for the game to start. Mary and Eve chat about an art assignment while I scan the bleachers for familiar faces. Of the fifty or so people here, I'd say I know a quarter of them by name. One girl I had Advanced Biology with last spring waves at me.

The game begins without much pomp or circumstance. One minute the players aren't on the court, the next they're shooting warm-up shots. Some go in, but most miss.

I start to get the sense this will be a long game.

Sure enough, it drags.

With ten minutes left, Holt is down by twenty points.

"I'm going to the bathroom," I tell Eve and Mary, then stand and skirt the edge of the court, heading out the first door I encounter. I look to the left. Then to the right. Both directions look nondescript. The pool is in one of the other two athletic buildings. I don't think I've been in this part of Holt's sports complex more than a couple of times. Both for orientation events held in the gym I just left.

I choose to go right. There's not a single door along the length of the linoleum hallway. I round the corner and stop dead.

I'm outside the entrance to a weight room that surrounds the basketball arena.

The lights are on.

The door is open.

And Conor Hart is the lone occupant of the room. He's lying on one of the black, narrow benches people use to lift weights. Doing exactly that.

I'm frozen in place as I watch him raise and lower the bar. Ironic, considering it feels like the temperature has shot up by a couple hundred degrees around me.

I don't consider myself a shallow person. I judge people based on how they treat others. The things they say. The way they act. I've never been dazed or dazzled by good looks or clout.

Conor has both in spades. His attractiveness is a pretty illusion—skin-deep—and I haven't forgotten that.

There's just a *lot* of that skin on display. Creating a tantalizing view I drink in like I've been lost in the desert and am in desperate need of hydration.

Conor is shirtless, wearing nothing but a pair of black mesh shorts that ride low on his waist. *Low*. I can see the definition of the carved V between his hips and the dusting of dark hair that disappears into the waistband of his shorts. My eyes trail up to the tightest six-pack I've ever seen—not that I make a habit of ogling shirtless men, or that there are that many to ogle in a state where bathing suit season lasts approximately three weeks. I study the sweat that's gathered on his pectorals. Assess the way his biceps are bunching as he lifts a bar with a lot of round, heavy-looking weights on each end. Take note of the intense, focused expression on his face. My gaze wanders back down his sculpted torso to the muscular thighs straddling each side of the bench that doesn't look sturdy enough to support someone in that sort of shape lifting that much weight.

I swallow a couple of times. My fingernails dig into my right palm. I have no idea how long I've been standing here, staring at him.

Clayton Thomas is objectively just as good-looking as Conor Hart is. He has golden hair instead of dark. Sweetness instead of swagger. Friendliness instead of derision.

I've spent the past hour watching Clayton sprint around and sweat. Had a front-row seat to his muscles and masculinity. Nothing. Nada. No effect. I was so bored I made up a trip to the bathroom.

Watching Conor lift weights? I could stand here for a while longer and not have my fill of this view. I rarely let myself look at him, and it seems to have had the unsettling effect of making me not want to look away now that I have.

Finally, I force myself to step back. The horrifying possibility of Conor catching me gawking at him is what makes me spin around and leave far faster than I arrived.

I don't bother trying to find the bathroom. I retrace my steps back into the gym. There are only a few minutes left in the game that I barely register a second of. According to the scoreboard, Holt ends up losing by twenty-eight points.

As soon as the game ends, Eve suggests heading to Gaffney's. I agree quickly. Maybe a cold beer will bleach the sight of Conor's bare chest from my brain. I also kind of wish I'd snapped a photo.

Gaffney's is packed, which is no surprise. I don't think I've ever been here and had it not be crowded. There's something to be said for limited options, but the relaxed, friendly feel of the place would also ensure its popularity even if there were lots of other choices in town.

We end up leaning against the bar to order and eat before walking to the house that is hosting the basketball crowd tonight. Along with anyone else who happens to wander in. That's one of my favorite things about Holt. There is no sign of the carefully cemented social hierarchy present at so many other colleges. The few times I've visited Brighton it was obvious the artsier, creative crowd Landon is part of is separate from any sports teams. Here, they mingle freely.

Attendance at the post-game party far surpasses the crowd at the game itself. We have to fight our way through the front door and into the stuffy living room.

Immediately, I spot Clayton in the corner.

"Perfect, let's go over," I tell Mary and Eve, nodding to where he's standing.

Mary blanches. "Uh, no, that's okay. He's talking to someone already. I don't want to interrupt anything."

I laugh. "This isn't a cotillion. Manners aren't going to get you anywhere. Come on."

Mary shoots Eve a panicked look.

"It's okay. Harlow knows what she's doing," Eve assures her.

I snort as I set off toward Clayton. He catches my eye as I approach. Clayton claps the guy he was talking to on the back before stepping around him and heading for me. If it wasn't so conspicuous, I'd send Eve and Mary a told-you-so look right about now.

"Hey, Harlow!" Clayton greets me enthusiastically, even pulling me into a quick hug.

“Hey, Clayton. Nice game.” I smile at him, and he grins back.

“Were you at the same one I was playing in?” he asks dryly.

My smile turns into a smirk. “Yeah. Tough loss.”

Clayton shrugs, retaining his good humor. “You win some, you lose most. Right?”

I laugh. “Right.” Mary and Eve reach us. “These are my friends. Eve and Mary.” I nod to each of them as I make the introductions.

“Hey, ladies.” Clayton flashes them both a charming smile. “I’m Clayton.”

“Hi,” Mary manages. Her cheeks are pink. Eve is looking back and forth between the two of them, grinning. Subtle, she is not.

“I was just heading to the kitchen. You girls want drinks?” Clayton asks.

“Sure,” Mary replies.

“I’m going to run to the bathroom. I’ll meet you guys in the kitchen,” I say, winking at my two companions and then heading for what I think is the dining room.

This time I *do* have to go to the bathroom. If I can find one.

I push through the crowded dining room and emerge into a back hallway that looks promising.

“Hey, Harlow.”

I look to the left. Aidan Phillips is leaning against the wall. I pause. “Hey, Aidan,” I respond, smiling as my stomach

sinks. I had no idea the hockey team would be here. Aidan's presence means Jack is probably here. Means Mr. I Work Out Shirtless is probably here. "How are you?"

"We won last night, so pretty awesome." He grins widely.

I keep my smile in place. "Yeah, I heard. Congrats."

"Thanks." Aidan takes a sip from the cup he's holding. "Hey, I was driving on Spring Street earlier. Was that you out jogging?"

"Yeah, it was."

"Thought so. You a big runner?"

I snort. "No, not really."

"Trying something new?"

"Sort of. I'm running a marathon this summer."

Aidan's eyes widen. "No shit?"

I nod. "Shit."

"Wow. What's your training plan like?"

"My training plan?" I echo. He nods. "Uh, run a lot, I guess?"

Aidan laughs. "Freestyle. I like it. You know who you should talk to..." His eyes leave mine, looking at something—someone—behind me. He grins. "Hart!"

I refuse to glance back down the hallway. I know Aidan is aware of the fact Conor avoids me like an infectious disease. The only reason I'm not panicking right now is that I know Conor won't come over here. Not toward me. Avoiding each other seems to be the one—and only—way in which we're on the exact same page.

Except... he *does* come over.

“What?” The word is a terse snap. He’s in a bad mood. Shocking.

Aidan seems unbothered by Conor’s moodiness. Probably due to repeated exposure.

I can’t claim the same.

“Harlow is taking up distance running. Didn’t you add a whole bunch of mileage to your workout routine this summer?”

“So?” I’d rate his tone a solid ten on the arrogant ass-o-meter.

“Harlow needs a marathon training plan. Her current one is to *run*.” Aidan laughs like this is the funniest thing he’s ever heard. I don’t see any issue with it, which I’d say if I wasn’t acting like it’s still just me and Aidan standing here.

“What does that have to do with me?” He’s next to me now. I can tell from the location of his voice. Also because it feels like the left side of my body is engulfed under a heat lamp. The hallway isn’t narrow, but it’s not wide either. Conor Hart is inches away from me. Far closer than he’s ever been before. He obviously showered after the gym, because he smells like cologne and laundry detergent, not sweat.

“Dude, don’t be a dick.”

I experience a rush of affection toward Aidan Phillips.

Aidan nudges my arm. “Go on, ask Hart for help,” he whisper-shouts to me.

Any good will vanishes.

I snort. I can’t help it.

Help is one thing Conor Hart will *never* offer me.

“Conor, will you help me train for a marathon?” I ask his profile in the sweetest tone I can muster. Just to fuck with him. Force him to remind his friend—remind me—what an unfeeling ass he is.

Silence. Then slowly—deliberately—he looks at me for the first time since his shock of an approach.

I’ve never been able to decide what color Conor’s eyes are.

It’s a stupid, unexplainable fixation. He rarely looks at me, so I haven’t had much time to figure it out. They’re a mixture of blue and gray. Like the surface of the ocean when it reflects the clouds. One of my favorite shades, staring at me from an infuriatingly attractive face coated with contempt.

“No.” That’s all Conor says before he walks away, continuing down the hallway. I’m not the least bit surprised. I learned a long time ago Landon isn’t exaggerating when he calls his half-brother a selfish prick. I’m also relieved. *See?* I scream at my traitorous libido.

Aidan sighs as he watches Conor’s retreating back. “Sorry. I don’t know what his... thing is with you.”

Thing. What a lovely way of encompassing hatred.

“Yeah.” The word is wry.

I know what his “thing” is with me. I’m not surprised Conor has never told anyone at Holt what his issue is with me. His response is exactly what I expected from him.

What I can’t figure out is why I’m disappointed he didn’t stay long enough for me to determine if his eyes are gray or blue.

CHAPTER THREE

CONOR

The puck finds the back of the net, and I'm mobbed. Three games into the season, and we're undefeated. Despite the hockey team's lackluster performance on the ice in past seasons, our stands are usually packed. We may not always win, but we're damn entertaining to watch lose.

At least, that's what the girls who come up to me after games we lose say.

"That's what I'm fucking talking about!" Hunter shouts in my ear as he leaps on me. Robby skates over and claps me on the helmet with his glove. Jeff Powers joins our celebration seconds later.

The guys are all standing on the bench. I skate down the line, slapping gloves. Scoring goals is expected of me, but it doesn't make delivering any less satisfying. I'm good at hockey, but even the greatest players have off days. So far, my senior season has been a consistent stretch of the best games of my college career.

There are thirty seconds left in the game, but we don't stop pressing. Our opponent tonight, Burham, hasn't even been able to pull their goalie. We're up by two goals. I feel good, and so do the rest of the guys. The third period got off to a shaky start. I passed to Phillips instead of Powers, and Jeff was

wide open. We got called on a sloppy penalty and almost gave up a power play goal. Small mistakes like those can get in your head, gnaw away at collective confidence. But we pulled it together. We're holding it together. The energy in the arena hums like a live wire: raw and exposed.

Twenty-five seconds.

I pass to Hunter. He passes to Robby. Robby passes back to me.

Fifteen seconds.

The poor guy assigned to defend me grimaces. He lunges, but I'm anticipating it. I send the puck along the boards, behind the goal, and onto Aidan's waiting stick.

Five seconds.

Satisfaction creeps up my spine and spreads, chasing away the nerves. The fear that three wins was a fluke.

Four straight sounds more dominant.

Sounds like noise. Like momentum. Like hope.

The buzzer blares and the whole team encircles me. Despite the trials and disappointments in my hockey career, I don't think I could be surrounded by a more supportive group of teammates. Aidan is celebrating like we just won the championship itself, and the packed stands seem on board with that level of enthusiasm. Screams and shouts reverberate off the high ceilings of Holt's hockey arena, decorated by one solitary banner from decades ago. If I have my way, there will be a brand-new, brightly colored one hanging from the rafters in a matter of months.

The euphoria carries into the locker room. I'm tempted to tell the guys to cool it, that we've got a long way to go, but I

don't. It's easy to get caught up in only celebrating the bigger victories in life. But smaller ones are worth appreciating too. The next joyful moment is never guaranteed.

"Nice work, boys," Coach Keller compliments before heading into the small office that juts off the far side of our locker room. He pairs the words with a meager smile that causes us all to burst into applause. The office door slams shut in response.

I laugh before heading to the showers.

Hunter, Aidan, and I decide to hit up our favorite Mexican place after we've changed for a post-game fuel up. It's a hole-in-the-wall spot a couple towns over from Somerville that we discovered sophomore year. There's no wait when we arrive, and I don't waste any time, ordering two burritos.

Hunter has a thing about anyone eating food in his car and I'm too hungry to wait until we get to the party, so I take a seat in one of the rickety wooden chairs and dig in. The tortilla is still steaming, barely containing the rice, beans, veggies, and meat filling it. I finish the first burrito in about four bites and start in on the second at the same time Aidan takes a seat across from me.

"Thanks for waiting, Hart," he tells me sarcastically before digging into his tacos. I'm too busy chowing down on my second burrito to reply.

I'm finished eating before Hunter has even taken his seat, so I get up and order some chips and guacamole.

"Damn, that was good," Aidan states, leaning back in his seat once he's finished eating. The wooden folding chair creaks beneath his tall frame. "Now, I just need a few beers."

"I'm not cleaning up your puke again," I tell him.

Aidan rolls his eyes. “That happened freshman year. *Once*. But I’m not planning to sleep at the house tonight, anyway.”

Hunter and I exchange an amused glance. Neither of us is celibate by any stretch, but Aidan sees more ass than a public restroom’s toilet seat. Based on his drunken rambling one night, I have my suspicions he’s trying to forget someone. Despite some of the debauchery I’ve seen them engage in, Aidan and Hunter are two of the most decent guys I’ve met. But we don’t discuss our pasts. A plan I’m fully on board with, for obvious reasons.

“Rebecca?” Hunter asks.

“No, that’s over,” Aidan replies.

“How come?”

Aidan shrugs. “I’m just over it.”

I snort.

“Glass houses, Hart,” Aidan warns.

“I didn’t say a thing, Phillips.” I smirk.

My aversion to commitment is well known on the team. When it comes to women, at least. I have no issues dedicating elsewhere. Even if I hadn’t grown up with constant reminders of how a supposedly monogamous relationship can backfire, I doubt I’d be enthused about the idea of dating. When girls throw themselves at you on a regular basis, limiting your options doesn’t seem like the brightest move.

“Is Sarah coming tonight?” Hunter asks me.

“How the hell should I know?” I dunk a chip in guacamole.

Truthfully, if I bothered to read all of my texts, I could tell him most, if not all, of the women who will be in attendance tonight.

“The Hart-breaker strikes again,” Aidan comments.

He got wind of the fact some girls on campus re-appropriated my last name at the start of the semester and has brought the stupid respelling up at least once a week since.

I know some guys who string girls along, worried they won't get any if they don't act like there's a chance they'll be in it for the long haul. I'm the exact opposite. I won't hook up with a girl if she's acting like she wants anything serious.

I've seen the destruction lies about intentions leaves behind, and I want no part in it.

“Conor the Hart-less,” Hunter adds.

I ball up my burrito wrappers and roll my eyes. “Are you two finished so we can leave?”

“Yeah, let's go.”



Most of the team is already in the living room when we arrive at the sophomore house. Sports teams tend to live together based on class year. Almost a third of the team this year are seniors though, so Aidan, Hunter, and I got our own place. Tonight, the five sophomores are hosting. Their house is closest to downtown, meaning there will be a big influx once Gaffney's closes for the night. Our parties draw a large crowd regardless of their location, though.

I wander through the living room, stopping to talk with a few of the guys and rehashing parts of the game that went

well. Despite his small smile, I know Coach will have plenty of criticism to dish out at practice tomorrow morning. For now, I soak in the sweet sensation of victory along with the rest of the guys. Few of them are as serious about playing as I am. I'm a one-man wrecking ball headed for a championship trophy. They all knew I would be. Know this season is it for me.

Knowing something and watching it take place are two different things.

Tonight, I felt my energy coursing through the rest of the team for the first time this season. Maybe some of them had doubts about whether we could pull it off. But I'm no longer the only guy on the team with trophy-shaped stars in my eyes. It both eases the pressure and enhances it. A group goal is more achievable than a singular one. If the rest of the guys are working just as hard, that takes some of the burden off of me to perform. At the same time, it means if we lose, I won't just be letting myself down.

I eventually amble into the kitchen to grab a soda. I don't drink during the season. A few hours of loose inhibitions aren't worth the resulting headache or sluggish skating the following morning. It's never resulted in fantastic decision-making skills, either. The one time I didn't remind a girl it was just sex *before* the sex was after two too many Heinekens sophomore year. I don't think she appreciated the reminder mid-hook-up.

Sarah Clark approaches me as soon as I enter the kitchen.

"Hey, Conor." She flashes me a bright smile that makes her dimples pop.

"Hey," I reply, grinning back.

Sarah has always taken the just-sex line like a champ, and it's the main reason she's the closest thing I have to a regular hook-up. I'm mostly certain she wants nothing more from me. I'm completely certain I've made the fact *I* want nothing more clear to her.

I stride over to the fridge and grab a can of soda out.

“Want anything?” I ask Sarah.

Contrary to what Harlow Hayes thinks, I'm not a total ass. I do have a tendency to display some ass-ish traits around her, though. Something Aidan made clear at the party last weekend. My life would be far easier if she'd chosen a different college. Or better yet, remained in another country.

“Nah, I'm good. I just had a couple of shots,” Sarah replies.

“Hunter?” I ask.

She laughs. “Yup.”

I roll my eyes. Hunter has a bizarre obsession with Jell-O, and it has resulted in every party the hockey team has ever thrown featuring alcohol encased in jiggly gelatin. I see no appeal.

More of my teammates wander into the kitchen after me, including Hunter, who starts making the rounds with his tray of wiggling cups. Some of the basketball guys come over, trailed by their own fangirls. I'm talking to Clayton Thomas when I see a flash of red and stiffen.

I'm distracted by a female body rubbing up against me. “Conor, you played so well today,” Emily Orens tells me.

“Thanks, babe,” I reply, then take a sip of soda. Clayton grins; Hunter rolls his eyes from his spot next to me. I want to

roll *my* eyes right back. Like Hunter is one to judge. His pickup lines are terrible. Just tonight, I've heard him use *Here I am. What are your other two wishes?* and *I seem to have lost my phone number. Can I have yours?*

I've never put any effort in to picking up a girl. They've been flinging themselves at me since middle school.

But I don't pay any attention to the girl doing so right now.

Harlow is still standing in the corner of the kitchen, and my eyes keep flickering over there. I can't focus on anything else. Not Emily rubbing up against me, not Hunter trying to get me to down one of his disgusting shots, not any of the people coming over to congratulate me on another win. She talks to a blonde girl, then to Cole Smith, and then she's all alone.

Fuck it.

I shake off Emily's hand and saunter over to Harlow's spot by the stove. She misses my approach. She's looking at her phone, but not in the way one does when they're at a party and have nothing better to be doing.

Twin lines of concentration are furrowed between her eyebrows as she scrolls through something. Maybe it's one of the fifty-seven training apps designed for novice runners to increase their mileage. One guess on how I know that. Eight minutes of my life I'll never get back.

"Why'd you ask me?"

Harlow startles. An old Britney Spears song is blasting from the speakers in the living room, but it's the sound of *my* voice that has her jumping. She bangs her elbow on the edge of the marble countertop and winces. I almost apologize, but don't.

She looks me up and down, and I think I see some heat in her expression. But this is Harlow Hayes, meaning I'm most definitely misreading things.

"Aidan." She shrugs as if I don't know why Phillips called me over when he was talking to her last weekend. As if she isn't aware of the fact my teammates have no clue what my issue with her is or how deep the resentment runs.

"I play hockey. I'm not a runner."

Things she knows.

Things I didn't need to say.

Another small shrug. "You're athletic."

Harlow manages to make the simple statement sound like an insult. I'm surprised she's bothering to respond to me at all. Equally shocked when I choose to keep the conversation going.

"So are the other guys on the team. You're buddies with most of them." I make how I feel about that friendliness clear in my voice.

Harlow rolls her eyes. Ones I'm just noticing are green. "I wouldn't ask any of them."

"But you asked me?"

"*Obviously* I asked you, or you wouldn't be over here badgering me about it."

She crosses her arms, drawing my attention to her chest. Unlike most of the girls here, she's wearing a cotton t-shirt that barely hints at her cleavage. Unfortunately, the white top looks good on her. Really good. Harlow is a natural beauty, and the lack of any glamorous outfit just draws more attention to that fact.

“Something on my shirt, Hart?”

Busted. “Just thinking we’re a long ways past Labor Day,” I tell her.

“I’m not going to take fashion advice from a guy whose fly is unzipped.”

I keep my eyes on her. She meets my gaze defiantly, eyes the color of pines bearing into mine. *She’s trying to get to you*, I tell myself. The urge to check is like an itch. Without permission, my eyes dart down to my crotch. Zipped. *Dammit*.

There’s an amused smile playing on her lips when I look back up. Harlow Hayes has more fire than I was expecting. It matches her vibrant hair. Every time I’ve observed her around the rest of the team, it’s been *please this* and *thank you that*. I pegged her as a pushover.

This is when I should walk away. Take Emily or Sarah upstairs. Maybe even down one of Hunter’s disgusting shots, just to wash away the weirdness of this encounter. Cleanse this strange compulsion to remain exactly where I am.

Harlow lets out an exasperated sigh. “Look, Aidan saw me out running. He was asking about my training. He called you over. I knew you’d say no. You did. End of the story.”

She’s eager to end this conversation, that much is obvious. Despite continuing to hold my gaze, she’s battling the urge to look away. I wonder if it’s because she’s aware other people in the kitchen are glancing over at us. Our private feud is only common knowledge among the hockey team, but people tend to pay attention to who I talk to.

I move on to the other part of her request that’s been bothering me. “Why the hell would you sign up for a marathon, anyway? Especially if you’ve never run before?”

She keeps looking straight at me but doesn't say anything. I'm being appraised—judged—and it's fucking uncomfortable. I don't back down, though. Not to anyone. Especially not to Harlow Hayes.

“It doesn't matter why I'm doing it,” Harlow finally says. She grabs a green can of ginger ale from the counter and taps it against the can of soda I'm holding. “Congrats on the win, Hart. If you'd passed to Powers at the start of the third, it would have been 5-2.”

She smiles mockingly, then walks away.

And I suddenly know with absolute certainty that wasn't the last conversation I'll have with Harlow Hayes.

Just the first.

CHAPTER FOUR

HARLOW

Poking wakes me. I toss one arm over my face, certain I'm imagining it. I'm alone in my own bed. Who the hell would be poking me?

"Harlow. Harlow!"

I crack one eye open. Eve is perched on the side of my bed. Her dark hair is a mess and her glasses are askew.

"What?" I mumble, closing both eyes again.

"Wake up." Another jab in the ribs.

I mutter something unintelligible, hoping she'll just give up.

"*Conor Hart* is here."

That gets my attention. I open my eyes and focus on her.
"What?"

"Conor Hart. He's here. At our front door. Right now."

"What?" I repeat. "*Why?*"

"I don't know! I opened the door thinking it was the doughnuts I ordered, and there he was looking ten times more delicious!"

"You ordered doughnuts?"

“I tried to last night. I thought they were finally getting around to it.”

“That makes no sense. Holey Moley doesn’t even deliver.”

“Who cares, Harlow? I was asleep, and I didn’t see you dragging your ass out of bed to answer the door. The point is that the hottest guy I’ve ever seen in real life is at our front door.”

I refocus, although I am craving a doughnut now. “You didn’t ask what he’s doing here?”

“Of course I asked! He wants to talk to you.”

“Me?” Approaching me at the party last night was strange enough. Coming to my house is bizarre. Alternate-reality insane. I try to think of a single reason why he might have and come up blank. “Tell him I’m not here.”

“Harlow...” Eve gives me a *look*. For all her brash proclamations, she’s a moral epicenter; the type of person who doesn’t approve of hiding from conflict. Or from a hot guy. In this particular instance, I’m also positive she wants to be able to eavesdrop.

What she doesn’t understand—what I can’t tell her—is that me avoiding Conor is for the greater good. In the global interest. Talking with him last night was not only unexpected. It was also exciting. There’s a dangerous thrill that comes along with the forbidden. Or maybe that’s how every girl feels while talking to him. Eve definitely looks dazzled, which I’ll be teasing her about once this morning is nothing but a distant, outlandish memory.

“Eve.” I match her determined tone.

She sighs, then stands. “Fine. I’ll tell him you must have snuck out the window in the middle of the night to meet your

secret lover.”

“Great.” I flop back down and pull my pillow over my head.

My bedroom door shuts, and I peek around my pillow to check the time on my phone. 7:05. I’m *almost* impressed Conor is up this early. He was still at the party when I left last night. Maybe he hasn’t gone to bed yet.

I roll back over, but I can’t fall asleep. Curiosity burns away exhaustion.

What was he doing here?

Our conversation last night rattled me, if I’m being honest.

It wasn’t finally determining his eyes are more gray than blue. It was seeing that sharp jawline up close. Those broad shoulders. The muscular forearms. Conor Hart is objectively good-looking—some might say dropped-jaw gorgeous. Fine. It hit harder after ogling him shirtless in the weight room. It also wasn’t a detail included in any of Landon’s rants about his half-brother when we were growing up, but one I acknowledged and moved on from the first time I saw him in person freshman year.

It was that *he* approached *me*. That the waves of hostility ordinarily wafting off of him were absent. He wasn’t friendly, but he wasn’t outright rude, either. One conversation, and I’m worried I get the fascination with Conor Hart I thought I was immune to.

I can’t fall back asleep, so I roll out from under the warm sheets. I yank on a one-piece bathing suit and cover it with a pair of sweatpants and a fleece.

Eve’s door is shut when I walk past it. Clearly, she was able to go back to bed. I resist the urge to knock and ask her

what Conor said when she sent him away. But I *do* resist it, because it's Conor Hart. I've always seen the physical enticement, but unlike the girls who fall for his charm and cocky smirk, I also know what's beneath the stormy surface.

Know the carefree indifference masks uglier inclinations.

Know the fury that makes him such a force on the ice has repeatedly hurt people I care about.

I use the bathroom, make my usual smoothie, and snag my car keys from the bowl by the door. It's raining—no surprise there—and my navy rainboots *slosh* as I walk toward the street. I don't bother pulling my hood up. My hair is about to get soaked, anyway.

There are only two other cars in the parking lot when I arrive at the sports complex. It's 7:40 AM on a Sunday. Not shocking at all.

I walk through the drizzle over to the front door of the building. A swipe of my student ID card, and I'm inside the lobby. I head to the right, into the women's locker room. My goggles are waiting in my locker. I quickly shed my clothes and stuff them inside the metal box before entering the pool area. There's not a single other person in here.

I pass the *No Lifeguard. Swim at your own risk.* sign and walk the length of the pool to the blocks. Getting into the water is always the worst part. I snap my goggles into place and step up onto the plastic platform. I lean forward and grip the front, then propel myself off of it and into the pool.

Cool water coats every centimeter of my body. I start kicking, propelling myself through the chlorinated liquid. The initial shock of being surrounded by water instead of air dissipates as I fall into familiar, rhythmic motion. I do four

laps of each stroke, then switch. Freestyle. Backstroke. Butterfly. Breaststroke. Repeat. Breathe.

I love swimming. Love the way the world turns quiet. Love the feel of my limbs churning through the water. Love the weightlessness of gliding along the surface.

Too bad there's no option to swim a marathon.

I pause at the end of the lane. The large clock hanging behind the now occupied lifeguard chair indicates more time has passed than I realized. I climb out of the pool. Water sluices off my body, dripping back into the cement rectangle containing hundreds of gallons of it. My mind is blank, my muscles just beginning to tingle with lactic acid.

"See you tomorrow, Jerry." I wave to the middle-aged man who lifeguards here in the mornings as I head into the locker room.

"Bye, Harlow," he calls after me.

The locker room is still empty. I snag a towel to dry the droplets off my skin, then pull back on my sweatpants and fleece, toss the damp towel in the hamper, and make my way over to the door that leads back to the entrance of the athletic center.

I step into the lobby and collide with Conor Hart.

I'm staring at gray fleece, but I know it's him, even before I glance up. Along with his eye color, I've learned Conor smells like cedarwood cologne and laundry detergent, and the scent is far more appealing than the chlorinated air I've been inhaling for the past hour.

I quickly put at least a foot of space between us. He's alone, which I think is a first. Normally when I see him on

campus, he's surrounded by people. Friends. Teammates. Fangirls.

“Lost, Hart? This is the pool. The frozen water is next door at the rink.”

Conor doesn't match my ire. “I didn't know you swim.”

“I could fill twenty books with all the things you don't know about me,” I retort. “So you not knowing my daily exercise routine isn't all that surprising.”

“Daily?” He looks impressed. From anyone else, I'd take it as a compliment.

“It means every day.”

“Thanks. It would have taken me a couple of minutes to look up that definition on my phone.”

I scoff, then move to walk past him.

“Your friend's a shitty liar.”

“I have no idea what you're talking about,” I tell him loftily.

“Oh, yeah? So, you were... where when I stopped by this morning?”

He grins, and my mind goes blank.

I've never seen Conor Hart with anything but a scowl on his annoyingly attractive face. Amusement transforms already striking features, softening the sharp slash of his brows and the tight clench of his jaw.

I force my brain to focus. I have no idea what Eve told him and a miniscule chance of guessing correctly.

Rather than admit that, I take a stab at it. “Out getting doughnuts.”

Conor's grin widens. "Not at the library returning a book?"

Seriously, Eve? First thing on a Sunday? Conor's right. Eve is a terrible liar. Telling him I snuck out the window would have been more believable. Never mind the fact I'm twenty-two and don't live with any sort of authority figure.

"I didn't want to talk to you. Thought that'd be a plan you would be on board with," I say pointedly.

Our road of resentment is a two-way street.

Conor seems to have turned on to a one-way without warning me.

"Since you didn't give me a chance to this morning, this is me agreeing to train you to run twenty-six point two miles," he tells me.

I fight through the shock and manage to say, "I'm good."

"Found someone else willing to take on a novice?" He smirks. This time it's mocking, not genuine amusement.

"You turned it down. Rather rudely, I might add."

"All I said was no."

"It wasn't what you said. It was how you said it," I fire back.

"Couldn't have come as much of a surprise. You're.... you."

I purse my lips.

"Come on, you can't honestly tell me it hasn't affected your perception of me."

"Nope, it *definitely* has."

"Then why would you even bother asking me?"

“We already talked about this last night,” I reply. “Aidan.”

“Bullshit. Why did you really?” he challenges.

“Maybe I wanted to see if you’re a better person than I thought,” I snap.

“Well, I’m not.”

I take the time to study Conor—really study him—for the first time since he showed up in front of me like some sort of Hart-in-a-box. As someone well aware of my own shortcomings, I also know owning up to them is a hell of a lot harder than denying them. It sparks a flicker of curiosity. Not the first I’ve experienced when it comes to him, but stronger than usual. I extinguish it faster than the body of water I just left would have.

“Glad we’re on the same page, then.” I move to walk past him again.

“Jesus Christ,” Conor mutters under his breath. “Look, I know I was kind of an ass before, okay?”

Another shock. Although I snort at the “kind of.”

“Just let me make sure you’ve got some idea what you’re doing. Especially now that I know you’re not totally unathletically inclined,” he continues, nodding behind me toward the pool. “Even if it’s *swimming*.”

“What’s wrong with swimming?” I challenge.

“It doesn’t get much sports coverage. That should tell you all you need to know.”

“Last I checked, Division III hockey doesn’t get much coverage either,” I tell him sweetly.

A muscle in Conor's sharp jawline jumps. Bullseye on a sore spot. When I have puzzled the enigma that is Conor Hart—which to be clear, I try to keep as infrequent an occurrence as possible—one of the main questions is the mystery of him being one of my classmates.

He had other—better—options than Holt University. Options that would have made his rumored plan to play hockey professionally after graduation a far easier goal to achieve.

“It will this year,” Conor tells me confidently. Determination coats the words. It's reflected in the features of his face that have turned stoic and unamused again.

I shrug. “We'll see, won't we?”

Inadvertently, I've implied I'll be following his season, which I absolutely will not be. My sophomore year relationship with Jack Williams didn't overlap with hockey season at all. I've never so much as stepped foot in Holt's hockey rink. For reasons that have a lot more to do with the guy in front of me than I'd admit to anyone.

“Yeah. *We* will.” He caught it. Oblivious isn't an adjective that can be used to describe Conor. “I'll be at the track at one tomorrow. Your move, Hayes.”



When I get back home, Eve is eating a bowl of cereal in the kitchen. She wrinkles her nose when I pass her to grab a bottle of water out of the fridge.

“You were at the pool?”

“Yup.” Eve’s mother is a hairdresser, and both she and Eve are horrified by the fact I dunk mine in chlorine on a regular basis.

“You’re using the shampoo I got you, right?”

“Yes.” I roll my eyes as I drink some water. “It smells funky, though.”

“Put on extra perfume before our double date tonight, then.”

“Shit. That’s tonight?”

Eve doesn’t answer. She points at the calendar, where *Double Date* night is written in bold letters. It’s the only event that made it on to the calendar this month, further emphasizing its importance.

“Why are we going out on a Sunday, again?”

Eve shrugs. “Ben chose the night. He’ll be here with David at eight.”

I sigh. Eve has been dating Ben Fletcher since freshman year. They met at one of those school-sponsored first week events I didn’t think people actually went to, let alone formed lasting love connections at. Ben is nice enough, and he adores Eve, which is all I want for her. Unfortunately, he seems to have an endless supply of friends who are “amazing guys” and “are looking for the right girl.”

Spoiler alert: I haven’t been the right girl so far. For any of them. All of Ben’s friends are super smart, nice, and, for lack of a kinder word, boring.

Tonight’s outing is the third double date of senior year. Either it will be the charm or the final one, I’ve decided. There are only so many set-ups a girl can take. Besides, it’s not like I

can't find suitors on my own. I'm going out with a guy in my aquatic resources class next week.

"Fine. I'm going to shower and get some work done." My plan was to put all of my assignments due this week off until later, but that was before I was reminded of my evening plans.

"You should watch a classic movie, too," Eve tells me.

"A classic movie? Why?"

"David's a film major. The first thing he asked me when I met him was what my favorite movie is. You need better material than *Legally Blonde*."

"But that *is* my favorite movie," I insist.

"I doubt David has even heard of it. He prefers dramas to comedies."

That doesn't bode well for our compatibility, but I don't say so. I promised Eve I will make an effort tonight, and I will.

My assignments don't allow for any time to view classic films, but I do scan an article listing the best films of all time for some conversation material before I start getting ready. I've seen a total of zero on the list. Eve is always chatty, but Ben is a man of few words. His friends tend to be the quiet, serious type as well.

Within five minutes of meeting David, I know we won't be forging any sort of love connection. He's perfectly nice. Cute, even. He's taller than me, and at five eight that's not always a given with guys. Unfortunately, none of that height accommodates a sense of humor. I drive the four of us to Gaffney's, and David spends the entire drive discussing French film angles and their brilliance. I kind of want to hum *Proud to be an American*, even though technically I'm not.

Eve gives me a glum, sheepish look when we reach the restaurant. Despite her advice earlier, I'm sure she realized the first time she met David, he and I are not headed for a happily ever after. Hope springs eternal in Eve's world, though. I'm more of a pessimist. Comes with the territory after having your world toppled a time or two.

Half the hockey team is leaving Gaffney's as we enter.

"Hey, Harlow," Aidan greets.

"Hey," I reply.

I let my gaze rove over the guys he is with, disgruntled to realize I'm not randomly glancing around. I'm looking for him. Conor is still at the large table the rest of them just left, talking to a blonde waitress. She laughs at something he says and strokes his arm. He grins down at her, and something twists in my stomach. I look away, straight into Jack's hurt gaze.

Jack. The hockey player I should feel some emotion at the sight of. We dated for almost two months. I give Jack a small smile, then look back at Aidan again.

"You guys celebrating last night's win?"

"Of course." Aidan grins. "Were you at the game?"

"No. I just heard a lot of drunken commentary from Cole Smith last night." Normally listening to hockey analysis at a party would be nothing but a source of annoyance, but the look on Conor's face last night when I told him he should have passed was priceless. I owe Cole for sharing that observation with me.

Aidan smirks. Last night wasn't the first time Cole overindulged in alcohol and then spouted sports commentary at a party. "Yeah, that sounds about right."

“See you guys later,” I say, smiling at Robby and a couple of the other guys who have always been friendly toward me.

Most of the guys give me nods as we move past them. I don’t allow myself another glance over to see what Conor is doing. I follow Eve and Ben over to a four-person table in the far corner. David trails behind me.

A waitress—not the blonde one flirting with Conor—comes over to take our drink order. Everyone but me orders beers. Aside from a harsher outlook on life, my parents’ deaths also ensured I’ll never get in a car with anyone who’s been drinking. Eve offered to stay sober tonight, but I’m happy being the designated driver.

Although David reignites the French film discussion as soon as the waitress leaves, and I start to regret that choice.

CHAPTER FIVE

CONOR

“What are you doing?” Hunter asks as he walks into the kitchen on Monday morning, glancing over my shoulder and squinting at the screen of my laptop. “Homework? You don’t even have class today.”

“I know,” I reply. Any senior who has a Monday class is either an overachiever or slacked so much up until now, they didn’t have a choice. “Just doing some research.”

“On distance running? Why? You forgot you’ve been running regularly for months?”

I sigh. We live together, and Aidan has a big mouth. He’ll find out eventually. “Harlow Hayes asked me to train her for a marathon.”

Hunter laughs. “What? And you *agreed*?”

“Yeah. Phillips chewed me out about being nicer to her.”

That’s true. But I not only agreed to help her. I ended up being the one practically begging her to let me, and I’m still trying to figure out how the fuck *that* happened.

“You ignore her every time she’s around and then out of nowhere decide to train her for a marathon?” The question is saturated with disbelief.

Hunter is incredulous, and I don't blame him one bit. If I understood how it happened myself, I might try to explain it to him. I didn't intend to agree to train her. I just felt guilty and decided to apologize for shooting her half-assed request down. Somehow that resulted in me ending up here, browsing marathon training forums.

"You know I go for runs anyway. It's good cross-training. Who cares if she jogs alongside me a few times?"

"I've always wondered. Did something happen between you guys? Some reason you've always avoided her?"

"No," I state emphatically. "I'd never even talked to her before last weekend."

Hunter still looks suspicious, but he hears the naked honesty in my voice. "Do you have a thing for her, then?"

"What? No, of course not."

"*No, of course not?* You've seen her, right?"

"So she's hot. Whatever. I don't need Williams' sloppy seconds."

Hunter doesn't look like he believes me. "Speaking of, are you going to tell Williams about this arrangement? He looked like his dog died when we saw her out on a date last night."

I ignore his mention of the encounter that was discussed at length during the drive home from Gaffney's. "This has nothing to do with Williams. I'll make sure she knows how to avoid getting shin splints and that will be that."

"If you say so." Hunter still looks doubtful. "This is *the* season, Hart. Williams is not going to like you spending time with her. Neither is Phillips. They'll think you're messing with

her. Are you seriously willing to risk your shot at the pros for a girl you claim to have no interest in?”

He’s right. I know he’s right. But I still say, “I’m not risking shit.”

Technically, Harlow didn’t even agree to show up later. But I know she will. She may not want to, the same way I don’t know if I really want her to.

But she’s curious about me, the same way I am about her.

Despite what I just told Hunter, I know that’s dangerous.



I avoid Hunter’s accusing gaze when I leave the house three hours later. Half the team is over and hanging out. None of them ask where I’m going, but Robby smirks as I head for the front door, letting me know where they think I’m off to. I jog through the drizzle to my SUV. The engine roars to life, as it very well should after the three hundred dollars I just dropped getting it to. I know nothing about cars. Changing the oil or a spare tire sounds like the type of thing you do with your dad in the driveway. Maybe that’s why I don’t know how to do either.

The drive to the football stadium takes a matter of minutes. It’s raining harder than it was earlier. The rain-splattered glass blurs the landscape into gray, brown, and green. I park right next to the bleachers. There are still a couple of weeks left in the football season, but the stadium looks as though it’s been abandoned for years.

Probably because the football team is neither successful nor entertaining. The crowds that swarm our home games are notably absent. At least, that’s what I’ve been told. I’ve never

attended one myself. Never seen the appeal of sitting on hard metal and watching a bunch of guys spend minutes lining up for mere seconds of action.

My disdain for football might be colored by the fact the athletic half of my DNA came from a former wide receiver. Learning that tidbit from my mother killed any interest.

If holding grudges were a sport, I'd be better at it than hockey.

I climb out of my car and into the steady rain. I'm wearing the same sweatpants and jacket I pulled on early this morning. They're soaked within minutes, so I don't try to seek cover under the bleachers. I lean against the chain-link fence that surrounds the field and wait.

Harlow shows up five minutes later, parking in the spot next to my car. She doesn't climb out immediately, and I wonder if she's debating leaving.

She doesn't.

Instead, she opens her door and steps out of her car in the ugliest jacket I've ever seen. It's bright yellow—a stop-and-stare shade that burns the eyes. Paired with her vivid red hair, she stands out against the muted landscape of brick buildings, bare trees, and grass, to say the least. Her hood remains down. Harlow ambles toward me, seeming unbothered by the rain saturating her hair and dripping down her face.

“How was it?” I ask when she reaches me.

“Huh?” She looks confused.

I barely manage to tamp down the smirk that desperately wants to form. “The ugly raincoat competition you obviously just came from. Did you win?”

She flips me off, but I catch a lip twitch. Maybe she thought I was asking about her date last night. Unlike the rest of the hockey team, I have no interest in her love life.

I allow myself a small smile before I pull myself upright and head for the gate that leads onto the track. I open it and gesture for her to walk through first.

She doesn't; she remains in place.

Our silent stand-off lasts for thirty seconds before she walks through the opening onto the track. She wasn't anticipating any gentlemanly behavior from me, clearly.

I normally thrive on being the cocky player people expect.

Surprising Harlow Hayes might be my new favorite hobby. Watching her green eyes try to figure me out. Making it difficult for them to do so.

I let out a low chuckle at her apprehensive expression as I follow her onto the track and start jogging. She falls into pace beside me. Neither of us say anything. There's just the sound of the rain and the pounding of our feet against rubber.

We circle the field five times. I don't know what to say. There's a lot between us, none of which has ever been spoken. I'm also enjoying the silence. The guys on the team don't have any issue going along with the mandatory team work-outs—actually that's a lie, most of my teammates bitch about them endlessly—but none of them add to their routines the way I do.

I've circled this track plenty of times to boost my endurance, just never with company. Never with a girl I view with equal amounts of contempt and curiosity.

She speaks first. "People say you're going to play pro after graduation."

“I am.”

“Why?”

No one’s ever asked me that. “*Why?*”

“Yeah. Why do you want to play hockey professionally?”

“Money, fame, women, glory... need I go on?” She says nothing. It forces an honest answer out. “Life is simpler on the ice. Stuff that I’m worried about—upset about—well, it doesn’t matter so much out there. I’ll chase that feeling as far as I can.”

“Huh.” She still seems unsatisfied by my response.

“You don’t have anything that makes you feel that way?”

“No, I do.” She doesn’t elaborate, and I don’t ask.

“You’re moving back to Canada?”

She gives me a questioning look as I mention her future plans. Clearly, Harlow has forgotten I know just as much about her as she thinks she knows about me.

I shrug in response to her silent question. “People in Claremont gossip.”

“Oh. Right.” We’re getting uncomfortably close to the shared history between us. Closer than I ever thought we might get together. “Yeah, probably. That was always the plan. Come here for university and then go back.”

“It was?”

“Yeah. Kinda turned the rebellious teenager stereotype on its head. I wanted to be just like my mom, and she always raved about her time here. It’s how she met Allison. They were in the same dorm freshman year.”

“Oh.”

She did it.

She mentioned them. Just Allison, but still.

Weirdly, I'm more occupied by another piece of her past falling into place. I assumed she resented ending up at Holt for college, not that it was her first choice.

That's it for conversation. We circle the track for another twenty minutes and then stop. I'm impressed she kept up, but I don't tell her so. She's winded and probably sweaty, but I can't tell the difference between any perspiration and the rain that is still steadily falling.

"If we're going to do this, I need to know what your target time is."

"My target time?"

Harlow reaches up to collect the red strands that have escaped from her ponytail. I force my eyes away from the strip of stomach the motion reveals. She lost the ugly raincoat halfway through our run. I never thought I'd say it, but I'm missing it now. It was a hell of a lot less distracting.

That's all Harlow's bare skin is. A distraction.

"Yup. What's your goal?"

"Um, finish?"

I almost crack a grin at that. "You're running this... why?"

She looks away. "It's stupid. Bucket list shit."

"Bucket list shit?" I echo. "If you want to start running, why not aim for like, a 5K?"

"Didn't think I'd need to explain the concept of competitiveness to Holt's all-time leading scorer in hockey."

I don't take the bait. Don't jump on the compliment she just handed me on a silver platter. I don't let myself wonder what her knowing that means, either.

"Fine. Don't tell me." I'm annoyed with myself for being annoyed she won't tell me, and I'm miffed she doesn't trust me enough to.

She doesn't trust me.

She shouldn't.

"Why are *you* doing this?" Harlow fixes me in place with a hard stare as she gestures between us.

"You asked me to do this."

"Bullshit, Hart. You were there. Aidan told me to ask you, and the only reason I did was because I didn't think there was a fucking chance you'd say yes!"

"Maybe you don't know me as well as you think you do, then," I retort.

"I know plenty, Conor. A lot more than Aidan or any of the other guys know. I know what an uncaring ass you really are. I know the Garrisons just—"

"Don't you *dare* mention them to me." My voice cracks through the empty stadium like the starting gun for the track meets held here. I was shocked she brought up Allison. I didn't think there was any chance she'd mention my father or half-brother. "Don't you *dare*, Harlow. You don't know anything about me."

"I know you won't give them a chance."

"Yeah, and there's a damn good reason for that. There are two sides to every story." I shake my head. "This was such a fucking mistake. I don't know what the hell I was thinking."

I spin and stalk away.

Leaving her standing on the track in the rain.

CHAPTER SIX

HARLOW

I tap my pen against my notebook. Marine Evolutionary Biology is my favorite course.

Most lectures, I can't scribble down what the professor is saying fast enough.

During today's, I'm barely listening. I'm distracted. I have been ever since Conor walked away from me three days ago.

I shouldn't have gone to meet him at the track. I knew it before I arrived at the football stadium, and I'm just as certain of it now.

But I did.

It was what I expected.

And nothing like it.

The fascination that started gnawing away at me after our first conversation in the kitchen was nothing compared to my intrigue after talking with him while running on the track.

Conor Hart confuses me.

I know what type of guy he is. Love 'em and leave 'em. Hit it and quit it. Hair trigger temper. I've heard the stories swirling around campus about the fights on the ice. Seen the

girls hanging all over him. He's a cocky player in both senses of the word, and he acts like it.

He's also kind of funny. Somewhat intuitive. Slightly entertaining. Devastatingly gorgeous.

Also... I feel bad about how things ended between us. Regret was the primary emotion I experienced as he stalked off and sped away.

It's a perilous feeling.

The look on his face when I brought up Landon and Hugh wasn't just mad, it was pained. There was genuine conviction on his face when he said I don't know anything about him. It's not true. I know plenty. More than enough to convict him of being selfish and heartless.

But he's not wrong. There *are* two sides to every story, and I've only ever heard one of them.

One side took me in when I needed it.

The other spoke to me for the first time less than two weeks ago.

I formed my opinion of Conor Hart a while ago—long before I'd so much as laid eyes on him. It was amplified when the Garrisons took me in after my parents died. When I witnessed the kindness Conor seems to lack up close and every day.

I've never considered things from Conor's perspective, though. I've seen the anger on Landon's face when he talks about his half-brother. The hurt on Hugh's whenever the topic of his elder son comes up. But I've never thought about what it must have been like for Conor to grow up without a dad.

For your father to have a separate family.

One that—if I had to guess—Conor feels like was chosen over him.

Class ends, and I've taken less than a page of notes. I huff an annoyed breath as I pack up my belongings, tossing them into my backpack and then heading out into the hallway.

I debate my destination for a few minutes once I venture outside. All around me hoods are being raised, but I keep mine down. It's misting out, but the damp air feels refreshing after the stuffy classroom I just spent an hour in.

The library looms ahead. I walk inside. I have a microbe lab analysis due tomorrow, and I know it'll take me twice as long to complete it at home than here. Tonight is my date with a guy in my aquatic resources class, so I need to get this done as quickly as possible.

I stop at the fountain just inside the main doors to fill up my water bottle. I'm holding it under the stream and staring out at the sea of tables, trying to decide where to sit, when a male voice speaks behind me.

“Hi, Harlow.”

I turn to see Hunter Morgan standing behind me, holding his own water bottle.

“Oh, hey,” I reply, in what I hope is a casual manner.

Hunter makes me nervous. Not because he's ever been anything but nice—because he hasn't—but because I know he's Conor's best friend. I'm confident Conor has shared nothing about his family life—the fractured half, at least—with his friends here. Hunter has always looked just as confused by his behavior toward me as all the other guys. That doesn't mean he's not privy to plenty of other parts of Conor's life, though, which he confirms with his next question.

“Have a nice Monday?”

I take my time capping my water bottle. “It was fine,” I answer, uncertain how much I should divulge.

“Hart can be a real drill sergeant. And I’m not sure whatever marathon forum he found is legit.”

I file the knowledge Conor took the time to look at a running site to consider—obsess over, more likely—at a later time when I’m not talking to his best friend. I can’t delay the fresh pang of guilt, though.

“It wasn’t bad.” I hobbled around all day Tuesday, but that was due to a stupid urge to impress Conor, not because he set too rapid a pace or ran for too long.

“Huh.” Hunter is eyeing me like he wants to ask more questions, but something is stopping him from doing so.

I seize the opportunity to avoid any. “I’ve got a lot of work to do. See you around, Hunter.”

I find an empty table and spend the next two hours finishing my lab analysis, then head for the main parking lot where I left my car this morning. I know where I’m going, but I lie to myself about it. Mostly to combat the nerves and excitement fighting for real estate in my stomach. This is a terrible idea. Conor has never liked me. So what if that’s intensified a little more now? It shouldn’t matter to me, but it does. Because it was one thing when that dislike stemmed from something I have no control over. This time, it’s personal, and I can’t convince myself to let it be.

There aren’t many cars outside the sports center, but the black SUV Conor drove to the track is one of them. I hope the high number of available parking spots means practice is over.

The last thing I want is the whole hockey team watching while I fumble out an apology to their captain.

Cold air laced with stale sweat greets me when I step inside the hockey arena for the first time.

There's only one person out on the ice. I walk up to the white plastic and plexiglass boards that surround the rink and shove my hands in my pockets as I watch him. I could count on a couple of fingers the number of times I've been skating. I like my water in liquid form.

Swimming.

Gentle rain.

Observing the sea.

Watching Conor skate, I feel my first stab of appreciation for its frozen existence.

He glides across the ice like a bird of prey in flight. Wild, controlled strength eats up the length of the rink in the blink of an eye. He barely leans, and he's flying along the other side of the ice. Six feet of solid muscle has never looked more graceful.

Conor makes skating look effortless. Easy. My two times on the ice left me with the distinct impression it is anything but.

I can hear the scrape of metal blades against the frozen surface, but that's the only indication he's exerting himself at all. He flies around and around the rink in rapid circles.

Sometimes he shoots one of the pucks into the goal.

Sometimes he turns it into a blur of black, weaving and spinning around invisible opponents.

Sometimes he abandons the circular shape on the ice and rests his stick on his shoulders to glide along silently.

I don't know how long I stand here, enthralled. Conor isn't showing any signs of stopping, and I'm too transfixed to do anything but watch him.

Then gray-blue eyes slam into mine.

"Hi," I state. My voice echoes across the empty expanse of frozen water.

"Hi." He skates closer to me but leaves an uncomfortable amount of space between us.

"You're really good," I blurt.

"I know." There's no sign of a smirk. His words are matter of fact.

I smile awkwardly as I twist my fingers in my pockets. I hate apologizing. Despise it. It's even harder right now. Because it's him. Setting aside the fact tragedy that made me an honorary member of the family he refuses to acknowledge, I recently learned I'm both attracted to and intrigued by him.

Deep breath.

"Look, I'm sorry, okay? You were being nice—I think—and I shouldn't have brought them up. I knew how you... I shouldn't have said anything. It's none of my business."

"Fine."

"Fine," I repeat. Conor doesn't skate away. He just stands there, leaning against his stick. "Did practice run late?" I glance around the empty arena.

"Ended a couple of hours ago."

"But you're still here?"

I state the obvious, and he calls me out on it. “You’re observant, Hayes.” He looks down at the ice, then back at me. “Simpler, remember?”

“Right.” I don’t ask what complications are chasing him.

“You want to try it out?” He taps the ice he’s standing on with his stick.

“Oh, no, that’s all right,” I’m quick to say.

“You can’t skate?” He smirks.

“I can skate. Not well,” I amend. “But I can skate.”

“So show me.”

I study him, trying to figure out how I can work my way out of this. “Shockingly, I don’t have any skates with me.”

“That’s the best excuse you’ve got?” Conor skates off to the side of the rink with a shake of his head.

Seconds later, he’s off the ice and beside me. I’m tall, but in his skates, he towers over me even more than usual. He clomps over to the edge of the arena, toward a series of shelves I’m just now noticing are filled with ice skates in various states of distress.

“What size?” he asks me.

“Eight.” I sigh.

Conor grabs one of the newer looking pairs of skates from the shelf and holds them out to me.

Looks like... this is happening.

“Thanks,” I mutter before taking them from him.

I take a seat on the lowest row of the bleachers before slipping out of my rainboots and lacing up the stiff leather. I

get to my feet like a newborn filly, wobbly and unsure.

Forget frozen water. I can't even navigate solid ground on these strips of metal.

Conor is already skating again, circling the rink like being on ice is his life's calling. I definitely can't say the same. I take a solid minute to navigate to the edge of the ice, and another thirty seconds to convince myself to step atop it. I list off an impressive array of curses as my skates move forward, leaving me with no choice but to follow them or topple. I stay upright, but barely.

"Grab my hands," Conor instructs, suddenly beside me.

"Nope, I'm good."

"Harlow, c'mon. Just until you're no longer imitating a windmill."

I heave out a sigh. "Okay. Fine."

He spins so he's in front of me, skating backwards. Showoff. He holds out his hands, and I'm suddenly apprehensive about a whole lot more than just falling. Until thirteen days ago—I'm annoyed I've kept track—I'd never talked to Conor Hart. Now, I'm about to touch him. He's wearing thick gloves, but I'm not. My pale skin looks snow white next to the black material of his hockey equipment.

There's nowhere to look but him.

His eyes are more blue today than gray. Maybe it's the lighter background. The unblemished ice and bright lights. Conor's eyes are meeting my gaze head on and not letting go. He's looking at me in a way that doesn't help with the balance issues I'm having. Or was having, rather. Conor's grip is steady. Grounding. I get a taste of how he must feel flying across this surface as he pulls me along for the ride with him.

Ten laps, and I'm sweating despite the cold air we're surrounded by.

"Hang on," I say, just before we reach one of the benches the players sit on during games. I strip my yellow jacket off and toss it on the bench. "Okay, I'm good."

Conor doesn't move at first. I wonder if he's getting sick of pulling my body weight along. I'm capable of skating at a slow pace, but I know I have no chance of keeping up with him. But when I meet his gaze, there's a look I've seen from other guys. Never him. He looks like he's checking me out. There's an animalistic gleam in those shifting irises.

"Okay," he replies, taking my hands again.

I swallow, feeling heated for reasons unrelated to exercise. His naked chest flashes in my mind. Why can't he be just a *little* less attractive?

Conor looks nothing like Landon, who has brown hair and hazel eyes. Who's only an inch taller than me and doesn't follow a single sport, much less play one. Who tends to stick to a small group of friends and has been dating the same girl since freshman year. The two brothers couldn't be more different, which I know they're both proud of.

We loop the rink twice before I speak again. I'm apprehensive about asking personal questions after the way our last encounter ended, but too curious not to. "Why did you choose Holt?"

Conor stares at me.

"I mean, why—"

"I know what you meant." He scans my face. Looking for what? I have no clue. "I wanted to stay close to my mom," Conor eventually says. "Holt was my best option in state."

I do a poor job of hiding my surprise at his response. I thought selfish was a synonym for his name.

“What about Brighton?” I ask hesitantly. Brighton University is Washington’s largest higher education institution. It boasts competitive athletics, including a Division I hockey program. “Couldn’t you have gone there?”

“Yup. Got a full ride.”

I don’t voice the question, but I know it’s scrawled across my face.

Conor sighs. “You know Hugh went there?”

“Yeah, I know,” I reply carefully, since the topic of his biological father is the main reason I ended up here.

“I promised myself a long time ago I’d make different choices than he did.” He shrugs, but there’s a tense line to his shoulders that keeps the motion from being completely nonchalant.

“Is that why you didn’t play football?”

“No. I just always preferred hockey.”

“What would you have done if he’d played hockey?”

Conor doesn’t answer right away. “I don’t know,” he admits. “Guess I’d have to decide if I love the game more than I hate him.”

I gulp. Based on his voice, it sounds like a high bar. “What if not going to Brighton cost you your shot at going pro?”

I keep my shock at his response out of my voice. I think. Is he selfish or stubborn? Neither? Both?

“Then I don’t get to play pro. At least I’ll know I didn’t take the coward’s way out. Flashy scholarship first.

Abandoning your pregnant girlfriend next.”

I experience a chill that has nothing to do with the temperature of the surface we’re skating along.

“He ate my burned pie last Thanksgiving,” I whisper. “No one else would even try it.”

Hugh Garrison has done far more for me than just eat an overcooked dessert I made. For some reason, it was the first thing that popped into my head. And in this moment, looking at Conor’s angry expression, it’s the only defense I can come up with for the man who’s become a second father to me.

“My mom was working a double shift at the hospital,” Conor states with no emotion. “So she doesn’t have to take a penny from him.”

I swallow. Does that mean he spent the holiday alone? He didn’t spend it with us.

“People make mistakes, Conor.”

His eyes flash like blue steel. “Have you ever done the math between my birthday and Landon’s?” It’s more of a demand than a question.

“I don’t know your birthday.”

It’s a cop out, and we both know it.

“He’s a year younger than us, Harlow. Eleven months younger than me.”

“I had... an idea,” I admit.

I may not have known the exact date of Conor’s birthday, but I know Landon’s. Know the two of them are just a year apart in school. Know when Hugh says *Conor has good*

reason every time an invitation gets shot down, he's not just saying it; he means it.

“Passing the puck when you should shoot it is a *mistake*. That... he... it fucked up my whole life. My mom's whole life.”

“He's tried to make amends.”

“By inviting me to spend time with his new family? Visit the house that's five times the size of what my mom can afford?” Conor snorts. “Some things can't be forgiven. Can't be fixed.”

He was right before.

There are two sides to every story.

We're still skating in circles. The stands blur by, and I don't make any attempt to focus on them. I'm looking at him.

“I'm sorry, Conor.”

He doesn't break eye contact. “I'm glad he ate your pie. Glad he—they—were there for you.” I swallow, but it's a struggle past the lump that's formed in my throat. “I'm sorry I'm complaining about my shitty dad when yours is gone.”

I look away. I knew he knew. The reason I came to live with the Garrisons the summer before I started school here is common knowledge in the town he grew up in. I just didn't expect him to acknowledge it. To *apologize*.

“It's fine.”

“It doesn't have to be.”

“Yeah, it does,” I counter. “They're dead. Nothing is going to change that.”

I look away, up at the clock above the scoreboard.

“Shit, is that the time?”

“Yeah...” He’s wondering if this is an escape route. If I’m bolting. I am, but it’s not because of an empty excuse.

“I have to go.”

Conor steers us back toward the door. “Big Friday night plans?” The words are a test. A tease.

“Actually, yes. I have a date.”

“Really? *Another* one?” Conor looks amused by this information. I’m pleased he heard about my double date last weekend, and that frustrates me. “With who?”

“I’m positive you don’t know him.”

“How do you know?” he counters.

“Because I met him in Conservation and Management of Aquatic Resources. He’s double majoring in Calculus and Marine Biology. And—*please* take offense to this—I don’t think you know anyone that smart. No offense to the rest of the hockey team, though.”

Conor laughs. He actually lets out a genuine laugh. It’s the second time I’ve heard the husky sound of it, *not* that I’m keeping track. It’s just that two is an easy number to remember.

“Conservation and Management of Aquatic Resources? Sounds like a great class to pick up girls in.”

I roll my eyes.

“Did he woo you with his knowledge of aquatic resources?”

“No, he offered me a pen when mine ran out of ink and then asked me out to dinner.”

“What a sad attempt at a meet cute.”

I snort. “What?”

“A meet cute.”

I focus on him, because I don’t think he’s trying to be a total ass, for once. “How the hell do *you* know what a meet cute is?”

Conor shrugs. “My mom watches a lot of romantic comedies. Her way of convincing herself she hasn’t totally given up on the notion of love and commitment, I guess.”

I shift uncomfortably. I’ve known Hugh Garrison for most of my life. He has been nothing but kind and considerate toward me in that length of time. But the more time I spend in Conor’s presence, the more I find myself facing the unwelcome reality that the man who has stepped up as a father figure for me hasn’t done the same for one of his biological children.

“And you watch them with her?”

Conor shrugs again. “Sometimes.”

This skating session is the most detrimental hit in my quest to remain convinced Conor Hart is a complete asshole. Him agreeing—insisting—on running with me snipped the thread, and every encounter since has tugged at the loose end a little more, steadily unweaving the narrative I once accepted from my best friend without question long before I knew I’d ever meet Conor in person.

“I really have to go.” I’m unwilling to, and I don’t let myself analyze why that might be.

Conor nods. “Okay.”

“Yeah, okay.” I step off the ice, stumbling as I make the uncomfortable transition from the glassy surface back to solid ground. “I’ll put the skates back on the shelf.”

“Sure.”

A switch has flipped. Conor’s face is inscrutable before he glides away. I manage to awkwardly navigate back to the lowest row of bleachers, take the skates off, pull my rainboots back on, and return the skates to the shelf.

I walk out of the arena, resisting the urge to look back at the boy still circling the ice.

CHAPTER SEVEN

HARLOW

Eve is beside herself when I arrive back home.

“Didn’t you say your date is at 7:30?” she asks as soon as I walk through the front door.

“Yes,” I reply.

“It’s 7:20!”

“I’m going to change,” I tell her, heading down the hallway.

I was excited about this date. Unlike with Eve’s set-ups, I have a lot in common with Eric. He’s sat next to me in class for almost two months. He’s interesting and cute and respectful. So what if having a spare writing utensil isn’t how most epic love stories start out? Neither is running together to prepare for a marathon.

Conor didn’t mention training during our skating session, and I chickened out on bringing it up myself. Continuing to run with him is most definitely a disastrous idea. But I do have to run a marathon in six months, and my session with him was far more successful than my solo one. Not taking into consideration the way it ended, of course.

I force all thoughts of Conor out of my head as I change into a nicer top and touch up my appearance as best I can in

ten minutes.

The doorbell rings at 7:30, and I'm not surprised in the least. Eric strikes me as the punctual type.

I grab my nicer coat and my purse and head down the hall. Eve is standing in the kitchen, doing a terrible job of acting like she's not waiting around to witness this.

Eric smiles when I open the front door. "Hi, Harlow. Wow..." He looks me over. "Wow, you look really nice."

He's being nice. I look no different than most every other time he's seen me. I can tell he means it, though. Appreciation is clear on his face. It doesn't have any effect on me. Uneasily, I recall how Conor looked at me when I took my raincoat off. I instantly feel flushed, then guilty.

"Thanks, Eric. That's Eve, my roommate." I nod behind me. Eric waves at Eve.

"Hi, Eric," she calls.

"You ready to go?" I ask him.

"Sure."

"Okay. Bye, Eve!" I call before heading outside.

"Nice to meet you, Eve," Eric adds.

"Have fun!" Eve calls back, giving me a wink as I close the door behind us.

The air outside is chilly, but not as damp as it was earlier.

"So... I couldn't decide where to take you, so I made reservations at three different places," Eric tells me, giving me a sheepish smile. "Do you want me to tell you the options and you can pick one?"

God, he's *so* nice.

“Surprise me,” I tell him, smiling.

“Okay.” He seems enthused by the prospect as he opens the door to his sedan. A gentleman. I’m expecting it, unlike when Conor surprised me with a similar gesture.

Stop thinking about him! I scold myself as Eric rounds the front of the car to climb into the driver’s seat.

We start on a route toward the highway I realize is going to take us straight past the hockey arena. I keep my eyes on my lap, choosing the moment right before we pass the rink to ask Eric if he minds if I put on music. I fiddle with the stereo for several minutes until we’re almost to the freeway.

Eric is an easy person to converse with. We both bemoan an upcoming exam in our shared class, debate which professors we want on our thesis committees in the spring, and discuss potential employment prospects.

“I didn’t realize you’re from Canada,” Eric tells me after I explain the Canadian government’s specialized whale conservation program that is my dream job after graduation.

“Uh, yeah. My dad was born in a small town in Ireland and my mom grew up in Cincinnati. He was stationed here for work for a few years, and he met my mom when she was a student at Holt. They ended up in Canada for my dad’s job.”

“What does he do?”

I don’t correct his use of the present tense. “Nautical engineering.”

“Wow. Smart runs in the family, huh?”

“Yeah, I guess. What about your dad? What does he do?”

“Nothing as exciting. He works in construction. Has a small company in Oregon he started himself. I help out there

in the summers.”

“So you can build a house?”

“Part of it,” he replies modestly.

“Wow, that’s pretty cool.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” I confirm.

Eric smiles as he pulls into a parking lot. I glance around.

“Where are we?”

“Loughton,” he replies, which is two towns over from Somerville. “There’s not a ton to do here, but there’s one Mexican restaurant that’s amazing. You like Mexican food, right?”

“Right,” I reply.

Eric looks relieved.

We climb out of the car, and I look around. I’ve driven through Loughton before, but this is my first time stopping. Eric was right; there’s not much. The downtown section is even more limited than Somerville’s.

I follow Eric past a dentist’s office and inside a building I would have missed if I’d just been walking along the sidewalk by myself. We have to walk down a short alley, and then we’re inside an explosion of color. Brightly colored flags and lights decorate the walls. Cheerful music pours out of the speakers.

The interior of the restaurant is tiny. The far side is mostly taken up by a serving counter, and the rest of the floor is covered by a few small tables and chairs. One table is occupied by a young couple, but it’s otherwise empty.

“I usually get the chicken burrito,” Eric tells me. “But I’ve never had anything here that wasn’t good.”

“Okay,” I say as I scan the menu of offerings.

I end up ordering fish tacos. The food is ready quickly, and we grab one of the two open tables.

“Wow, this is really good,” I state as soon as I’ve swallowed my first bite. The tortilla is warm, the fish is fresh, and there’s a tangy sauce covering the slaw that is one of the best things I’ve tasted.

Eric beams.

We finish our food, then sit and talk for a while before heading back outside. It’s raining now, and we hurry back to the parking lot where Eric left his car.

“Are you warm enough?” Eric asks once we’re inside his sedan, fiddling with the dial that controls the heat.

“Yeah, I’m good,” I reply.

“We could stop for some dessert then?” Eric suggests. “Or go to Gaffney’s?”

“I’ve had kind of a long day. Is it okay if we call it a night?”

“Yeah, of course.”

“I’m heading back home a day early,” I feel obligated to explain. “My best friend goes to Brighton, and they went on break today.”

“Oh, cool. Some of my high school buddies ended up at Brighton.”

“Did you consider it?”

“Probably would have gone there if I’d gotten in off the wait list,” he replies.

“Oh.”

Eric laughs. “I didn’t slack off in high school or anything, but I’m definitely a better student now. It all worked out how it was supposed to, I guess.”

“Brighton’s loss,” I reply.

Eric looks pleased by my answer. He seems to have read it as my gain, which was not exactly what I was trying to say. I study him surreptitiously out of the corner of my eye as he merges onto the highway. Dirty blond hair. Green eyes. He’s hot in a boy-next-door way. I don’t think I’d be struck speechless and immobile by the sight of him with his shirt off, but I should be attracted to him. I should be anticipating whether he’ll kiss me goodnight when he drops me off in a few minutes. I’m not. I had a nice time with him tonight, but it felt like grabbing a bite with a friend. Not a date.

Maybe it was the casual atmosphere.

Maybe it’s because you can’t choose who you have chemistry with.

It’s pouring by the time we reach my street. I know most Holt students hate the constant precipitation, but I don’t mind it. Gray clouds have a way of making beams of sun appear brighter.

Eric stops in front of my house.

“Thanks for dinner. I had a really nice time tonight,” I tell him as I unbuckle my seatbelt.

“Me, too. Thanks for coming.”

I hold eye contact. Slowly, Eric leans forward, across the center console. His lips press softly against mine. Once, twice, three times. He pulls back and smiles at me. “Happy Thanksgiving.”

I smile back. “Thanks. You, too.”

“Maybe we can do this again after we’re both back from break?”

“Yeah, sure.” Feelings take time to develop. Right?

I grab my bag and climb out of the car. Eric waves before continuing down the street. I turn and head for my front door.

A figure rises from the front stoop as I approach. “Hey.”

Repeatedly thinking about someone can result in them appearing, apparently.

“Hi,” I reply, disoriented by how I experience excitement when I see him now, rather than the resentment or dread I was accustomed to. “What the hell are you doing here, Conor?”

He holds up my yellow rain jacket. “You left this at the rink earlier.”

“Oh.” I drop the combative tone. “Thanks.”

“I considered burning it. You know it smells like old fish?”

“It’s the one I wear—never mind. Thanks.” I’m flustered. I’ve never told anyone about my Saturday mornings spent out on the water. I almost just told Conor.

A raised brow tells me he caught my near slip, but he doesn’t press me on it. He just holds the canary-colored material out. I take it. Our fingers brush. My body reacts to the innocent touch in a way it definitely didn’t respond to Eric’s kiss.

“Good date?”

I flush. “It was fine.”

“He talk a lot about aquatic resources?”

I laugh. Both because we did spend a lot of time discussing our shared class, and because it’s bizarre to be discussing my date with Conor Hart, of all people. When I meet his gaze, he’s smiling. The sort that makes butterflies swarm in my stomach.

“Yeah, he did,” I admit.

“He was probably nervous.”

“First dates can be nerve-wracking.”

“I wouldn’t know.”

“You haven’t dated anyone?” I ask. “Ever?”

“Nope. I’m not interested in being in a relationship,” Conor replies.

I snort. “*Of course* you’re not. You’re just interested in screwing your way through campus.” Conor smirks, and I’m sure it’s because I just admitted to paying some attention to his interactions with the opposite sex. “Girls talk,” I add.

“Uh-huh.” He still appears amused, but it slowly fades. “Look, I know we got off to a shaky start on the whole training thing, but if you want, we could try again.”

Rather than blurt out, *I want to!* I pretend to think about it, then nod casually. “Okay.”

“I’ve got an away game tomorrow night. We’re leaving at two. But I can make earlier work?”

“I can’t,” I reply. “I’m leaving after my morning class for break. I’ll be gone until Sunday. For break.” If I ever had any cool in this conversation, I’ve lost it.

He doesn't ask where I'm going. The "Oh." tells me he knows.

"I can text you?" I offer. "And we can set something up for after break?"

This may be the most awkward encounter I've had with a guy since I hit puberty. I can't come up with anything casual and collected to say. And I've just asked Conor for his number, because he most certainly isn't saved in my contacts at the moment.

He slides his phone out of his pocket and hands it to me. "Put your number in and I'll text you."

In the time it takes for me to enter my ten digits, Conor receives nine texts. Two from Hunter Morgan asking where he is in colorful terms, and seven suggestive ones from three different girls.

I hand his phone back to him without mentioning a single one. According to his home screen, he now has eight hundred and forty-three unread messages.

"See you, Hayes."

He turns to leave.

"Conor!"

He looks back. "Yeah?"

"Good luck tomorrow."

He smiles. "Yeah. Thanks."

This time I turn to leave at the same time he does.

Eve and Ben are sitting on the couch when I enter the living room.

“How come when I went to spy on your goodnight kiss with Eric, I saw you talking to Conor Hart instead?”

Eve isn't one to waste time with small talk.

I shrug out of my coat and fold it over my arm on top of my raincoat. “We were planning out our runs. He's helping me get ready for the marathon.”

“He *is*?”

“Uh-huh.” I head into the kitchen to grab a soda from the fridge.

Eve stands and follows me.

“Since when are you friendly with the Hart-breaker?”

“That's a stupid nickname, and I'm not. I told one of the other guys on the team I was trying to start running, and he said something to Conor.”

“That's why he came over that morning?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay, we'll circle back on Conor Hart. How was your date with Eric?”

“It was fine.”

“*Fine?*”

“He's really nice. We had a lot to talk about and he took me to this great Mexican restaurant. We should definitely go some time. There was this sauce—”

Eve makes a *shut-up* motion with her hands. “Did you guys kiss?”

“Yup.” I crack open the can of soda.

“*And?*”

Ben walks into the kitchen just in time to catch my shrug.
“She’s not into him, Eve.”

Eve deflates like a balloon.

“You don’t even know Eric,” I tell her.

“I know, but I thought you guys would be perfect together!”

“Well, I don’t think we will be,” I reply, then take a sip of soda.

“Would you go out with Conor Hart if he asked?”

I choke on some bubbles. “He’s not going to ask me out.” I manage to speak with a burning throat.

“How do you know?”

“Because he told me he doesn’t date.”

“You asked him out?” Eve gasps.

“No! It just came up when he was asking about my date with Eric.”

“He asked about your date?”

“Yes.”

“Huh. That’s interesting.”

I grab my soda and turn toward my room. “I’m headed to pack for break.”

“Wait!” Eve calls.

I spin back around. “What?”

“Mary and I ran into Clayton outside the art building earlier.”

“Okay...” I wait for her to elaborate.

“I didn’t have a chance to tell you before you left for your date.”

“Tell me what? Did you guys talk to him?”

“I did. Mary was mostly...” Eve mimics zipping lips shut.

I nod in understanding. “Well, hopefully you guys will run into him again.”

“That’s the thing. He said we should hang out sometime, but he was looking at Mary. I think he might be interested in her!”

“That’s great,” I say.

“Right? Except, I’m not sure how much Mary will say around him if they *do* hang out.”

“If she wants to date the guy, she’s going to have to figure out how to talk to him,” I point out.

“Obviously.” Eve rolls her eyes at me. “I just think it would be nice to have someone help break the ice. I offered to, but I don’t know the guy at all.”

I realize where this is all headed. “You want me to tag along like a third wheel? That doesn’t sound uncomfortable at all.”

“Told you,” Ben chimes in. Eve obviously already shared her plans with him.

She sends him an exasperated look, then looks back at me. “No third wheeling. While Mary was silent, I suggested they should hang out after break. I also mentioned making it a group thing, like a double date. Clayton seemed into it. Just instead of me and Ben going out with them, it would be you and... someone.”

“I’m supposed to pull some random guy into this?”

“You go out with guys all the time. Give Eric another chance. Does he like sports?”

“No idea. It didn’t come up.”

“Please, H? Maybe Mary and Clayton are soulmates. And also, if they go out and hit it off, I won’t have to hear about it anymore in class.”

“Uh-huh. *Super* selfless of you,” I state sarcastically. Ben laughs. “I am not making any promises,” I warn. “But I’ll think about it, okay? Mostly how much you’ll owe me for this.”

Eve beams. “Okay.”

I shake my head before I head to my room, still holding my coats and soda. I dump the jackets on my desk and then change into a pair of flannel pajama pants and an oversized t-shirt. My clothes for tomorrow get set out, and I pack a duffel bag with what I’ll need for Thanksgiving break.

After a final check to make sure I have everything ready to go, I use the bathroom, turn out my light, and climb into bed. My phone buzzes as I’m snuggling under the covers.

My car smells like fish now.

Excitement bolts through me like lightning. He texted me. Not a *Hi* or an *It’s Conor*. He’s teasing me, I think? Conor is difficult to read in person. Black and white words are even harder.

I reply, *Buy an air freshener*, then roll over and try to fall asleep.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONOR

Game days feel different. There's a quiet hum in my bloodstream. An awareness tingling behind every thought. Every molecule and muscle knows what is coming later.

I know what is expected of me.

I don't know how it will end.

There's an additional excitement to that. Even if I could choose to know what the scoreboard will read at the end of a game, I wouldn't. There's a thrill to the unexpected. To the challenge. Knowing the undefeated season I've worked so hard for could slip away at any moment. There's no room for complacency.

I'm making noise. Nine games into the season, and we've won every single one of them. There was an article about Holt on *Center Line Commentary* last week. It was titled "Division III's Dark Horse?"

One article is not enough to get me signed anywhere. But it might be enough to get a few people to dig into my background. To realize there's a good reason why I didn't attend the combine. Enter the draft. To realize I'll work three times as hard as one of the rookies already under contract with millions of dollar signs in their eyes.

A chip on your shoulder is a much better incentive than a fat check. At least for me.

I scroll through my phone, ignoring most of the unread messages. I smirk when I read Harlow's response.

She's a tie to the father and brother I've spent my whole life pretending don't exist.

She's also frank. Sarcastic. Endearing.

I wasn't supposed to learn any of those things about her.

I roll out of twisted sheets and swear when my toe collides with a textbook on the floor. My room needs a thorough cleaning. One I know it won't get anytime soon. I'll crash as soon as we get back tonight, and I have to head out early tomorrow to make it home before my mom will have to leave for her shift at the hospital. I pull on a pair of sweatpants and make my way downstairs in search of coffee.

Hunter eyes me when I hobble into the kitchen. The pain in my toe has begun to recede, leaving behind the reminder that skating for an additional three hours last night was a massive mistake.

"Jesus, Hart. The other guy look better?" Hunter asks.

I flip him off. "I'm fine. I stayed at the rink a while after practice ended."

Hunter looks worried. "You sure you're fine? I can call Doc. Hampton is going to be out for blood. Yours, specifically."

"I know. I'll be ready," I assure him. Hunter has already brewed coffee, and I fill a generous cup.

"I'm serious, dude," Hunter presses. "Are you all right?"

“Yes,” I snap. “Let me worry about the game, okay?”

“Okay.” Hunter raises both hands.

I sigh. “Sorry.”

“We spend a lot of time together, Hart. I already know you’re a grump most of it.”

I roll my eyes as I pull a carton of eggs out of the fridge. The scent of frying bacon and scrambled eggs is enough to draw Aidan downstairs. He stumbles into the kitchen in just a pair of boxer briefs.

“Well, isn’t this domestic.” He nods between me standing at the stove and Hunter pouring a glass of juice at the fridge.

“Good thing you’re here to ensure it’s no longer family-friendly,” Hunter comments. “Do you own pants, Phillips?”

“Yup,” Aidan replies in a cheerful tone. He’s one of those annoying people who wakes up with a smile on his face.

“So you’re walking around like that because you think we want to see your beer belly?”

Aidan laughs and pats his abs. “I’m waiting to do laundry until I get home tomorrow.”

Hunter rolls his eyes. I wonder what that would be like: having a mother who does laundry and cooks. I grew up washing my own clothes and ordering takeout. My mom didn’t have the time. Another thing I have Hugh Garrison to thank for.

Harlow didn’t say where she was going for break, which tells me where she’s headed. I know our mutual destination is part of the reason I’m on edge today, too. I hate going home. I know that town will forever remind me of more unhappy times than happy. Harlow was right. Hugh has tried to make amends.

I just haven't been amenable to them. Because what is there to say? He knows he fucked up. I know he fucked up.

He's not sitting in a crappy apartment getting wasted every day as he mourns his mistakes. He's a financial analyst with a big house and a wife and another kid. They go on vacations and host dinner parties and who knows what else.

I could say I forgive him, but what would that really mean? He's missed my whole life. He had partial custody when I was a kid, but I ensured that didn't mean much. Mean anything. He and my mother don't speak. She works every minute she can so that she can support the two of us on her income alone.

Certain things can't be fixed.

"Your smelly ass better be planning to sit in the front of the bus then," Hunter states as Aidan wanders further into the kitchen.

"My game stuff is clean," Aidan replies, grabbing some coffee.

I tune out their boring-ass clothes conversation as I eat my breakfast and scroll through my phone. I end up in my messages. I send the whole team a reminder about what time the bus is leaving and study the two-text exchange with Harlow. *If you need caffeine try the place off exit 56*, I send. I watch as the *Delivered* appears beneath the message. I'm famous for my disregard of texts. I can't recall the last time I initiated a chain with anyone, much less a girl. I don't let myself read into it, shoving my phone back into my pocket and clearing my dishes.

"I'm headed to class," I tell my two roommates, who have moved on to debating the challenges of ironing. It's a miracle

either of them ever get laid. “Do *not* be late, got it?”

“I was planning to show up at the bus at 2:30.” Aidan gasps. “Thank God you texted, Captain.”

I roll my eyes at his sarcasm as I grab all my stuff and head outside. A light mist is falling from the sky, coating everything in a thin layer of moisture. I toss my backpack and hockey gear into the trunk of my car and drive toward campus.

Campus is less crowded than usual. Some students have cleared out early for break. Rather than the usual ten, it takes me five minutes to find a parking spot. I only have one class today: an African American literature seminar.

Most of the guys on the team are Business majors. It’s well known to be an easy path to a diploma, but I enjoy my classes. I have no idea what I’ll do with an English degree if hockey doesn’t pan out, however. Hopefully it’s something I won’t have to figure out.

I’m early; there’s no one else in the room besides the professor. Since this is a smaller seminar, it’s not held in one of the larger lecture halls on campus. Just an average sized room overlooking the quad.

“Hi, Conor,” Professor Ashland greets as I walk inside.

“Hey, Professor,” I reply, slinging my hockey jacket on the back of a chair and dropping my backpack on the floor.

Professor Ashland glances at the door and then back at me. She pulls a stack of papers out of her briefcase. “I was going to wait to return these until the end of the class, but since you’re here early...” She grabs one and walks over toward me. The essay I turned in last week has been decorated with a big red A at the top of the page. “I was very impressed, Conor.”

“Thanks, Professor.”

“Have you given any thought to your plans after graduation?”

“I’m hoping to play hockey professionally,” I admit. It’s common knowledge on campus, but I usually avoid saying the words out loud. Doing so seems like a taunt to the universe. *Here’s what I want!* A glaring neon sign pointing at what it will hurt to lose most.

Professor Ashland nods. “Yes, I heard the hockey team is having quite the season. Congratulations.”

“Thank you.”

“I imagine there’s some uncertainty as part of the professional athlete process.”

I share a wry grin. “Yes. Quite a bit.”

“You’re a talented writer, Conor. It doesn’t hurt to have options.” The door to the room opens, and Adelaide Jackson walks into the room. I shove my essay in my backpack. “Just think about it,” Professor Ashland adds with a small smile.

I nod. “I will.”

“Hey, Conor,” Adelaide says as she takes the seat beside me.

“Hey,” I reply.

Freshman year, I could tell all the girls in English 101 were wary of having a male classmate. They all assumed it was a joke or I wouldn’t take it seriously. Now, I’m one of two guys majoring in English in my graduating class. The other, Paul Deering, looks a lot more like the stereotypical literature student: glasses, button-down shirts, and a thick mop of curly hair. A reminder not to judge a book by its cover, I guess.

Class starts with a discussion of the book we're currently reading and ends with Professor Ashland returning everyone else's essays. I head straight for the door.

Hunter and Aidan are waiting outside the English building.

"Aw, you two are so sweet to wait for me." I hold my hand to my heart.

"Told you he'd be a dick about it," Aidan tells Hunter. "We're bumming a ride to the bus. Hunter is worried you're not in the zone." Those two sentences are directed at me.

"Yeah, remember how I said that, and *then* I said to keep it between us?" Hunter says, scowling at Aidan.

I say nothing, just begin walking in the direction of my car. I ignore the looks being cast my way. Disregard the people who call out to me. I'm not in the mood.

"Want to tell me what Morgan is worried about?" Aidan asks, falling into step beside me. "Or do you want me to get it out of him and then act surprised when you tell me?"

"I have no idea what Morgan's problem is," I tell Aidan, sending a hard look to Hunter. There is only one topic we've butted heads on lately, though, so I'm pretty sure I have an idea.

"Does it have anything to do with the redhead you were skating with last night?" Aidan asks innocently.

Dammit. "Absolutely nothing," I insist.

"Wait. You went skating with Harlow Hayes?" Hunter questions. When I don't answer, he asks Aidan. "He went skating with her? I thought they were only running together."

"I forgot my jacket in my locker. I headed back to the rink after practice and they were skating circles," Aidan explains.

“I know you said they were running together.”

“Because that’s what Hart told me! He said you guilted him into it!”

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. “Jesus, you two. There is absolutely nothing going on between me and Harlow Hayes. Thanks to your pushy ass—” I glare at Aidan “—I caved and agreed to run with her a few times. Seeing as I already add to training so I can drag your sorry butts to the championship. She said something that pissed me off, and she came to the rink last night to apologize. I don’t like her, and I’m not interested in her. I like winning and I’m interested in winning a championship. Any more commentary from you two, or can we focus on the game that actually matters?”

Silence. Just feet pounding pavement.

“What did she say to piss you off?” Aidan asks tentatively.

“None of your fucking business,” I reply.

“I think he’s ready for the game,” Hunter mock whispers to Aidan.

I snort and keep walking.

The rest of the team is already standing around the coach bus that’s going to transport us to Hampton University for our game tonight when the three of us arrive at the sports center.

“That’s everyone! On the bus, boys!” Coach shouts.

No one moves. They all wait until I stash my bag in the cargo compartment. As soon as I reach the stairs, there’s a flood of activity as everyone follows my lead. I smile. Even as a freshman, I was a leader on the team. Part of it is my stats. On what has historically been a mediocre, dull team, I’m the

flashy star who scores goals and provides measures of hope that have always been crushed.

This year is the first time we've worked as a cohesive unit rather than just pockets of talent. I'm the central component, and there's not a guy on the team who doesn't know it. The night before Thanksgiving break is traditionally an evening to party, but not a single one of my teammates filing onto the bus looks hungover or tired. And I feel it. That hum I woke up with is close to reaching the fever pitch that always corresponds with the drop of a puck directly in front of me.

Hunter plops down in the seat beside me. "I don't tell Phillips anything important," he assures me.

I scoff. "Yeah? I wonder why."

"I just thought he'd be better about bugging you. I know you better than to think you'd let a chick get in your head."

I pull my headphones out of my bag and plug them into my phone. "Just be glad I'm in a forgiving mood."

Hunter laughs. "You have one?"

I don't answer. We both know I don't. And Hunter doesn't even know about the grudge I've held my whole life toward the Garrison family.

I scroll through my music until I find my usual pre-game playlist. Music blasts in my ears. Before I turn my phone off, I go into my messages. There's a new one. Technically, there are nine hundred and twenty-seven new ones, but I only open one. It's a photo of a cup of coffee being held in front of Patty's Pastries, which is located off Exit 56 on the freeway leading from Holt to my hometown of Claremont.

I stare at it for a couple of minutes before I shut off my phone and turn my gaze to the rain streaking down the bus's

window instead.

CHAPTER NINE

HARLOW

The dull staccato of crashing cymbals starts off the song. The guitarist, Adam, comes in a few seconds later. Then Landon steps up to the central microphone and starts singing. He has a throaty, deep voice that I've always enjoyed listening to, even if his band's music isn't to my personal taste. I mostly listen to indie folk. I blasted *The Head and the Heart* for the full drive here earlier.

Landon's band—whose current name I can't remember because they're constantly changing it—is more alternative rock. I think. I'm far from a music aficionado. Any new bands I discover are thanks to the *We Think You Might Like* playlists my music app generates.

“Aren't they incredible?” Simone shouts.

“Yeah,” I yell back at her.

I first met Simone twenty minutes ago. I've gathered she's here because she's hooking up with the shaggy-haired Adam, who has opted for the I-don't-give-a-shit look for this gig. Despite the fact that the temperature is hovering in the mid-forties, he's wearing a ripped t-shirt that shows patches of the pale skin covering his lanky frame.

I'm currently at a sweet sixteen party. Gigs are few and far between for Landon's band, and when Landon mentioned they

had one the first day of Brighton's break, I surprised him by coming home early. He was thrilled when I showed up at the Garrisons' house just before two this afternoon.

I know he'd be far less so if he knew my presence here is penance for the company I've been keeping lately. I don't know if I should feel guilty for spending time with Conor or not. I *do* feel guilty, but not so much so that I'm not checking my phone every few minutes to see if he's responded to the photo of Patty's Pastries I sent him earlier.

He hasn't.

I see both sides now. I've always understood what Landon's issue with Conor is. Now I also have insight into Conor's resentment toward the Garrisons. Unfortunately, that places me smack dab in the middle.

Landon has no idea I've ever even spoken to Conor. It's the biggest secret I've kept in the course of our twenty-year long friendship. And it's the reason I'm watching teenage girls gossip and giggle at the moment.

I remember my own sixteenth birthday. I went out to dinner with my parents at my favorite restaurant, and then my three best friends came over to watch movies and gossip about the boys we liked. Everything seemed so complicated at the time. Looming college decisions. Coming up with things to say to crushes. Figuring out how to tame my unruly red curls.

Looking back now, it all seems so simple. The beauty and the curse of hindsight.

The band's set lasts for another twenty minutes, ending with a popular pop ballad I'm sure Landon would be gritting his teeth about playing if he didn't need his jaw open to sing. He doesn't harbor much—any—appreciation for mainstream

music. Extensively discussing obscure musicians few people have ever heard of is one of his favorite conversation topics.

“You guys were *ah-mazing!*” Simone trills when the guys have finished packing up and make their way over to us.

“Really good,” I agree, nodding.

“You should bring some friends to our next gig, Harlow,” Adam suggests. “We need more fans.”

“When is your next gig?” I ask.

“We don’t have one,” Landon tells me.

“We will,” the drummer, Matt, predicts. “I told you my uncle’s bar is looking for acts.”

“Get us a tryout then,” Landon replies. He places his guitar in its case and slings it over one shoulder. “See you guys later.”

I smile at the two boys and Simone and then follow Landon out of the backyard. We climb into his car.

“So, what did you think?” he asks as soon as we start driving.

“I already said it was good. You guys were great.”

Landon glances over and grins. “Liar. We were terrible. Adam was in the wrong key for half the set.”

“Simone didn’t notice.”

He laughs. “Yeah. At least we have *a* groupie.”

“Hey! I was there too,” I point out.

“Yeah, you were. Thanks for coming, Harlow. I’m sure there were a hundred other places you’d rather be.”

I shrug. “More like a hundred and one, but who’s counting?”

“Hilarious.” Landon drones. I smirk.

My phone buzzes in the central console, and I dive for it.

Landon notices. “Jesus. Waiting for a text?”

I check the screen. It’s Eve. “No.”

“Is it a guy?” he teases.

“Nope.”

“Come on. You know Mom is going to ask you. Weren’t you going out with some guy in your class?”

I sigh. “Yeah. We went out last night.”

“One and done, sounds like?”

“I don’t know. I should give him more of a chance, right? He was nice. We have tons in common. I just... I don’t know. There wasn’t a spark.”

Landon shrugs. “I don’t buy into all the ‘love at first sight’ crap, but if you went out with the guy and don’t see it going anywhere, then it’s probably not going to go anywhere.”

“Yeah.” I sigh. I like Eric. I also can’t help but wonder how I might feel about our date if I hadn’t gone to the rink to apologize to Conor right before it. Or if I’d never asked Conor to train me in the first place—even considering I did so spitefully.

Landon parks in the Garrisons’ driveway a few minutes later. Despite writing it down as my home address for almost four years now, I don’t consider the brick house before me my home. I’m a visitor here. A familiar, comfortable visitor. But still a visitor.

“Hey, you two. How was it?” Allison Garrison appears in the entryway as soon as we walk through the front door. She was obviously just in the midst of cleaning something. Her shoulder-length brown hair is tied up in a high, messy ponytail and a pair of green rubber gloves are the only outliers from her perfectly put together outfit.

“Amazing,” I gush.

Landon rolls his eyes. “Harlow’s being nice. It was mediocre at best.”

“I’m sure that’s not true,” Allison counters. “The mediocre part, at least. I know Harlow’s a sweetheart.”

I laugh.

“The next Bob Dylan is back already?” Hugh Garrison steps out of the kitchen and into the front hallway. He smiles at Landon, then slides his gaze to me.

“Harlow,” he greets warmly. He was at work when I arrived earlier. This is the first time I’ve seen him in person since I left for Holt in August. He looks the same as he did then. Tall, with the same brown hair and hazel eyes as his younger son.

“Hey, Hugh,” I greet, stepping forward into his open arms.

For the first time, it occurs to me. *I’m hugging Conor Hart’s dad.* He’s always been Landon’s father in my head. Allison’s—my mother’s best friend’s—husband. I wonder if Conor has ever hugged his father. I doubt it.

“I’m finishing some dishes and then about to pull the chicken out of the oven. Your timing is perfect,” Allison announces before bustling back into the kitchen.

The rest of us follow. Hugh and Allison barrage me with questions about classes and friends as we set the table and sit down to eat. It feels normal. Comfortable. A routine.

Hugh and Allison ask about the gig earlier, which Landon happily answers. Despite the occasional suggestion that Landon should have a back-up plan, they've both always been supportive of Landon's dream of pursuing music. Almost too much so, according to Landon's incredulous expression when they ask why they weren't invited to the sweet sixteen performance earlier.

"We could have stopped by," Hugh says.

"You didn't even tell us about it until this morning," Allison adds. "Why didn't you invite us?"

Landon scoffs. "That's a rhetorical question, right?" he asks his parents while helping himself to some potatoes.

"And you couldn't have worn something nicer to perform in?" Allison questions, eyeing Landon's apparel critically.

"Seriously, Mom?" Landon glances down at the *Brighton* sweatshirt he's wearing. "What's wrong with this?"

"To start, it's dirty." Allison nods to a stain on the hem that looks like coffee.

Landon rolls his eyes, then pulls off his sweatshirt. He's wearing a long-sleeved t-shirt he obviously slept in recently, if the number of creases in the cotton are any indication. "Better?"

"Worse," Allison says. "I'll put in a load of laundry after dinner."

I bite my bottom lip to keep from grinning. Landon gives me a glare that tells me he doesn't appreciate my amusement

before he pulls the sweatshirt back on.

“Musicians have better things to do with their time than laundry,” Landon explains.

“Just because you want to be a starving artist doesn’t mean you need to dress like one,” is Allison’s response.

“Is Kelly coming over for dessert tomorrow night?” Hugh asks in an obvious attempt to change the topic off fashion.

“Nope. We’re taking a break,” Landon replies.

“Oh,” Allison says before exchanging a glance with Hugh.

I notice neither of them look too dismayed by the news. I’ve never liked Landon’s girlfriend all that much, either. As far as I can tell, she spends an unhealthy amount of time complaining about one thing or another. I have a feeling most of her allure on Landon’s part is that he never had a girlfriend in high school and considers Kelly to be out of his league.

“What about you, Harlow?” Allison turns her attention to me.

“What about me?” I ask, eating some salad. Landon mouths *told you so* at me.

“Didn’t you say you were going out on a double date with Eve and her boyfriend a couple of weeks ago?”

“Oh, yeah.”

“How was it?”

“I don’t think we were a good fit,” I reply diplomatically.

Landon snorts. “Eve’s still with that Ben guy?”

“Yeah,” I confirm.

“What about that guy in one of your classes? Aaron?” Allison isn’t deterred.

“Eric. We went out last night, actually,” I admit.

“How exciting!” Allison looks delighted, and I decide I need to stop mentioning guys to her until after I’ve already gone out with them. “Where did he take you?”

“Some Mexican place in Loughton. The food was good.”

Landon laughs, already knowing how this anecdote will end. “The date was bad, Mom.”

“I didn’t say it was bad,” I protest.

“You didn’t have to. The first thing you mentioned was the food.”

I roll my eyes, acknowledging he has a point. “I don’t think we’ll go out again,” I concede.

“Well, that’s fine,” Allison says. “There are plenty of great guys out there.”

“Plenty of jerks, you mean,” Landon corrects. “Most of the guys at Brighton are total tools.”

“All of your friends seem perfectly nice,” Allison replies.

“Well, yeah. They’re not *jocks*.”

“That’s awfully stereotypical, Landon. Your father played sports.”

“Yeah, I know.” Landon rolls his eyes. “Apple fell far from the tree.”

There’s an awkward silence I don’t think I’m imagining. But maybe I am. I could count on my fingers the number of times I’ve heard Conor’s name uttered out loud in this house since I’ve been living here. But he comes up in innocuous

idioms like the one Landon just spoke. On Father's Day. Whenever Holt or hockey is mentioned.

He's a shadow in the background.

Subtext in conversations.

I've always had some vague sense of it. I'm painfully aware of it now. Because Conor is no longer a shadow or subtext to me. He's a number saved in my phone. Fingerprints on my raincoat. A voice in my head saying *some things can't be forgiven*.

The rest of dinner is absent of any more light-hearted catching up. Tomorrow is Thanksgiving. A day meant to spend with family, acknowledging what you have to be grateful for. Even me, the Canadian, gets that would be a painful reminder of an estranged son. Brother. Stepson.

I wonder how Conor is planning to spend the day tomorrow. He didn't ask where I was spending break, but his text about Patty's made it clear he knew where I was headed following our conversation last night.

After dinner, a few of Landon's high school friends come over. We end up lounging around in the den. All of Landon's friends are similar to him: mature, slightly nerdy, and happier spending a night in than out. The decision to watch one of the *Lord of the Rings* movies is met with great enthusiasm—from everyone but me.

I entertain myself by scrolling through social media on my phone.

Suddenly, all the guys stand up from the couch.

"Movie over?" I ask. Based on Landon's eye roll, the question came out too eager.

“No. Popcorn break,” he replies. “Want any?”

“Nah, I’m good. Thanks.” I snuggle back into the cushions.

All the guys leave the den except for Steve Essex. “Senior year going well?” he asks me, plopping down and taking advantage of the extra space on the couch to spread out some.

Steve has always been friendly toward me. He’s more outgoing than the rest of Landon’s friends. He’s the closest person I have to a friend in this town where I hardly know anyone. The Garrisons would always come to visit my family in Canada. Landon was still in high school when I came to live with them, but I only stayed in Claremont for a couple of weeks before moving into Holt’s dorms to start my freshman year. This town doesn’t feel like home any more than the Garrisons’ house does.

“Yeah, pretty good,” I reply. “Crazy to believe I’m almost done with college.”

“Tell me about it. I can’t believe I’m more than half done. All the senior guys on the team were messes at our last game.” Steve smiles as I recall he plays soccer at a small college in Oregon. “It was actually kind of funny.”

“Did you guys have a good season?”

“Not bad. We’re D three though, you know? Not the biggest deal.”

“Yeah, Holt is the same way.”

Steve glances at the sliding door that leads into the den, then back at me. “Not when it comes to hockey, from what I hear.”

I shift uncomfortably. “Yeah. Not for hockey.”

“You ever been to a game?” Steve asks.

I raise both eyebrows. “Seriously?”

Steve has the good grace to look sheepish. “I know, I know. I went to high school with the guy, too, though. I get why Landon hates him. I do. Conor and his friends were... well, I’m sure you can imagine what it was like in high school. But Evan Sanford was on the soccer team with me. He was Conor’s right winger in the winter. Couldn’t say enough good things about the guy. I just... well, it couldn’t have been easy for Conor, either, you know?” Steve shrugs. “Nice to see some things working out for him now. I hope he makes it to the pros.”

I just stare at him. It took Conor telling me to my face there are two sides to every story to even consider his. Landon’s best friend is following Conor’s season because he’s thought about the justification Conor has for how he’s acted toward the Garrisons.

My silence unnerves Steve. He glances at the doorway again before leaning forward. “This is just between us, right? You won’t...”

“I won’t say anything to Landon,” I assure him.

Steve lets out a relieved sigh. “Okay. Good.”

Loud chatter announces Landon’s return, along with the rest of the guys. When it comes to fantasy trilogies, they all have plenty to say. I shake my head when Landon holds the popcorn bowl out to me and keep my eyes fixed on the television screen as the movie resumes.

I’m too distracted to even attempt to immerse myself in the movie. I stare at the screen until the credits roll, then say good night to Landon and his friends and head up to my room. Just

like the house, it doesn't really feel like my room. It's one of several guest rooms in the five-bedroom house. I haven't changed any of the decorations that were here when I moved in, despite Hugh and Allison encouraging me to make any alterations I wanted.

I get ready for bed and then slide between soft flannel sheets. I toss and turn under the down comforter until I accept the fact I'm not going to be falling asleep anytime soon. I grab my phone from the bedside table and pull up the *Holt Athletics* website. I select *Hockey* and scroll down to their schedule.

They won tonight. Still undefeated.

I fall asleep with a smile on my face.

CHAPTER TEN

CONOR

Aidan's grinning when I enter the kitchen. "Quite the performance last night, Hart."

"Have I ever let the team down?"

"Dude. I'm not talking about the game last night. Had I known you were bringing a girl back, I would have crashed at Robby's."

I snort. "Speaking of, can you tell Sarah I had to take off when she comes down?"

"You get the sex and I get to be the one to tell her you're never gonna call? Pass."

"She knows the score already. Thanks, Phillips."

I head for the door.

"You owe me, Hart," he calls out after me.

It's sunny outside, with no hint of moisture in the air. I breathe deeply, letting the crispness fill my lungs. Rather than climb into my car, I shove my hands into my pockets and start walking along the sidewalk toward campus.

It takes me ten minutes to reach the football stadium. I spot Harlow's red hair after nine. She's sprawled out on the green grass of the field. That's one upside to the endless rain in

Somerville. While most places with seasons have started to see everything shrivel up and chlorophyll retreat, Washington is still a sea of green.

A reluctant smile tugs up the corners of my mouth when I see Harlow is plucking blades of grass and tossing them up in the air. They twirl back down to the ground like miniature helicopters.

“Hey,” I greet when I reach her.

She sits up, giving me a tentative smile. “Hi.”

“Good Thanksgiving?”

Harlow stands and studies me. Based on how our last meeting here ended, I’m guessing she’s unsure how to answer. I mime fast-forwarding with my hand.

“It was fine,” she replies, biting her bottom lip. “Yours?”

“Pretty good.”

She wants to ask if I was in Claremont, I can tell. But she doesn’t. Instead, Harlow tosses me an evergreen cutout. “Here.”

I glance down. It’s one of the cheap air fresheners gas stations have on a carousel right next to register. Pine scented.

“Wow, if you were going to start paying me for my training time, I could think of some better gifts.”

She rolls her eyes. “It’s because you said—”

I laugh. “I get it, Hayes. Hilarious.”

“Well, you had like eight hundred unread texts, so you seem to forget about a lot of messages.”

“Did you have fun snooping through my phone?”

A slight flush colors her cheeks. “Nope. Pretty boring, actually.”

“Uh-huh.” If she thinks that, she didn’t read any of them.

She follows me off the field and onto the track. I demonstrate a couple of simple stretches, and then we start jogging along.

“I saw you won last night.”

I glance over, but she’s staring straight ahead.

“Yeah,” I confirm.

“Did you play well?”

I laugh. A rhetorical question if I’ve ever heard one. “Yes.”

I catch her nod out of the corner of my eye. I have no intention of ever telling her so, but I’ve started looking forward to running with her more than any of my other off-ice training. It’s not uncomfortable, the way I expected to feel around her. I’ve learned Harlow isn’t one to force conversation. I’ve also discovered I enjoy hearing what she has to say.

A couple laps later, I voice the question that’s been bouncing around my head since our last conversation. “What are aquatic resources?”

She looks over at me and scrunches up her nose. “Seriously?”

I nod.

“Marine reserves, protection of endangered species, extinction risk, population dynamics. Stuff like that. Most life on Earth lives in the water. There are zooplankton and

phytoplankton you can't even see, and then cetaceans that are over a hundred feet long."

Harlow's eyes are alight; her cheeks flushed.

"You like the ocean," I surmise.

"Yeah." She laughs. "It's my simple place."

I half smile. "A true island girl."

Harlow raises both eyebrows.

I shrug.

"Claremont gossip."

Almost everything I know about her is secondhand. From my mom, whose friends keep her well-appraised of Hugh's life. From the guys I grew up with, who took my side over Landon's and had plenty to say about his best friend.

It bothers me for the first time. That nothing I know about Harlow Hayes is because she chose to tell me it herself.

"Do you go back much? To Ireland?" I ask.

"I haven't been back in years. We used to go every summer."

"What's it like there? I've never been out of the country."

Harlow looks surprised by the admission. "Never?"

I shake my head.

"It's beautiful. Green grass as far as you can see. Big cliffs overlooking the water. Villages with pie shops and apothecaries. Everyone is so cheerful and happy." She smiles. "I used to pretend to talk with an Irish accent after every visit. Drove my parents crazy."

"How come you haven't gone back?"

“The last time I was there was with them.” She looks away, off at the bleachers. “Now it feels like it’s a place I shouldn’t go. That making new memories there might ruin the old ones.”

“You’ve been back to Canada, though?”

“Yeah. A few times.” Harlow pauses, and I realize why when she continues speaking. “The Garrisons would always come stay with us for a week in the summer. They’ve rented a place the last several years. Kept the tradition going. They’ve only missed one year since Landon was born, and it was a while ago.”

I don’t say anything. She probably thinks I’m mad she mentioned them again.

“They didn’t go that year because Allison found out he was screwing my mom again.”

I don’t look at her. I keep my gaze forward.

There’s a long pause. Finally, “I... I didn’t know.”

“Yeah, I figured.” When I glance at Harlow, her face is pale and serious. I’m not sure it was my place to tell her that piece of the past. For once, it’s not that I want her to see Hugh the way I see him. I meant what I told her before. I’m glad she has him. Glad he’s stepped up as the father she no longer has.

I just blurted out that ugly truth because I’m selfish. Because I want her to see my side of things. I’ve never felt the need to justify my behavior regarding Hugh to anyone. But I want Harlow to get why I can’t forgive him.

“How old were you?” she asks.

“Seven.”

“How did you find out?”

“Eavesdropped on my mom talking to a friend.”

“And Hugh told Allison?”

I shrug. “No idea. He told my mom he was having problems with Allison. That he regretted not standing by her. Not choosing us. Then, he changed his mind again. Once a cheater and liar, always a cheater and liar, right? My mom never really got over it. Either time.”

“Conor...” Harlow has no idea what to say. I don’t blame her.

“It’s fine, Harlow. It was a long time ago. Just not as long as most people think. I have my reasons, okay? I’m not a jerk about them—him—for no reason.”

“I know,” she says softly.

We run in silence for a lap.

“I don’t think Landon knows.”

“I won’t say anything,” she tells me.

“You lie to your bestie?” The question comes out more mocking than I mean it to.

“You can be friends with someone and not agree with everything they do.”

“True. Aidan only does laundry once a month.”

Harlow laughs, lightening the heavy moment. The sound has a similar effect to the sun beaming down. Colors seem brighter. Worries lighter. “That’s disgusting.”

“I know. He and Hunter got into a whole argument about it.”

She laughs again.

“Did you run over Thanksgiving break?” I ask her.

“Should I lie?”

“So, no?”

“No,” she confirms. “I’m not very motivated to run by myself. Lan—Landon was supposed to go with me, but he got some extra studio time, so he ended up heading back to Brighton early.”

“Studio time?”

“Yeah. He’s in a band.”

I know nothing about my half-brother. Likes. Dislikes. Interests. Pet peeves. Hobbies. “He is?”

“Be nice,” Harlow cautions.

“Are they any good?”

“Um. They’re a work in progress.”

I chuckle. “Huh.”

“I listen to more indie folk, so I’m probably not the best judge.”

I wonder if Hugh is musical. I don’t think so. I wonder if it irks Landon how my interests align more closely to our father than his do.

It irks me.

Harlow doesn’t complain when I push the pace and add an extra mile to what we ran last time, but she does bend over as soon as we reach the finish line for the final time.

“Hold your arms up,” I instruct. “It opens up your lungs.”

She keeps heaving with her hands on her knees, so I step forward and do it for her. Surprised green eyes meet mine. She

wasn't expecting me to touch her, that much is clear.

Awareness sizzles in the air, even once I've let her hands go. She keeps them airborne.

"I have a favor to ask you," she says, biting her bottom lip.

"*Another* one?" I tease.

"This doesn't count," she informs me, gesturing to the track. "You offered to run with me."

"After you asked me to," I counter.

Harlow sighs.

"Fine. Shoot," I tell her.

"You're friends with Clayton, right?"

I feel my brow furrow as I try to figure out what her angle is. Is she into him? If so, what does that have to do with me?

"Thomas? Yeah."

"I have a friend, Mary—well, actually she's really more friends with Eve, but—"

"Spit it out, Hayes," I instruct. "I've got a weight session in—" I check my phone "—twenty minutes."

"I need you to go out with me on Saturday night," she blurts. Shock stills me. "With other people," she adds quickly. "This friend has a crush on Clayton but she's shy and she doesn't want to go out with him on her own."

"Like a double date?" It sure sounds like one.

"Like half a date. We would be the non-dating half, obviously."

I grin at that. "How come you're not asking Aquaman?"

Harlow's green eyes blaze. "One, don't call him that. And two, you know why."

"Because I told you I don't date?" She opens her mouth, but I don't give her a chance to say anything. "I'm kidding. Yeah, sure, I'll go."

"Really?" She clearly wasn't expecting me to say yes. I wasn't expecting to, either. But what the hell?

"Yeah. One condition though," I add.

"What?" she asks warily.

I scour my brain, trying to come up with something. I didn't have anything in mind, just didn't want to capitulate too easily.

"You have to come to my game on Friday night."

I'm pushing the bounds of her loyalty to the Garrisons. To Landon.

Will she see supporting me as a betrayal?

I'm testing her. I'll also do this either way. Northampton is one of our weaker opponents. I plan on making a mockery of them no matter who is watching, and I'll be in a fantastic mood on Saturday as a result.

"Okay," Harlow agrees, so quickly I'm surprised. She looks as surprised by the words as I am. I know for a fact she's never attended a hockey game before, because Jack Williams bemoaned it for months.

"Crowds can get a little rowdy." I don't know why I say that. Maybe because I'm not sure what else to say. I expected her to refuse to come.

"I can handle rowdy."

I don't know if she means the words to be flirtatious or if I'm just reading them that way.

"Okay," I reply. "I'll pick you up at eight on Saturday."

"You don't have to do that," Harlow says immediately.

Interesting. According to every romantic comedy I've watched with my mom, it's proper date etiquette.

"Do you live with this Mary chick, too?" I ask. Maybe they're planning to carpool?

"No. Just Eve."

"Then I'll pick you up. See you, Hayes."

I grin at her surprised expression before I turn to leave.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

HARLOW

I gaze around in awe as I step inside Holt's hockey arena for the second time. Rather than silence and stale sweat, I'm met by noise and an atmosphere of excitement. I thought Conor was exaggerating when he warned me the hockey games get rowdy.

Turns out he wasn't.

Eve and Ben look just as taken aback. The only Holt sporting event Eve has ever attended was the basketball game we went to a month ago, and Ben's interests don't include sports. I asked Eve to come with me on this unexpected outing, and Ben tagged along like the dutiful boyfriend he is.

"I guess we should find seats?" I eye the packed bleachers dubiously.

They're filled with shirtless guys shouting and girls in tight tops holding homemade signs. I read a few, noting *Hart* and *15* are featured on most. No wonder he's so cocky.

I lead the way up the center aisle. Most people are clustered closer to the ice. We end up about halfway up, squeezed between a group of girls I'm certain are freshman and two guys who eye me. I ignore them.

“Wow.” Eve states, sinking down beside me and looking around with wide eyes. “I had no idea anyone at Holt had this amount of school spirit.”

It’s a fair statement. Holt’s a decent school, but it’s not one students burst with pride to attend, especially for its athletics. I look around the arena, surprised by how many faces I recognize. Mary wasn’t exaggerating about the turn-out at the hockey games.

“Wish we had these many people show up to our film screenings,” Ben grumbles. Eve pats his arm consolingly.

Players appear on the ice, and everything else fades to the background. They whizz in circles, passing pucks and sending shots at the hulky body centered between the iron posts of the goal.

Booming speakers project sound. First, a flashy pop song. Followed by announcements I don’t listen to.

The national anthem plays, and then there are only twelve players on the ice. I can’t see the back of the Holt players’ jerseys, but I don’t need to. I know which one he is immediately.

The confident stance.

The way all the other players glance at him.

Six of them gather in the center of the ice. The referee drops the puck and everyone blurs into movement.

Eve’s saying something to me, but I just hum along an acknowledgement. I’m too focused on what’s happening on the ice. Conor is grace and power and poetry in motion. I’ve always viewed hockey as a brutal, bloody sport. That appeals to base instincts and bruised knuckles. Filled with pushing and

shoving and hate. There is some of that taking place, but it's also... beautiful.

Precise movements.

Sprays of ice shavings flying.

I don't think about how complicated my feelings toward one particular player have become. I don't think about how Hugh Garrison has never seen his son play hockey. I don't think about how much Landon Garrison would hate that I'm sitting in Holt's rink right now.

I just... watch.

I don't lack any athletic interest. My dad's preferred sports were nods to his native country: rugby and curling. Despite Canada's obsession with the sport, he never fully adapted to that piece of his adopted home's identity.

None of the whistles or arguments on the ice make any sense to me. I have no way of anticipating what circle they will line up in or when the blurs of color on the once-pristine, now-carved ice will swap. No idea why one Holt player gets sent to the penalty box ten minutes into the game. But I can appreciate the speed and intensity. It resounds around the arena with each rattle of the boards and roar of the crowd.

I spend most of the game watching Conor. On skates, he towers over all the other guys on the ice. The 15 emblazoned on the back of his jersey in white is a stark contrast to Holt's navy jerseys, the same way each Holt player stands out against the white-gray colored ice. I was impressed by Conor's skating skill the last time I was here. It's now comically obvious that was the equivalent of a stroll for a marathon runner who's not a novice like me. He flies across the frozen surface effortlessly, speeding past other players as if they're

standing still. Hurling toward the tiny, black circle they're all chasing after. You don't need to understand the nuances of hockey to tell that he's on a whole different playing field in comparison to the rest of the players. Faster. Stronger. More talented.

Conor barrages Northampton's goalie with shot after shot after shot. The rest of Holt's team keeps passing to him, assisting with the single-man assault. It's clear Northampton is under no delusions about who Holt's star player is. They come for Conor over and over again. I gain a new appreciation for Hunter Morgan's tall stature as he sends one Northampton player into the boards with a slam that makes *my* teeth rattle.

"I can't believe Conor didn't play somewhere else," Eve whispers to me. "He's really good."

"Yeah, he is," I agree. I don't share the fact that I know why Conor chose to play here instead of at a different university. I know it's not common knowledge, so it matters that he confided in me. I'm protective of the truth. His truth.

Unknowingly, my ear drums adjusted to the loud volume of the arena, because the fresh wave of noise takes me off guard. So does the loud buzzer and the sudden flash of light at one end of the ice. The fact that all the navy jerseys are suddenly huddled in one spot as a mass of blue.

Eve figures out what happened before I do. "We scored!" she screams.

Under most circumstances, I would tease her for her enthusiasm. She spent most of the basketball game discussing art with Mary, despite it being her idea to attend it in the first place.

But I'm too busy screaming right along with Eve and the rest of the crowd to judge anyone else's reaction. Even Ben seems to have shed his indignation about the disconnect between Holt's appreciation for indie cinema and hockey. He's clapping and whistling right along with the rest of us.

The loudspeaker crackles to life. "Holt goal by number fifteen, Conor Hart. Assisted by number twenty-two, Hunter Morgan. Thirteen minutes and thirty-two seconds into the second period."

Conor's goal seems to set off a domino effect for Holt's performance. The rest of the navy jerseys feed off his dominance and the energy of a home crowd that's ahead. Aidan Phillips scores a couple minutes later. Then a sophomore whose name I don't recognize. Then Conor again.

Holt is ahead by four goals to nothing, with only three minutes left on the clock. Fifty-seven seconds tick by, and Northampton pulls their goalie. Conor gains possession of the puck and zips down the ice like a navy bullet. I wait for him to send it between the pipes, but he doesn't. He passes it across the ice to a player wearing the number seventeen. Steve Essex's words at Thanksgiving about one of Conor's high school teammates come to mind. *Couldn't say enough good things about the guy.*

I didn't memorize the team roster, so I have no idea who number seventeen is. But he sends the puck right into the net, prompting a fresh roar from the euphoric crowd.

"Oh my God! We won." Eve sounds half shocked, half happy. "We actually won!"

"The team is undefeated this season, Eve," I reply with some amusement.

She sticks her tongue out at me before turning back to watch all the players celebrating on the ice as Northampton files off dejectedly.

I slide my phone out of my pocket. Before I think it through and lose my nerve, I text him. *Good game.*



“You straightened your hair?”

That’s the first thing Eve asks me when I enter the kitchen the following evening.

“Yeah...” I reply casually.

Eve raises both eyebrows but doesn’t say anything else. This is the problem with living with someone who knows you well. They know what music you want to listen to and your favorite brand of chocolate. They also know that you only straighten your hair for occasions deemed to have some special significance. To put those in context, I haven’t bothered to in months. Not since the party the oceanic research firm I worked at this past summer threw for my final day. I’m not headed to a work function tonight. It’s Saturday.

“I just felt like it,” I add unnecessarily. And defensively. I’m probably just drawing more suspicion from Eve.

The truth is, I’m crazy nervous about tonight. I told Conor it’s not a date. He doesn’t consider it a date. It’s a favor I’m still stunned he agreed to. I asked him partly because I didn’t think he would agree. Something I need to stop assuming when it comes to him, clearly.

Tonight *feels* like a date. I thought there was a better chance of going out with the male lead in one of my favorite

romantic comedies than Conor Hart.

But here I am, waiting for my best friend's half-brother to pick me up. Because he *offered* to for our non-date.

Eve watches me closely as she moves around the kitchen. Probably fixing herself a bowl of popcorn to watch this uncomfortable scene unfold. I plop down on the couch and pull my phone out to avoid her discerning gaze.

The doorbell rings minutes later.

I stand and smooth my sweater. Eve just returned home from the movie she went to with Ben this afternoon, so she wasn't here to witness the embarrassing length of time it took to pick out the jeans and sweater I'm currently wearing. The simple outfit is deceptively well thought out. The jeans are my favorite: stretchy yet figure-hugging. The white sweater I'm wearing is casual but not bulky enough to look careless. Underneath it, I'm wearing a lacy top that's standard attire for the frat party I'm guessing we'll end up at after dinner.

Conor is leaning against the porch railing when I open the front door, staring off into space. He glances over at the distinctive creak of the hinges. The curse of living in a perpetually damp climate. Rust.

"Hey, Hayes," he greets. He doesn't say anything about my appearance, but his gaze sweeps over me: slow and languid. I resist the urge to shiver.

"Hey," I reply, drinking in the sight of him. He's wearing jeans and a red Henley barely visible beneath his *Holt Hockey* jacket. And he wears the outfit well. I was hoping I'd spent enough time in his presence by now that I might be over his appearance. If it's possible to achieve immunity to male perfection, I haven't yet. "Let me just grab my coat."

I leave the door open and grab my rain jacket from the row of hooks that line the mudroom wall.

“Not the yellow one,” Conor groans. “Terrible choice.”

“Shut up,” I retort. “You’re supposed to tell me I look nice, not share your *Project Runway* impression.”

“They would have been far harsher.”

I zip up my coat and roll my eyes. “Let’s go, Tim Gunn.”

Eve rounds the corner before we can depart.

“Oh. Hi, Conor.” I watch her give the shyest wave I’ve ever witnessed as she dons a fake shocked expression at encountering Conor on our front porch. I’m sure she’s been eavesdropping ever since I answered the door.

“Hey,” Conor replies. “Library on a Sunday girl, right?”

Eve’s cheeks blaze red. “I’m not great at coming up with lies on short notice.”

Conor nods as his expression shifts to looking excessively somber. “Harlow has a way of forcing uncomfortable situations on people. This evening, for example.”

“We’re leaving,” I announce, pushing him out the door. “Good night, Eve!”

Conor laughs as we start down the walk.

I huff. “Was that really necessary? She had enough questions about tonight. About you.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, she doesn’t know anything about the Garrisons and you.”

“Why not?”

I risk a glance over. He looks interested, not annoyed.

“It’s not my story to tell. I figured if you wanted people here to know, you would have told them yourself.”

“How do you know I haven’t?” he challenges.

“Every interaction I’ve ever had with the rest of the hockey team,” I reply, as we reach his car.

“Where are we meeting the dating half of this date?” Conor asks as he settles into the driver’s seat.

“Antonio’s,” I respond, referring to the Italian restaurant in town.

“*Antonio’s?*” Conor repeats incredulously.

“Yeah, why?” Is he allergic to tomatoes?

“Isn’t the whole point of this outing for Thomas to make a love connection with this girl you know?”

“Yes...”

“You think that’s likely to happen over subpar spaghetti and garlic sticks?”

“Dates often take place at restaurants, Mr. I’ve Never Been On One.”

“Exactly. It’s boring and expected.”

I huff out a sigh. “Where do you want to go?”

Conor grabs his phone out of the cupholder and hands it to me as he drives down the street. “562998. Call Thomas.”

“You shouldn’t use the same digit twice in your passcode,” I scold. “It’s easier for someone to hack it.”

“When I start storing state secrets on my phone instead of nude pics, I’ll make sure to change it.”

I scoff as I scroll through Conor's long list of contacts.

"Got it?" Conor asks, holding out one hand to me.

"No. You have a ridiculous number of people in your phone. I'm only halfway through the C's."

"He's under Thomas," Conor replies.

I scoff and scroll faster. Finally, I locate *Thomas* above a *Tina* with two red heart emojis.

"Here you go." I hand Conor his phone back.

There are a few seconds of silence, then the muffled sound of Clayton Thomas's voice.

"Hey, Thomas," Conor greets.

There's a pause.

"Yeah, yeah." Conor laughs. "Uh-huh. We'll see about that."

Clayton says something else.

"Northampton always does."

They're talking about the game last night. I bang my head back against the headrest, and Conor catches my not-so-subtle annoyance.

"Hey, so you're heading to Antonio's tonight?" he asks Clayton.

I can't hear what Clayton is saying, but I have no problem catching the tone. Surprise. I have no idea why I assumed Mary would have told Clayton that Conor was joining us tonight, but I did.

"No, she didn't," Conor replies, glancing at me.

I raise both eyebrows. Conor shakes his head slightly.

“Okay, well, I think we should go to Lemer’s instead. You’ve been there with the guys before, right?”

Clayton says something that makes Conor grin.

“Yeah, we’ll see,” he says. “We’ll meet you guys there.”

Clayton speaks again.

“Oh, okay. I’ll have Harlow tell her. See you soon, man.”

He hangs up and drops his phone back in the cupholder.

“Clayton’s meeting us at the bowling alley. Let your friend know.”

“You want to go bowling?”

“Sounds better than an awkward dinner. They have food there.”

“An awkward dinner? Way to project, Hart.”

“They’re not even driving together,” Conor points out.

“I know.” It’s why both Eve and Mary were so shocked Conor and I are. I sigh and text Mary. *Change of plans. Meet us at Lemer’s bowling alley.*

“You didn’t tell me Thomas asked you out.”

I peer over at him. “Why would I have? And how do *you* know that?”

“He just mentioned it.”

“What? Why?”

“Girls aren’t the only ones who talk, Hayes.”

“What does that have to do with Clayton suggesting we hang out sometime last semester?”

“You shot him down and now you’re going out on a double date with him?”

“First off, this is not a double date. Second, I seriously doubt Clayton is scarred by the fact I didn’t take him up on his hang-out offer.”

“Scarred enough to mention it months later.”

“Is there a point to this conversation?”

“Just making it,” Conor replies cheerfully. “Although now that you mention it, this does elevate my opinion of Williams some.”

“Jack? Why?”

“He still has a thing for you, Hayes.”

“No, he doesn’t,” I dispute, despite the fact that of the two of us, he would know better than me.

“Why do you think none of the guys on the team flirt with you?”

“Because they’re not interested in flirting with me?”

“Pretty sure you’re wrong about that.” Conor snort laughs. “I never got it.”

“Got what?”

“You and Williams.”

“He’s nice.”

“Yeah, he is,” Conor agrees. “That’s your type, though? *Nice?*”

“Obviously not, or I would still be dating him.”

“Why did you go out with him at all?” I slant him a glance and he shrugs. “Just curious.”

“I had some shit going on and he was nice and uncomplicated,” I reply. “I didn’t even know he was on the team, or I never would have pursued it.”

“What sort of shit?”

“The none-of-your-business sort.”

Conor smiles. “Fair. You have something against hockey players?”

“No. Why?”

“You said you wouldn’t have gone out with Williams if you knew he was on the team. You don’t like hockey players?”

I sigh. “It didn’t have anything to do with him,” I admit. After a pause, I add, “or hockey.”

Conor hums. “Are you going to make me pinky swear not to tell Williams that?”

“Nope,” I reply. “Because we’re not seven. And because... I trust you.” I add the last sentence begrudgingly, but it doesn’t make it any less true. I don’t know if I should. In fact, I’m quite certain I shouldn’t. But I do.

Conor doesn’t say anything. I can’t think of anything that won’t make the silence more uncomfortable, so I don’t either.

When we park at the bowling alley, it’s as though I never spoke. Conor snags the keys from the ignition and looks to me. “Are you any good at bowling?”

“No,” I reply before climbing out of his car.

We start toward the entrance to the bowling alley. The parking lot is mostly empty, making it an easy, direct trip to the doors that lead inside.

Conor scowls as we walk. “Dammit. Do you think your friend is any good?”

“Mary? I would lean toward no.” As far as I know, the only upper arm workout she engages in is painting.

Conor’s expression brightens. “Good. Thomas isn’t going to let me live it down if we lose.”

“Why don’t you play with him, then?” I suggest.

“Because we’re on a fake date, Hayes. Plus, if I play with Thomas, I can’t beat him.”

I scoff as we enter the building. There’s a long counter spanning a dozen feet to the right. A middle-aged man is manning it, looking like he’d love to be elsewhere. He eyes Conor warily, probably thinking he looks like the type to start a bowling brawl. I hope not. I’ve heard plenty of stories about Conor getting into fights, but I’ve never witnessed one myself. Unless the topic of the Garrison family comes up, he seems even-tempered. The roguish grin he flashes while requesting our bowling shoes reeks of mischief, though. Rather than be deterred, I find it compelling.

Conor hands me a pair of shoes I’m surprised to see are the right size.

“How did you—” I stop talking when I recall our skating session and answer my own question.

We move to our assigned lane and swap out street shoes for the uncomfortable and ugly bowling ones. Somehow, he’s gotten me to exchange my shoes for borrowed footwear twice now. At least these have flat soles.

“Why couldn’t they be cute?” I groan as I pull the left one on. “Or just more comfortable. I feel like my feet are strapped to a wooden board.”

“Dramatic, much?” Conor asks as he puts his own on.

I open my mouth to retort, then spot Mary entering the bowling alley.

“Mary’s here,” I announce. “Be nice! And don’t say anything crude. She’s sort of shy.”

Conor looks amused by my instructions, rather than offended. “I know how to behave in public, Harlow. And when have I said anything crude?”

“You play hockey,” I point out.

“Way to stereotype,” Conor mumbles.

I ignore him and stand to greet Mary. “Hi!” I say enthusiastically, then give her a hug. “You look amazing!”

Most of the time Mary comes over to Eve and I’s place with paint-splattered clothes or sweatpants. Or both. Tonight, she’s wearing a cute sweater dress with riding boots.

“Thanks, Harlow,” Mary replies, smiling shyly. Her gaze slides to Conor, who’s still sitting and lacing up his bowling shoes. He glances up and my heart misses a beat.

“You must be Mary.” He stands and gives her a warm smile. “I’m Conor.”

“Nice to meet you,” Mary replies softly, then blushes.

“No sign of Thomas?” Conor asks, glancing around the bowling alley.

Aside from the three of us, there’s no more than a dozen other people here in total. Two employees, one group with matching shirts I try and fail not to cringe at, and what look like high schoolers.

“Clayton isn’t here yet?” The disappointment is obvious in Mary’s voice. “Do you think he decided not to come?”

I shoot Conor a *nice going* look. He replies with a *like she wasn’t going to notice* one. It’s both disturbing and convenient to discover that we’re able to communicate wordlessly.

“Absolutely not,” I state firmly. “I’m sure he’ll be here any minute.”

“Okay,” Mary says, but she’s still looking around anxiously. “I’m going to go get my shoes.”

I level a glare at Conor as soon as she disappears. “Was that really necessary?”

“You think she wasn’t going to notice her date isn’t here yet? You may be happy to pretend the elephant in the room doesn’t exist, but I’m not.”

“You didn’t have to make it sound like he wasn’t going to show up!”

“How did I do that? I just said there wasn’t any sign of him.”

I sigh. “You don’t think he’s not going to show up, right?” Despite my assurances to Mary, I have no idea if he will. I don’t know the guy all that well and I haven’t talked to him since the party after the basketball game. Eve and Mary orchestrated this evening. Even Conor contributed by choosing the venue.

“Thomas is a decent guy,” Conor replies. “If he said he’d be here, he’ll show.”

“You’re sure?”

“I showed up, didn’t I?”

“So you’re saying you’re a decent guy?”

Conor grins. “Do you normally trust assholes?”

I can’t help the small smile that forms. “I knew you were going to make me regret saying that.”

“Slow night here, huh?” Mary reappears, a pair of ugly bowling shoes in hand.

“Looks that way. I’ve never been here before.”

“It wasn’t your idea to come?” she asks.

“Nope. Conor gets the credit. He has an aversion to dinner dates.”

Conor laughs. Mary looks confused. Suddenly, her expression brightens.

“Holy shit, he’s here!”

We all turn to watch Clayton Thomas saunter into the bowling alley. He’s wearing jeans and a *Holt Basketball* jacket. He spots us all staring—Subtlety: 0; Uncomfortable Moment: 1—and comes straight over.

“Hey, guys!” Clayton’s displaying no sign of the awkwardness I was experiencing earlier, or that Mary is experiencing right now, based on her face.

“Hey, Thomas.” Conor takes over, and I veer more toward being grateful than regretful I chose him as my co-chaperone for tonight.

“Hart! Still surprised that you’re here.” Clayton gives me a questioning look, and I seriously hope Conor’s *guys talk too* comment doesn’t mean rumors about me and the captain of the hockey team will soon circulate campus.

“I love bowling,” Conor deflects. “Ready to get your ass kicked, Thomas?”

“I’d like to see you try,” Clayton replies, pulling off his jacket and rolling up his sleeves. All of a sudden, I’m being suffocated by a heavy blanket of testosterone. “Your winning streak is about to come to an end, Hart.”

“As fun as this I’m-more-athletic-than-you pissing contest is to witness, how about a little less chirping and a little more bowling, boys?” I suggest.

Clayton laughs. “I’ll go grab my shoes. Beer, anyone?”

“No, I’m good,” I reply quickly. “Thanks.”

Shit. I didn’t consider this. Antonio’s is within walking distance of my house and whatever party I figured we might end up at after this. The bowling alley is not.

“I’ll take one,” Mary says.

“Hart?”

“Nah, I’m good. Thanks,” Conor replies.

Clayton nods. “I’ll be right back. Want to come, Mary?”

She nods eagerly.

I look at Conor with surprise as soon as Mary and Clayton leave. “You’re not drinking?”

“Nope.” He pops the P.

“Why not?”

He looks amused. “You’re probably the last person I ever thought would be promoting drinking and driving, Hayes.”

Shock makes me stammer. “I didn’t—I’m not—” For whatever reason, I keep forgetting Conor knows my past.

That, unlike other people, he won't just assume I don't like beer or that I'm not thirsty.

He takes pity on my lack of articulation. "I don't drink during the season, anyway."

"You don't?"

He shakes his head. "Want to show me your bowling technique while they're off getting liquored up?"

"No."

Conor grins. "Fine. You using chirping in a sentence was worth us losing."

Despite the fact there that there was only one other person waiting at the section of the counter labeled *FOOD AND DRINKS* when they headed over, Mary and Clayton don't immediately return. When I glance over, I see they're both leaning against the counter, waiting to be served. At least they're talking and don't look bored out of their minds. I am.

"Fine," I capitulate. "I'll bowl *once* and you can give me pointers."

Based on Conor's face, you'd think I just offered a blowjob. I stand and grab a purple ball from the rack. The pins have all been set up at the end of the lane. I stick my fingers in the three tiny holes and test the weight of the ball. It's been a while since I last went bowling, but I don't think there's anything all that complicated about hurtling a heavy ball in a straight line. Execution is more the issue.

I line up in the center on the lane, relax my fingers so they'll slip out of the ball, and am about to send it flying toward what I hope will be a strike when a hand curves around my waist. I startle, almost dropping the heavy sphere I'm holding on my foot.

“What are you doing?” I snap at Conor. “I was in the zone.”

“You were about to throw a gutter ball,” he informs me.

“No, I wasn’t! I was perfectly lined up to—”

“Throw a gutter ball,” Conor finishes.

I grit my teeth. “Do you boss the hockey team around this much?”

“Yup,” Conor replies cheerfully. “Checked our season record lately?”

“The deal was I bowl and *then* you provide commentary.”

Conor sighs. “Fine.”

He steps back. I let the ball fly... directly into the gutter. When I spin back around, Conor doesn’t make any attempt to mask his smug smile. At least he doesn’t say *I told you so*. Instead, he steps forward again. I’m prepared for his hands to touch me this time, but it doesn’t make it any less unsettling. Goosebumps erupt on my skin as his touch somehow sears through the two layers I’m wearing.

“Turn your hips like this. Drop your shoulder...” Conor makes the adjustments to my body himself, so I tune out the specific instructions. I just listen to the melodic hum of his deep voice speaking so close to my ear. I can feel his body heat. Awareness skitters across my skin.

Clayton’s voice startles me again. This evening has wreaked havoc on my heartbeat. “We interrupting something?”

I jump, then pull away and spin to see he and Mary have finally returned, beers in hand.

“Just preparing to kick your ass,” Conor replies lightly. He seems unaffected by the moment we just shared. Of course he’s not, I remind myself. He’s Conor Hart.

Just as I predicted to Conor, Mary’s bowling isn’t all that impressive. Not that I’m in a position to judge. She rolls a gutter ball on her first try. I smile when Clayton gets up to help her toss the second ball down the lane. I do notice he doesn’t stand as close to Mary as Conor was standing to me.

When my turn comes, my performance isn’t much better than my warm-up attempt. I knock a couple of pins down, then a split. Conor and Clayton both bowl strikes. That sets the tone for the rest of the game. Conor and Clayton duke it out, while Mary and I limp along, occasionally knocking down a decent number but mostly not. Conor and I end up winning.

“It’s going well, don’t you think?” I ask Conor when Clayton and Mary go to the counter to renew our lane.

“Uh-huh,” he drawls, leaning back in the plastic chair. “Sparks are flying.”

“It seems like they’re acting more like friends.” I chew on my bottom lip. “Do you think he’s into her?”

“Should I make up a trip to the men’s room so I can ask him?” Conor asks.

“I didn’t invite you for annoying commentary, you know.”

“Why did you invite me?”

“You’re friends with Clayton. You’re both athletes. I thought having someone here who Clayton was comfortable around would help break the ice. Put less pressure on Mary.” All true. “I also had a feeling you’d be a good bowling partner.”

Conor chuckles and calls me out. “Right. Because that’s what you were looking for. A *bowling* partner.”

“Right,” I confirm, as if ending up here was the plan all along.

He smiles before turning to look at the lane, and a lightning bolt of lust snakes down my spine.

I’m in trouble.

CHAPTER TWELVE

CONOR

We won last night. Decimated. Destroyed.

I'm reminded of that when we walk into the living room.

Another victory was what everyone expected, but that didn't make it any less satisfying to know that a 5-0 victory against Northampton is being permanently marked on our season record. More than halfway through the season, and we're more than just undefeated.

People are starting to talk. To take notice. We're coming for the championship, and the teams that normally lead the division are sitting up and sensing the threat. Being watched feels different than being the underdog. Now, we have something to protect along with something to prove.

Right now, I couldn't be less worried about it. I just soak up the cheers and congratulations as I fight my way through the crowd of drunk Holt students, high-fiving guys and flashing the confident grin girls seem to lose their minds over.

When I reach the kitchen, Harlow is still right behind me. We were a unit earlier, beating Thomas and Mary two games to one. We still feel like one. Familiar. In sync. And... I don't hate it.

“Beer?” I ask her. We’re a block away from her house, so I’m assuming driving is no longer a factor in her sobriety. She also ended up having one at the bowling alley once she knew I wasn’t drinking. It’s one thing to have someone say they trust you. It’s another one to see it in action.

Harlow Hayes trusts me. That knowledge prompts a strange combination of fear and satisfaction. I’m worried I’m not worthy of that confidence. I’m glad she thinks I am.

“Yeah, sure,” she replies. “Thanks.”

I force my eyes to stay on her face as I hand her a can. Harlow usually wears sweatshirts. Sweaters. Jackets. Scarves. Bulk.

Tonight, she wore both a sweater and her ugly yellow coat. She lost the coat at the bowling alley. She took off the sweater in the car. The lights of the kitchen provide my first clear glimpse of the lacy tank top she is wearing underneath. The thin material showcases her impressive cleavage, and I’m having a lot of trouble keeping my gaze upward. It’s a hell of a lot more revealing than anything I’ve ever seen her in. My eyes seem to have forgotten they’ve seen a pair of boobs before.

“Hart!”

Jake Brennan, a junior defenseman, appears and grabs my shoulder from the right, slinging his arm around me.

“Having a good time, Brennan?” I ask. I should scold him for consuming an amount of alcohol that’s going to make him sluggish as shit at practice tomorrow, but I’m in too good a mood to play an authority figure right now.

Jake smirks. “Hell yeah, I am!” He glances past me. “Hey, Harlow.”

“Hi, Jake.” She smiles at him and then takes a sip from the beer I just handed her.

Jesus. Is there a single guy on the team she *doesn't* know? I keep the annoyance off my face. I don't get possessive over girls. My teammates acknowledging Harlow Hayes' existence is supposed to elicit annoyance, nothing else.

“Were you at the game last night? Fucking Hart.” Brennan gives me a proud grin. “Calder Trophy winner. I'm calling it now.”

Jake lifts his red cup enthusiastically, and I watch as some of the beer contained in it sloshes out of the rim and onto the hem of Harlow's blue top. I'm both disappointed and relieved it didn't land further north.

“Fucking hell, Brennan. Nice hands.” I grab Harlow's hand and tug her to the right. “Come on.”

Jake calls out an apology after us. But I'm not irritated with Jake; I'm grateful. Because I didn't have a better idea for getting Harlow out of the kitchen with me, and for some reason, that's exactly what I want right now. I don't want to talk to my teammates. Or make out with a random girl. I want to be alone with Harlow Hayes.

I pull her into the laundry room that's located right off the kitchen. It was the other hockey house's turn to host tonight, and I scoff as the solitary light illuminates the absolute disaster that's their hamper situation. It looks far worse than when I lived here sophomore year and that's saying a lot. Trust me.

I close the door and hold out my hand. “Shirt.”

“Excuse me?”

Harlow was too shocked to protest me pulling her in here, but there's plenty of indignation on her face now.

I roll my eyes. “I won’t look, Hayes. I’m just going to rinse the stain. Unless you’d *like* to spend the rest of the night smelling like a brewery? Maybe some guys are into that.”

Harlow mutters something under her breath I’m sure isn’t a compliment aimed at me, but I catch motion out of the corner of my eye. She’s taking her top off. I keep my gaze straight ahead, looking out the small window that overlooks the yard. I flicked the light on when we entered, but it’s a half burned-out bulb. Barely turning shadows into shapes.

Lace lands on my palm. “There you go, Prince Charming.”

“Prince Charming?”

“Wasn’t he a considerate guy?”

I laugh under my breath as I turn on the water in the sink. “Yeah. Sure. I’ll have every girl on campus try on this top later.”

Liquid flows from the tap, and I run the bottom edge of her shirt under the stream of water, trying to keep the whole thing from getting soaked. And not think about how Harlow might look with her top off.

“I’m a little tipsy,” Harlow tells me.

“Brennan spilled his drink on you, not the other way around.”

“That’s not what I’m talking about.”

“Okay.” I turn off the water and wring out the hem. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m I-know-what-I’m-doing-but-likely-to-do-things-I-otherwise-wouldn’t tipsy.”

“Well, you’re obviously not wasted if you managed to get *that* sentence out.”

I turn to her, holding her shirt out and making a show of covering my eyes.

Rather than take her top, she kisses me.

I freeze. Random girls have kissed me before. Sometimes I pushed them away. Sometimes I pulled them closer. I’ve never been stunned still by it before, though. Not until the last girl I ever expected to kiss me did exactly that.

Harlow takes advantage of my shock. Boobs are pressed against my body. Her tongue plays with mine, and I imagine how that wet heat might feel on other parts of my body.

I don’t consciously decide to kiss her back. It’s a reflex. A realization that I want to. The feel of her lips on mine temporarily erases the knowledge she’s shirtless, but I remember when I reach for her waist and encounter nothing but smooth, warm skin. Her shirt falls to the floor as my grip loosens.

She’s Landon Garrison’s best friend.

The girl my father sees as a daughter and knows better than me, his biological offspring.

Right now, as she’s pressed up against me, I can’t see her like that. The lace of her bra rubs against my chest, and there’s none of the repulsion my body is supposed to produce. Stopped producing the first time I talked to her. There’s just lust and heat and hunger. I’m *painfully* aroused.

I’m not the only one.

Harlow is kissing me like she needs me more than oxygen. Like she’s desperate for me. Like her plan is for this to go a lot

further than just kissing.

I tear my mouth away from hers and drop my hands.

“Harlow.” Her name comes out like a groan, and I clear my throat before attempting to speak again. “What are you doing?”

“I’m offering you one-time, no-strings sex, Hart,” Harlow tells me, then leans forward and starts kissing my neck. Her tongue comes into play, and *holy shit*, am I having trouble thinking straight right now.

“That’s a bad idea,” I manage to say as I internally scream *what the fuck are you saying?* Not only is Harlow one of the hottest girls I’ve ever seen, she’s beating me to the just-sex line. Hooking up with her should be a no brainer. Would be, if she were anyone else.

“We’ve exercised together before,” Harlow reminds me. “This will just be more enjoyable than running.”

I huff a laugh at her drunken logic. “It’s going to fuck things up between us,” I warn.

“It’s not going to,” she insists. Lies, rather.

We both know sex will make more of a mess of our already complicated... *something*. Our date earlier—call it whatever you want, it sure felt like one—made it clear we’re already playing with fire. I’m not sure if Thomas has any chemistry with Harlow’s friend Mary. I realized Harlow and I have it the first time I talked to her. It has come a little closer to combusting every time we’ve interacted since. Kissing me, she lit the match.

“It will,” I correct.

Harlow responds by slipping her fingers beneath the hem of my Henley and ghosting them along the strip of skin just above the waistband of my jeans. I stop pretending like we're not far past the point of no return, no matter what half-hearted concerns I raise. Maybe this was inevitable from the moment I walked over to her when Aidan called out to me. Maybe sex in a laundry room is exactly what I need to go back to seeing Harlow as nothing but a reminder of people I like to pretend don't exist.

"One time won't be enough," I taunt. "For *you*."

Defiance simmers in her gaze, along with heat. I'm goading her after I've learned Harlow Hayes doesn't back down. I know—and so does she—that means I'm going to do this. I'm going to fuck the one girl I told myself I never would so much as talk to. Good thing I've got better discipline when it comes to hockey.

"Try me. Or I'll go find some other guy instead."

"I don't think you want some other guy, Hayes," I reply, taken aback by how much the idea of her having sex with someone else tonight bothers me. Doing my best to act like it doesn't at all. "I think you want me."

Her hand slides down to trace the fly of my jeans. Forget pain, I'm in agony. Trapped in a denim prison.

"Is the door locked?" Harlow asks.

Rather than a simple no, I say, "Why the fuck would I have locked the door?"

"Lock it."

I roll my eyes at her bossiness, but I listen. Any amusement disappears when I flip the lock, only to turn

around and realize the scraps of lace covering her boobs are gone.

“Fuck...” I breathe as I walk back over to her.

Up until now, I didn't let myself dwell on how crazy attracted I am to Harlow. I knew it would lead nowhere good, a lot like where it's headed right now. If I had allowed myself to fantasize about her, my imagination would have fallen far short of the real thing. Mostly because I wouldn't have been able to step forward and touch her soft curves in any of them, the way I'm doing right now.

“You going to try and talk me out of this again?” Harlow teases.

Her voice is light. Unaffected. But I can tell she's suppressing the urge to shiver as my hands slide higher and higher. The light in here is enough to make out the subtle definition of goosebumps on her skin. I'm close enough to see the fluttering of the pulse in the hollow of her throat.

“Absolutely fucking not,” I reply, finally reaching her boobs. Harlow moans.

I press against her, shoving her between my body and the washing machine. Even the rigid denim of my jeans isn't doing much to mask my reaction to seeing her half-naked. She grinds against my erection as I sneak one hand into her pants and between her legs.

Fuck. “You're soaked,” I tell her as I yank her jeans down.

“Because I've been thinking about doing this for the past few hours,” Harlow replies, as she kicks her jeans away and then hooks the hem of my shirt to pull it up and over my head. My dick swells even more, both from the admission that she's

fantasized about me and the way she's blatantly admiring my bare chest.

She kisses me again, right as she slides a hand down to the waistband of my jeans. A flick and unzip, and her hand finds my cock. I'm embarrassingly close to coming from the contact alone. I can't recall the last time I was this turned on. I don't know if I've *ever* been this turned on. I barely have the presence of mind to fish a condom out of my pocket before my jeans fall around my ankles and I kick them off.

Harlow is still stroking me, and there's no blood left in my brain. It's all rushed south.

"Of fucking course you'd be a big dick with a big dick," she grumbles as she slides her hand up and down my cock. There's no real malice in the insult-compliment combo. There was a very recent time when Harlow would have called me a dick and meant it.

I smirk as I lift her up on top of the washing machine. She's already tall, but now she's at the perfect height.

The light over here is dim. I can see everything, but it's coated with an imperfect lens, like a dusty layer of film. I have to focus to see anything. All I'm focused on is her.

Harlow leans forward as I roll the condom on, brushing her hair against my chest. Suddenly, the machine I'm pressed against—the machine she's on top of—starts to vibrate.

She bites her bottom lip as she stares at me. Neither of us says anything as the sound of clothes tumbling fills the tiny room. I reach for her, resting my hands on her waist and positioning her exactly where I want her. Then, I tease. I use my tongue, my lips, my fingers, and my cock. Touch every part of her except that spot she wants.

I'm rewarded by her pants. Her moans. Her swears. Finally, her threats.

"Hart, I swear, if you don't—"

I thrust into her.

Her shout is loud enough someone would probably be knocking on the door if she hadn't started the washer. As soon as I'm inside of her, I lose any motivation to take this slow. I had a feeling I would, and it's the main reason I prolonged it until now.

Harlow wraps the legs I've spent hours—pretty much every one I've spent with her—admiring, and I'm stuck in the only spot I want to be. I piston my hips against hers again and again, feeling her absorb the shock and push back against me. Sweat builds between our bodies, reflecting the fact that there's absolutely no air circulation in this tiny-ass room. This tiny-ass room I've barely spent any time in, and know I'll never be able to enter again without thinking about what it was like to be inside Harlow Hayes.

I stare down at her, memorizing the rapturous look on her face. Studying the waterfall of red hair spilling across the white metal comprising the top of the washing machine she's sprawled back on. Surveying the dips and curves that I know is all I'll see next time she shows up at the track in that godawful raincoat. Letting the sound of her moaning imprint on my brain when I angle my hips and slide even deeper.

I slip my hand down to the spot where we're connected, and she convulses around me. It sets off my own orgasm. Everything fades to black as blinding pleasure overtakes every cell in my body.

Even once the ecstasy starts to fade, I don't move. The washer keeps tumbling, creating vibrations that make me wonder if *that* was part of her plan, too. But I don't ask. With anyone else, I probably would. I'd make some crude joke. But sex and Harlow feel off-limits again. Two things that shouldn't be in the same sentence.

"I think all that running is really paying off for your endurance." Harlow sits up, and I don't make any attempt to act like I'm not ogling her boobs. Wishing I paid more attention to them when I had the chance. Looking at her naked body makes me feel like a kid in a candy shop. There's so much I want to touch. To taste.

"Yeah, for you too," I reply, finally pulling out of her. I dispose of the condom, and she yanks on the shirt that got us into this situation. Or was she going to make a move even if we hadn't ended up in here? I don't know, and I kind of want to. One time or not, I'm curious how much thought she put into this. *If* she put any thought into this.

I retrieve my jeans from the floor, enjoying the feel of Harlow's eyes on me as I pull them back on. I'm not the only one trying to take mental pictures of body parts.

Harlow tugs her jeans up and heads for the door.

"Thanks for coming tonight, Hart."

She's gone in a swirl of red hair before I have the chance to take advantage of the double entendre. Or ask her what the hell just happened and what it means for an acquaintance that once seemed so clear.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I had sex with Conor Hart.

I had sex with Conor Hart.

I had sex with Conor Hart.

Those six words run like a mantra through my head. Over and over and over again. What the *actual fuck* was I thinking? I just had sex with Conor Hart.

Conor Hart.

And not just sex. Mind-blowing, life-changing, epic sex. With Landon's half-brother. Hugh's son.

Fuck.

Propositioning him was only supposed to ever happen in my head. One of those fantasies you think about but definitely don't act upon. Him overlooking my current home address and agreeing to it was not supposed to happen. But at the very least, screwing him was supposed to extinguish the heat between us. I'm pretty sure it's ten times worse. Maybe twenty. It happened less than an hour ago, and I'm craving him again already. I wanted to beg him to fuck me all over again as I was pulling my shirt back on.

This is what a single beer and objectifying a guy's butt while he bowls will get you. Sleeping with the enemy. Except

I don't see Conor in easy terms any longer. Which is almost as concerning as how much I enjoyed touching the chest I've been fantasizing about since early November.

“Ooooh, let's get doughnuts at Holey Moley!” Eve is oblivious to the panicky lust I'm drowning in as we pass downtown.

I thought telling her to come to the same party as me after our bowling trip would be a brilliant idea. Instead, I had to fake a headache to pull her and Ben out of the frat house before Conor emerged from the sex chamber. I mean, laundry room.

“Okay,” I agree.

Not that me agreeing matters. Ben is right behind Eve, and she's already turning toward the shop that stays open until three AM precisely to cater to drunk college kids like us.

Except I'm not drunk. Maybe if I were, I'd be able to stop thinking about what happened in that tiny laundry room. I'll never be able to look at a washing machine the same way again.

Warm air and the scent of fried food greet us when we step inside Holey Moley. It's packed, same as it's been during every late night stop I've ever made here. I follow Eve over to the counter. She's chattering away to Ben about how crazy the party was, too distracted to register the fact I'm not listening.

I “uh-huh” and “hmmm” in all the right places, staring at the chalkboard menu and not reading a word. Ben picks up the slack in the conversation.

We reach the front of the line. Eve opts for a maple bacon donut, and I get a chocolate sprinkled one. We snag one of the corner booths. I sink down onto the polyester seat, closing my

eyes as the delicious combination of frosting and fried dough hits my tongue.

“Could you grab some napkins, Ben?” Eve asks.

“Yeah, sure.” He stands and leaves.

Eve looks to me. “What’s going on with you?”

Okay, so she did notice my zombie status.

“I had sex with Conor Hart,” I blurt, then stuff more doughnut in my mouth while I wait for her reaction.

Eve’s mouth drops open. “Holy shit. Really?”

I nod and chew furiously.

“Oh my God.”

I swallow. “It just... happened. I had like a brain freeze, but a mouth melt? One of his teammates spilled some beer on me, and he took me into the laundry room to wash it. I took my shirt off, and I could tell he was trying not to look. But then I wanted him to look. And *he* looked—well, you’ve seen him—and he smelled so good and he was right there. And the whole time I was thinking that I shouldn’t say anything, but I said something stupid about being tipsy and I kissed him and then... well, we had sex.”

“Oh my God,” Eve repeats.

I shove another bite into my mouth and nod rapidly.

“How was it?”

I roll my eyes. “*Ridiculously* good. He’s better at sex than hockey.”

Eve studies me with wide eyes as she methodically eats another piece of her doughnut. “Wow.”

I nod. “I know.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Nothing. I told him it was a one-time thing, and he agreed. No strings. I’m going to meet him to run together like usual and act like I don’t know the size of his hockey stick.”

Eve snorts a laugh. “I hope you—”

“Here you go.” Ben plops a pile of napkins down on the table.

“Thanks, babe.” Eve beams up at him.

Ben studies us both. “Did I interrupt something?”

“Nope.” I lean back against the booth and hope denial is like anything else. The more you practice it, the better you get.



I step outside of Loughton High School, still trying to get my breathing and heart rate under control. According to Google, it houses the closest indoor track to Holt University’s campus. Which doesn’t have one, of course.

There have been plenty of times out running on Holt’s track in a downpour that I’ve thought about how it would be much more enjoyable to not be soaking wet. To not feel the patter of rain against my face.

Today is a rare sunny, clear day. I told myself coming here today was preparation for winter. For snow, when I *really* won’t be able to run outside. I’m not great at lying to myself. Subpar at best.

I’m here to avoid Conor. Because the miniscule chance of him showing up at the track while I’m running was enough to

send me speeding two towns over. Despite my assurances to him sex would change nothing between us, I'm ninety-nine-point-nine percent sure it has. The one upside to my idiotic idea to proposition him is that we're approaching Holt's month-long winter break. If I can just avoid Conor until then, he'll be nothing but a distant memory when we return to campus in January. That's the hope, at least.

The high school's parking lot is empty. No surprise on a Sunday. I was the only one using the athletic facilities, save for the elderly man who signed me in and then napped while I ran laps.

I climb into my car, and my leg muscles let out a relieved sigh as I sink down onto the soft leather. Make that two upsides. Today's workout was motivated by self-loathing. I made myself run until I was no longer thinking about Conor, just the cramping in my calves. It took twenty-six laps.

I turn the key in the car's ignition. Rather than roar to life, there's a soft click. I pull it out and try again. This time, nothing.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" I mutter, banging my head on the steering wheel.

I try again. Still nothing.

A long exhale, and I pull my phone out. The kind woman from AAA informs they'll be sending someone to tow my car, but that it will be at least an hour until they arrive. I thank her, hang up, and text Eve, asking where she is. She doesn't immediately reply, and I bang my head back against the headrest.

I climb out of the useless car and scan my surroundings. There's not much to Loughton to begin with. Directly across

the street is a dentist's office, and then... With a jolt of recognition, I recall the alley that I walked down with Eric on our date. I lock my car—then laugh at myself, because if anyone managed to get it running, they'd be doing me a favor—and head across the street.

The smell of spices and citrus greets me as soon as I reach the alleyway. I walk inside the restaurant, studying the cheerful, colorful surroundings I remember from my trip here with Eric. This time, two of the tables are occupied. They're busier than before. Two girls are ordering at the counter. One of them keeps glancing to the left and giggling. I follow her gaze and spot the person I drove here to avoid. Karma really has it out for me today.

“Hayes.”

“Hart,” I reply coolly. It's a stark contrast to my body temperature, which has skyrocketed.

“Good weekend?” he asks innocently. A small smile plays in the corners of his lips. Lips that have been on mine.

“Fine. Nothing memorable,” I reply.

Conor's smirk widens. “That's too bad.”

“Yup.” I make a show of looking away from him and studying the menu instead. What is he doing here? What are the chances I'd get stranded and end up in the same restaurant as him at the same time?

“What are you doing here, Harlow?” he asks me quietly.

I look away from the menu, right at the girl who can't keep her eyes off Conor.

“Harlow.”

I meet his stormy gaze.

“I went running at the high school here. They have an indoor track.” At the reminder of how I spent the past hour, I smooth my ponytail. Sweaty athletic clothes are not what I was hoping to wear when encountering Conor for the first time after sleeping with him. “My car won’t start. I called AAA and they’re sending someone, but not for an hour. I remembered this place is across the street.”

“You’ve been here before?” Conor asks.

I nod. “Eric took me here on our... date.” It was weird enough discussing my love life with Conor before we slept together. It feels even stranger now.

Conor makes a humming noise. “Why did you come all the way here to run?”

“I felt like running inside.” I hold his gaze. He can assume whatever he wants. No way am I fessing up to avoiding him.

Another hum.

“You ready to order?”

The girls ahead of us have moved to the checkout, and a man with a friendly smile and black hair that is just graying is waiting to help the next customer. Who happens to be Conor. He looks at me, both eyebrows raised. “You can go first.”

“I don’t know what I want,” I reply, flustered. I know how to handle Conor the Cocky Ass. Conor the Considerate Guy is another matter entirely.

It’s obvious Conor has been here before—many times—because he decides on the offerings almost as quickly as the man can mention them. He finishes ordering, and then it’s my turn. I end up choosing the same meal as last time, fish tacos. When I reach the end of the counter, I hold my card out the woman standing behind the register.

“It’s already been paid for, miss,” she tells me.

My gaze darts to Conor, who’s leaning against the wall, typing something into his phone. “Oh. Okay.” I pull a couple of dollar bills out of my wallet and stuff them into the tip jar. Then, I turn and close the short distance between me and Conor.

“I’m not having sex with you again,” I hiss to Conor.

“Did I ask you to?” He keeps typing in his phone.

I huff. “I can buy my own food. I don’t need you to—”

“Two chicken burritos and an order of fish tacos!” The woman at the register calls out cheerfully.

“Can you grab some napkins, Hayes?” Conor shoves his phone in his pocket, steps forward, grabs *both* of our meals, and makes his way over to the one open table. I stare after him, mouth agape.

“What are you doing?” I stomp over to the table. Conor’s taken a seat and is already peeling the foil back on his burrito.

“Eating,” he replies sanguinely.

I drop down across from him. “I don’t know what you—”

“Harlow.” Conor sets down his burrito. Blue-gray eyes pin me in place. “You said it wouldn’t change anything.”

I inhale sharply. “I—It hasn’t.”

Conor laughs. “Bullshit. You’ll barely even look at me.”

I raise my eyes from the table to meet his gaze head on.

He leans forward. “It happened. You wanted it to happen.”

Flashes of last night play across my mind. Me kissing him. Pulling his shirt off. Yanking his jeans down. “I know.”

“Do you regret it?” Conor asks me. His face is impassive. I have no idea what he’s thinking right now.

“No. But I feel guilty it happened.” Conor’s jaw tightens. He thinks I mean because of the Garrisons. I probably *should* feel guilty about that. But I tell him the truth. “I’m worried I fucked things up between us. That you were right, and I ruined a good thing because I have a low alcohol tolerance.” And because you’re too freaking gorgeous for your own good, I add silently.

“A good thing?”

“Our running relationship,” I clarify.

Conor grins. “Right.”

I think I blush, but my body is so overwhelmed and overstimulated by being in his presence, I really have no idea.

“Your friend have fun last night?”

The abrupt shift in topics gives me whiplash. “Mary. Uh, yeah, I think so.”

I know she did, but little of it was attributable to Clayton Thomas. I woke up to a series of texts from Mary asking all about me and Conor and also informing me of a guy on the crew team she was talking to at the party.

“Good.”

“Why are you asking about Mary?” I question.

He gives me a sly smile. “Because I already know you enjoyed yourself.”

This time, I’m definitely blushing. Teed that one right up for him.

“What are you doing here?” I deflect.

“What do you mean?”

“In Loughton. You just randomly happened to stop by here?”

Conor nods. “Actually, yes. I love this place. Come here all the time with Aidan and Hunter.”

“You’re here alone,” I point out.

“We’ve got a game tonight. Make-up from last week.” I arch my eyebrows because that didn’t answer my question. He sighs. “I’m stressed. Didn’t feel like being around anyone.”

“Oh.”

Conor takes a big bite of burrito, and I finally start eating my own food. The fish tacos are just as delicious as last time. Once we’re both finished eating, Conor stands and clears our trash.

“Come on. I’ll drive you home.”

“I can’t just leave my car!”

“Worried someone might take it for a joyride?”

I send him a stern glare.

“Fine. What time is the tow truck coming?”

I glance at my phone, shocked to see how much time has passed. “Any minute, actually.”

“All right, let’s go.” He heads for the door, and I follow.

When we reach the parking lot across the street, my car is the only one in sight. Even the old man has left for the day.

“Try starting it again,” Conor instructs, lifting the hood of the car. I picture him shirtless holding a wrench. “Harlow?”

“Yeah, okay.” I unlock the car and try turning the key in the ignition again. Nothing. I climb out of the car and approach Conor, who’s staring down at the engine.

“It’s probably the transmission. Or maybe the carburetor,” he informs me.

“Do you know anything about cars?”

He flashes me the grin that should come with a warning label. *Cover your eyes or make stupid decisions!* “Nothing.”

I roll my eyes. Thankfully, the tow truck chooses this moment to show up. I abandon Conor to chat with the driver, a middle-aged man named Hank. He’s as clueless about what might be wrong with the car as Conor but promises the garage he’s towing it to will receive all my contact information and let me know what the issue is once they’ve taken a look at the car. Then, he asks if I need a ride anyplace.

Reluctantly, I glance back at Conor. “No, I’m good.”

“All right. Have a good evening, miss.”

“You, too,” I reply, then head back toward where Conor is standing. “That ride offer still good?” I ask.

“Depends. Are you asking for a ride back to Holt or to ride my—” I glare at him, and he chuckles. “Still good.”

Conor parked along the main street. It’s less than a block away from the high school. He climbs in the driver’s seat of his car, and he leans over to clear the passenger side seat. It’s obvious he wasn’t expecting a co-pilot anytime soon. The leather chair is scattered with empty water bottles, binders, and loose papers. I pick one stack of papers up as Conor tosses a couple of water bottles into the backseat. I flip to the second sheet, which is decorated by a large, red A. My eyes widen. I glance up to find Conor’s on me.

“What?” he asks.

I flip the page so he can see what I’m looking at.
“Impressive.”

Conor shrugs, nonchalant.

I climb into the now empty seat. “This is your major? English?”

“Yeah,” he confirms.

“Not business?”

Conor’s lips quirk as I call out the stereotypical jock course of study. “Not business.”

I turn my gaze out the window, watching the green scenery flash by. We reach Somerville, but Conor stays on the highway.

“You missed the turn,” I state.

“I know.” He keeps driving.

I look over and study his profile. His jaw is tense. The tendons in his forearms are rigid, indicating he’s holding the steering wheel tighter than he needs to.

“So... where are we going?”

“You’ll see.”

I heave out a sigh as I turn my gaze back to the road. I’m confused, but I’m also curious. We drive for another ten minutes before Conor pulls off at what I determine to be an ice cream stand. It’s hardly more than a shack, clearly marketed for summer tourists visiting the neighboring beach. The ocean is visible in the distance.

“Ice cream?”

I didn't have any good guesses for where we might be headed, but frozen dessert wasn't on the list.

Conor shrugs at my puzzled expression. "I'm still hungry."

I look at Conor and laugh. "Okay. Let's get ice cream."

We climb out of his car and walk over to the window. There's a girl who looks like she's in high school leaning out of it. Her eyes widen when she gets a good look at Conor. It bothers me more than it should. I don't have any ownership over him.

"Hey there," Conor greets.

"H—hi," the girl stutters. Her cheeks are red.

"What do you recommend?" Conor asks.

I tune out her lengthy descriptions of the flavors. Conor seems amused by her. I'm annoyed—mostly at myself. There's no rational reason I should feel possessive toward him.

"Hayes?"

"Huh?"

Conor appears entertained by the fact I was just zoning out. As long as he has no clue it was because of him, I couldn't care less.

"What are you getting?"

"Oh." I scan the list of flavors. "Cone of blueberry, please."

"They only have blueberry in the summer. It's on the list of seasonal flavors," Conor informs me.

"What, do you work here?" I grumble as I look back at the list, choosing to ignore the fact seasonal is in brackets after blueberry on the menu.

“Nope,” Conor replies. “But I bet Brittany would give me a job, right?” He smiles at the girl behind the counter.

“I’d at least ask you to interview,” Brittany replies.

I barely restrain a snort. “I’ll take Oreo, then.”

“We’re out,” Brittany tells me.

At the same time, “They’re out” from Conor.

“Fine. I’ll have a cone of chocolate with rainbow sprinkles,” I decide.

“Boring,” Conor tells me.

“Third choices usually are,” I reply.

“That’ll be \$9.24,” Brittany announces.

Conor hands her a ten.

“I can pay for my own,” I protest.

“Just pick out a table, Hayes,” Conor tells me.

“Fine.” I head for the assortment of tables, only to find that they all have old ice cream encrusted on them. I walk back toward the stand to grab some napkins.

“Your girlfriend is kind of grumpy.” I hear Brittany say as I approach the shack.

I stall in place, curious to hear Conor’s response.

Rather than deny any relationship, all he says is “She’s having a bad day.”

I keep walking. “Just grabbing some napkins,” I say, taking a wad from the dispenser.

“Good timing.” Conor’s now holding a cone of chocolate ice cream, which he hands to me. “Nice talking to you, Brittany.”

“Bye!” she calls out, as Conor follows me over to the picnic tables on the left side of the building.

“Do you flirt with every girl you meet?” I ask as we sit down at one of them.

Rather than appear annoyed, he laughs. “I wasn’t flirting with her.”

“I’ve never seen someone memorize an ice cream menu that fast.”

Conor’s eyes gleam. They look blue right now. “That’s called being polite, Harlow. Not flirting. If you’re confused about the difference, maybe you haven’t been flirted with properly.”

I scoff. “I have.”

“Aquaman had game?”

“Eric has nothing in common with Jason Momoa.”

“So you’re not going out with him again?”

“No, I’m not.” I take a bite of ice cream. “Why the sudden interest in my love life?”

“You were the one who wanted to know about my flirting skills.”

“You were the one corrupting children,” I shoot back.

Conor smiles. “Brittany’s nineteen. She’s taking a gap year to help her grandmother with the business since her grandfather passed away last summer.”

“Oh,” is all I can come up with.

One, how the hell did he learn all that? Two, I’m even more irritated by her interest in him.

“Why didn’t you tell her I’m not your girlfriend, then?”

Conor raises an eyebrow.

I flush. “I was coming over to grab the napkins.”

“Because I’m not interested in her and letting her think we’re a couple was easier than having to tell her that straight up.”

“Oh,” I say again, then eat more ice cream. “What did you get?” I nod to the cup he’s holding.

“Vanilla milkshake.”

I smile. “And you thought chocolate was boring?”

“Vanilla is a classic. Want some?”

“I’m good, thanks.”

Sharing a milkshake with a guy feels like a date. Unfortunately, I’m worried I’m getting the wrong impression from this entire outing. Guys have flirted with me before. Eating ice cream with Conor feels like foreplay.

I’m hyperaware of everything I do. Everything he does. Every lick. Every slurp. Every suck.

How did I never notice how dirty eating ice cream sounds?

“How far did you run earlier?” Conor asks.

He seems unaffected by my tongue swirling around my cone, so I try to pretend like I’m not imaging his tongue on places other than that straw.

“Seven.”

“Miles?” He looks surprised. Impressed.

“No, feet.”

He laughs just as his phone rings. Conor pulls it out. He glances at the screen, then at me, then answers it.

“Hey, Mom.”

Shock bolts through me. I’ve heard a lot about Anna Hart, but I’ve never met her. I look away from Conor as I eat the final bite of my cone. A woman’s voice sounds distantly.

“Okay. Yeah, okay.”

There’s a pause.

“Right. Bye.”

I glance back at him. He’s playing with his straw.

“My mom is coming to the game tonight.”

“Oh. That’s nice.” I try to act casual. Normal.

“She took the train down. It arrived early. I have to pick her up.”

Oh. Comprehension dawns. We headed south of Somerville. Meaning we’re already halfway to the nearest station.

“I can call a friend. Or Uber...” I reach for my phone.

“I’m asking if it’s okay with *you*, Harlow.”

“You don’t care if your mom knows...” I trail off, because he’s clearly not running with me right now. I have no idea how to describe our acquaintance. Friends? Fuck buddies? Former antagonists?

“No.”

“Oh. Uh, okay then.”

“Okay. Let’s go.”

Conor stands, and I scramble to my feet. We walk side-by-side back toward his car as I try to fumble through my swirling thoughts.

I'm about to meet Anna Hart.

I don't know very much about her. I know she and Hugh dated for about a year before she got pregnant. I know Hugh moved on quickly with Allison, who didn't know Anna existed. I know twenty-three years later, all is far from forgiven on her side. I'm guessing she views me as guilty by association the same way Conor did... does... still might.

"Does she come to a lot of games?" I ask hesitantly as Conor pulls back on the highway.

"No," he replies. "She doesn't get much time off."

"She's a... nurse?" I try to recall some tidbits I heard when I was young enough my parents would gossip around me.

"Doctor. She went back to school when I was ten."

"Oh. Wow. Good for her."

Conor nods.

"Does she know who I am?"

"Yeah."

I gulp.

"Garrisons don't share much?"

"I've never really felt like it was my place to ask."

Conor's silent until we reach the train station. "I'll be right back," he tells me, before climbing out of the car.

There's about a dozen people standing outside the brick building between the parking lot and the train tracks.

I watch as a tall woman with dark hair rises from a bench outside. She beams as Conor approaches her, then throws her arms around him. He pulls back a minute later, and I watch as she reaches up and pats his cheek. She says something, and Conor laughs before grabbing her small suitcase and heading back toward the car.

Anna falls into step beside him, and I watch the two of them talk.

It's obvious they're close. There's no awkwardness or unfamiliarity. I assumed they must be, but it's different to witness it in person. I can't picture Hugh Garrison as part of the scene in front of me, and it's strange to think he could have been. Even more bizarre to realize if he was, I wouldn't be sitting here.

Conor and Anna reach the car.

I open my door and step out.

Up close, Anna Hart is stunning. Shoulder length hair the same shade as Conor's frames a heart-shaped face. She's wearing a pair of scrubs and an assessing expression.

I shift under her scrutiny. The deck is stacked against me, but for some reason I don't allow myself to dwell on, I really want her to like me.

"Hi, Ms.—uh, Dr. Hart. I'm Harlow."

I hold out a hand for her to shake. Her grip is firm.

Eyes the same shifting shade as Conor's assess me. "Anna is fine."

"It's very nice to meet you."

"You, too." She's still studying me, but her expression is more curious than anything. I wonder what explanation Conor

gave for why I'm here, picking her up with him.

Conor puts her suitcase in the trunk of the car. I'm silent for most of the drive back to Somerville, but Conor and Anna chat easily, catching up on each other's lives. They remind me more of friends than mother and son, and I consider what a journey Anna Hart's life has been for the first time. Based on my eavesdropping over the years, my understanding is that things fell apart between her and Hugh before she learned she was pregnant, and Allison entered the picture soon after. Maybe a moral gray area. Maybe just terrible timing. But it resulted in Anna raising a son alone. I kind of want to tell her she did a really good job. Instead, I respond to Eve, who's finally texted me back, letting her know my car broke down but I got a ride.

I unbuckle my seatbelt as soon as Conor turns on to my street. The atmosphere in the car isn't uncomfortable, but I am. Running with Conor somehow turned into having sex and meeting the woman who raised him.

My door is open as soon as the car stops moving. "Thanks, Conor," I blurt. "Nice to meet you, D—Anna."

I'm out of the car before either of them have a chance to say anything. I'm halfway up the front walk before I hear "Hayes!" shouted behind me.

I turn to see Conor jogging toward me. He's clutching something in his hand. My phone, I realize. I pat my pocket, and sure enough, it's empty. I must have left it on the seat after texting Eve and exited the car too fast to grab it.

"Thanks," I say when he reaches me.

"Check for the essentials before you bolt next time, 'kay?"

My cheeks burn. "Sorry. I... that was weird for me."

“I know,” Conor says.

“Good luck tonight, Conor.”

He nods. “Yeah. Thanks.”

I give him a small smile and then turn back toward my front door.

“Harlow?”

“Yeah?” I spin back around. He’s closer than before, and for one wild moment, I think he’s going to step forward and kiss me.

“How many books?”

“What?”

“How many books could you fill now?”

Oh.

I swallow.

I’m done. This is the last moment I’ll ever be able to look at Conor Hart the way I should.

He doesn’t wait for a response, heading back to his car. I certainly don’t call the two words that come to mind out after him.

Not enough.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CONOR

There aren't many things about Claremont I like. It's a fine town, I guess. Small. Compact. Some might say quintessential. It's the type of place where people are friendly and gossip is scarce. Rarely is there anything newsworthy happening here. A large percentage of the town's occupants work at Brighton University, which is located only twenty minutes away.

The quiet, simple pace here makes scandal and controversy rare. Unfortunately, it also means the most salacious conversation topic is dated by two decades. Both Anna Hart and Hugh Garrison grew up here. Connected over college breaks here. Raised children here. And since we're not the type to forgive and forget—well half of us, anyway—the state of my parents' relationship with each other and my relationship with the Garrisons is pretty much an unending well of gossip in a town where it's a rare get.

I'm reminded of that as I walk into Evan's house. He was my best friend growing up, and we're still close. Gatherings during breaks have trickled off as my graduating class has all grown more distant and more rooted in our now separate lives. But I've stayed tight with most of the guys I played hockey with, and I was pretty popular in high school. I rarely rubbed it in Landon's face—because I preferred to pretend he didn't

exist—but I didn't shirk away from the Mr. Popular stereotypes in high school.

Being among former classmates, I fall back into it effortlessly. My life at Holt isn't all that different. I just spend enough time there training that my partying is limited. My no-drinking during the season rule puts a damper on things, too. Being around drunk people while sober is a painful predicament.

Tonight, I'm loosening my rule for the first time since my senior season started. I have one week in Claremont before heading back to Holt, weeks before the rest of campus, to resume our still undefeated season.

I make my way into the kitchen leisurely, letting old acquaintances stop me to ask about my season and reminisce over old memories. They don't spark much nostalgia for me. I'm far happier living in Somerville than I ever was here.

Evan's holding court by the island. My former winger gives me a broad grin. "Hart! About fucking time, man!"

"You said nine. It's only nine thirty," I point out.

"Details." Evan waves his hand. "Want a beer?"

"Hell yeah."

He hands me a bottle so cold I can see the condensation sneaking down the sides of the darkened glass. I crack the top open and take a long sip. Chilled, brewed hops hit my tongue and I grin.

"Still not drinking during the season, looks like?" Evan taunts.

"Nope. Going pretty well for me, though."

Evan grins. “Yeah, I’d say so. Undefeated? More than halfway through the season?” He shakes his head. “I knew you were good, man. But the way you’ve been playing?” He whistles. “Your whole team has been tight. I can’t get half my guys to show up at morning practice.”

I snort. Evan went on to play division three, just like me. Unlike me, he didn’t do it with any higher aspirations. “Sure you’re not out in the bars with them at all hours?”

“I’ll plead the Fifth.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought.” I laugh before taking another sip of brewed bliss. I forgot how good a cold beer tastes, especially after a grueling workout like my skate earlier.

“You’re Conor Hart, right?” a female voice asks.

I turn to see a blonde smiling at me. She’s pretty. Purposefully so. Each strand of light hair falls in a perfect ringlet and her lips are painted with an artificial shade of crimson.

“Right,” I confirm, taking another sip of beer. The final sip, it turns out. I set the empty bottle on the island counter. It clinks against the marble. “Have we met before, beautiful?”

The blonde preens. Evan rolls his eyes behind her, then turns to talk to someone else.

“Unfortunately not. I go to Brighton.” She looks me up and down. “None of the guys on our hockey team are as good as you. You should have played for us instead.”

I tense at the reminder. There was plenty of speculation as to why I’d turn down a full ride to play at a Division I school in favor of Holt. Some people correctly guessed it had something to do with Hugh. But the only person I’ve outright

admitted that to is Harlow. I feel no desire to share the truth with this chick.

“I like being the underdog,” I reply instead.

The blonde laughs. “You call setting an all-time leading scorer record being an underdog?”

My intuition flickers. I don’t have any problem with girls who want to be so-called puck bunnies. Whose sole interest in me is the fact I play hockey. But it’s strange this girl knew my name, mentioned not playing at Brighton, and knows my stats. If she’s looking for a hook-up—which her low-cut top tells me she is—she seems like the type that won’t take the just-sex line well. If she goes to Brighton and lives locally, there’s a chance she just happened to see an article about me. But as Harlow pointed out several weeks ago, Division III hockey is not exactly front-page sports material.

The reminder of Harlow kills any interest in this chick. I haven’t been able to get sex with her out of my head—the opposite of what that encounter was supposed to accomplish—and I’ve never been the type of guy who has sex with one girl to forget another. Not that anyone has ever gotten under my skin to the degree Harlow has, but still.

The water I imbibed after my skate earlier and the beer I just gulped give me a believable excuse to cut this conversation short. “Nature calls. It was nice meeting you...” Crap, did she say her name? If she did, I have no clue what it is.

“Kelly,” she supplies. Rather than appear pissed I didn’t ask or forgot it, she’s just staring at me. It’s disconcerting.

“Nice meeting you, Kelly.”

I give her a friendly smile and leave the kitchen, heading for the bathroom tucked beside Evan's father's study. I swerve to the left when I see the line of fifteen people waiting to use the restroom. I spent a lot of time here growing up, and it doesn't take me long to locate the extra bathroom tucked in the guest suite at the top of the stairs. I take a piss, wash my hands, and then head out into the attached bedroom.

It's no longer empty. Rather than a horny couple, I'm confronted by the same blonde from downstairs. Kelly. Surprise makes me freeze. She followed me up here? What the fuck?

"Landon wasn't lying," she says. "You really don't know anything about him, huh? Not even the name of the girl he's spent the last two and a half years dating."

I just stare at her. My brother's girlfriend, apparently. Not who I pictured him dating, but I haven't seen the guy in person for years.

"It took him a year to mention you to me, you know? One day, he admitted he has a brother. He tried to play it off all nonchalant. I think he was trying not to let me see how much you bother him. I mean, how could you not? You're hotter. Athletic—"

"He's not going to be happy you're here. Talking to me."

Kelly laughs. "Duh. Why do you think I'm here?"

"Trouble in paradise?" I taunt.

"I'm the one who ended it. He was cute when we were freshman. But all he talks about is music and his best friend. She lives with his family—your family too, I guess. He has a thing for her." She sniffs.

“So this is... what? Your way of getting back at a guy you dumped?”

“Who cares what it is?” She walks over to me. I tense, but don’t move away. “You’re hot.” Her gaze roams over me appreciatively. “I’ll make it worth your while. And from what I’ve heard, you don’t have any problem telling the Garrison family to fuck off.”

She reaches out and runs one red-painted fingertip down my chest. Two more join in as she trails her hand along the waistband of jeans.

“Come on, Conor. What do you say?”

“That Landon has terrible taste in woman,” I reply honestly. Who breaks up with a guy after dating him for over two years and then turns around and tries to screw his brother? Half, but still.

Kelly smiles, not looking the least bit offended. She leans forward and kisses me. Whatever is on her lips must be flavored, because the artificial taste of cherry smothers my taste buds. I’ve barely opened my mouth when Kelly shoves her hands under my sweatshirt, yanking the cotton material up. She moans when she encounters the hard ridges of my abdomen.

And... I can’t do it. I step back, breaking all contact between us.

“Sorry. Not going to happen,” I tell her.

“Wha—what?” Kelly looks dazed and confused. Enthralled in her own revenge fantasy. If she and Landon had called it quits months ago—hell, weeks ago—I’d be right there with her. Imagining the look on my half-brother’s face when he finds out I screwed his ex-girl.

But I know if he hears about it, *she*'ll hear about it.

Ever since I was old enough to realize my family's fucked-up dynamic, two things have been my primary motivators to make some questionable choices: the desire for my father to recognize how badly he messed up my life, and the need to be nothing like the son he chose over me. For the first time, there's a third, less sabotaging influence.

I care about what Harlow thinks.

I don't know how to feel about it. How I should feel about it. The two devils on my shoulder have been joined by an angel. And all three of them are probably playing Monopoly right now, or some other equally wholesome family bullshit.

I tug my sweatshirt back down and then leave the guest room before Kelly can say another word. It's a dick move, but so is making a move on your ex-boyfriend's estranged half-brother. I may know nothing about healthy relationships, but I know that much.

Evan shoves off the wall when I emerge back in the living room, shaking off the brunette he was talking to and returning to my side.

"Saw the blonde follow you upstairs ten minutes ago. Little quick on the trigger these days, Hart?"

I roll my eyes, grabbing an unopened can of beer off a side table and cracking it open. "Wasn't feeling it. She just wanted to fuck with Garrison."

"You mean your favorite hobby?"

I shrug, not denying it. "I've got other ways of doing that. I'm gonna bounce. Mom wants to go tree-killing tomorrow, if you want to come with."

Evan grins. “Hell yeah, I do. Those pines won’t know what hit ’em.”

“See ya, man.”

I bump Evan’s fist and weave through the crowd toward the door. A few people call out to me as I pass, but I ignore them. Easy to do in the loud house.

Cold air smacks me in the face as I step outside. I chug the rest of the beer I’m holding, then toss it in the Sanfords’ trash can as soon as I reach the street. I bury both hands in the pouch of my sweatshirt. It can’t be hovering all that far above freezing, but I’ve spent most of my life in an ice rink. This is nothing.

I pass the occasional adult out walking the family dog. A few middle-school aged girls clearly heading to or leaving a sleepover. They all giggle as they pass me, clutching fluffy blankets and sleeping bags.

Finally, I reach the brick house. I huff a laugh as I stare at it, watching my breath hover in the cold night air for a moment. Below freezing, then. It’s been years—many, many years—since I was here. Since I grew old enough to know the exact words to ensure my mother wouldn’t make me step foot on this property. I wasn’t sure if I could ever come back voluntarily. But here I am. I should leave. But I don’t.

I heave another breath before I start up the walk. This is a bad idea. I can’t shake the propulsion to do it anyway. I wasn’t lying to Evan earlier. I’ve got other—more lethal—ways of hitting Landon Garrison where it hurts than screwing a girl I’m not into.

Harlow is the most fatal. She’s his best friend. Landon is also a straight guy, meaning Kelly was probably right, and he

has considered trying for more than friendship with her.

He also has no idea she and I have *any* familiarity at all.

Finding out we do is going to hurt a hell of a lot more than me fucking his ex at a party would. I'd be lying if I said I didn't wish I could see his expression when he figures out we have some acquaintance—much less a carnal one.

I'd also be lying if I said pissing off Landon—and confusing my father—is the real reason I'm here.

My general approach to the Garrisons is pretending they don't exist. I'm breaking that trend because of Harlow. It's been two weeks since I talked to her. Since I pointed out we're far from strangers and walked away. Fourteen days should be meaningless. I used to go months without so much as seeing her. Suddenly, that's hard to imagine.

I reach the front porch and scuff my foot against the welcome mat. It's bright and cheery, just like the exterior of the house. Covered with sunflowers and loopy writing spelling out *Welcome*.

The cookie-cutter condo I live in when I'm not at college serves its purpose. It's all we can afford, since my mom started refusing Hugh's checks when I was in preschool and took out hefty loans for medical school. I know she's done the best she could, and I don't resent her for it. The exact opposite.

Hugh Garrison? I resent *him* plenty.

I hit the doorbell. Hear it echo through the massive house.

“Coming!” A woman's voice calls. It's not Harlow's, so that means...

“Conor!” Surprise makes Allison Garrison's voice come out higher pitched than sounds natural. Like the call of one of

the whales Harlow likes to talk about.

“Hi,” I state.

“Uh—” she starts.

“Is Harlow here?” I interrupt, before she can either try to act like me stopping by is some sort of normal occurrence or ask me what the fuck I’m doing here.

“Harlow? Uh... I can—I think...” Whatever immediate conclusion she came to about why I’m on her doorstep, it didn’t involve her adopted daughter. “Yes, she’s here. Hang on.” She turns, then spins back around. “Did you want to come in...?”

“No, I’m good here.”

Allison nods, then heads deeper into the house, leaving the door wide open. I study their entryway for a minute. It’s just as stately as the exterior of the house. The wide bannister is part of faded—shoved out of my brain—memories. The wall art and rugs are new, though. They’ve redecorated in the fifteen years since I’ve stepped foot inside.

Appraisal over, I turn back around to face the street, leaning against the railing to survey the road I might have grown up on, once upon a time.

It’s easy to convince myself I’m over the past when I’m at school. Where I’m Conor Hart, the cocky captain who doesn’t have anything to worry about besides the next hockey game and which girl to choose for the night.

It’s a lot harder to do that on this front porch.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

HARLOW

“Your turn, Mom,” Landon says as soon as Allison reappears in the den.

“Oh, okay.” She replies right away, but her voice sounds distracted. She looks at me, her brow wrinkled in confusion.

“Who was at the door?” Hugh asks.

“It’s for you, Harlow,” Allison tells me, rather than responding to her husband.

“For me?”

I’m surprised. I don’t have much of a social circle here. Or any. The few people I see when I’m in Claremont on breaks are mostly Landon’s friends, who I’ve gotten to know over the years. He looks equally puzzled, so it must not be any of them. Not to mention Allison said someone is here for *me*, not for the two of us.

“Who is it?” Landon questions, looking at his mother. She’s sipping some wine now, looking unsure and uncomfortable. An expression I’ve only seen on her face when a certain topic comes up. When a certain person comes up.

He wouldn’t come here, right?

Wouldn’t choose—want—our familiarity exposed to the estranged half of his family.

I didn't think so, but I don't know. The last adjective I'd use to describe Conor Hart is predictable, which Allison confirms with her next words.

"It's Conor."

"Conor? Here?" Hugh sounds stunned.

"What?" At the same time, Landon sounds incredulous.

Fuck.

"I'll be right back." I stand from my spot on the couch.

"You're... what? I'll come with you." Landon stands as well. "I can't believe he thinks he can just show up—"

"I'll handle it, Landon."

He opens his mouth to protest, but Allison's quiet "Landon" causes him to close it again.

I glance at her, but she's looking down at her wineglass. It occurs to me that my involvement with Conor may not only seem like a betrayal to Landon. I've been sheltered from most of the uglier details that predate my move here, but I know Conor's burned a lot of bridges in this family.

Whether or not he was justified in lighting those fires is a matter of opinion.

Of perspective.

Of knowledge I recently gained.

So far, I think Allison is the only one who's put together that Conor stopping by isn't a random coincidence.

That he might have a reason to.

That *I* might have given him a reason to.

If her reaction to the news is to avoid my gaze, I'm worried how Hugh and Landon will react.

I don't say anything else before I leave the room. There's a draft through the front hall that I trace to the open door. A lone figure is leaning against the railing that surrounds the front porch. One I would recognize, even if not for the fact *Hart and 15* are emblazoned on the back of his sweatshirt.

"You lost?"

Conor turns. I can no longer look at him without imagining his hands running across my skin. His lips on mine. His...

"At the house I've avoided like the plague since I was seven? Yeah, just happened to be walking by."

I step outside, pulling the door shut behind me. I don't want anyone eavesdropping on this conversation.

"What are you doing here, Conor? What the hell am I supposed to say to the Garrisons about this?"

"Whatever you want."

"Why would you just show up here? You had to know this is going to make things fucking uncomfortable for me."

"Yeah," Conor confirms. "I did." He pauses. "I guess... I don't know."

"Are you drunk?" I ask.

He laughs and mumbles something that sounds like *I wish*. "No. I just... Landon's girlfriend broke up with him."

"Yeah, I know," I say carefully. I scan his face, trying to figure out if he's lying about being drunk.

"Right. Guess you would." There's a bitter edge to the words. "His ex was at Evan's tonight. Three guesses who she

wanted to get under to get over little bro.”

I only need one. “Did you?” I ask, surprised I manage to get the words out.

Following that sentence, I’m now painfully aware of the fact Conor sleeping with another girl—Kelly or anyone else—bothers me. It bothers me a lot more than my voice suggests, and I’m glad for that.

“No! I—no. That’s the point.”

“*What* is the point?” I ask, as relief coats me like hot fudge on a sundae.

“I didn’t do it. I had the chance to fuck with Garrison, and I didn’t do it.”

“You showing up here is going to fuck with him,” I state.

“Yeah, I know,” Conor admits. For all his faults, he’s honest, at least. “But I came here to see you. Because I can’t stop thinking about you, and it’s fucking annoying.”

I stare at him, suddenly aware of how much trouble I’m in.

“Is this about sex?” I finally manage.

“Yeah.” He rolls his eyes. “I thought there was a good chance I’d get laid on my sperm donor’s front porch.”

“Then why are you here?” I fold my arms across my chest.

Rather than answer, he says, “Nice pajamas.”

I glance down at the ratty sweatshirt and flannel bunny pajama pants I’m wearing. “I would have worn something else, if I’d had any idea you might come over.”

“Really?” He grins.

I’m honest. “Really.”

“Any spot around here you can’t see from the house?”

“What makes you think I would know that?”

“Behind the garage it is.”

With a dexterity I’m not expecting, Conor moves into motion, pulling me off the porch, around the house, and behind the garage. Just like he said, there’s no view of the house from behind the detached building. We’re sheltered by some shrubbery.

“How’d you know about this place?”

“Spent some time back here when I was a kid.”

A fist squeezes around my heart. “Oh.”

Conor’s very adult body pressing me against the brick exterior of the garage makes me forget about his younger self in this same spot. Despite the cold air, I’m suddenly heated. Calloused fingers slip beneath the hem of my sweatshirt, trailing along my ribcage and around my back.

My breathing grows embarrassingly fast. In the silent night, it’s all I can hear. Conor chuckles as his fingers trace circles on my skin, hearing it too. I need him to keep touching me. It’s all I can think about. Focus on.

“I’ve been thinking about what happened in that laundry room a lot,” he whispers.

I move my hands, imitating him and sliding them along his waist. Hot, firm skin tenses under my touch. I feel him harden against my stomach.

“Me too,” I murmur back, arching against him when he starts to play with the clasp of my bra.

It's freezing out and I'm shoved against a brick wall. I'm barely aware of either of those things. Desperation must be evident on my face, because Conor smirks before leaning down to kiss my neck.

"I'm not going to fuck you out here. As much as I enjoyed the washer, the next time's going to be in a bed."

"There's going to be a next time?" My voice is way too eager.

"Do you want there to be a next time?" His hand slides lower, dangerously close to the spot I want him to touch.

Rather than answer—than admit just how badly I do want that—I kiss him. *Really* kiss him. I twine my fingers in his dark hair, drape my arms across his shoulders, and exert enough pressure against his body I'm literally shoved between a wall and a hard place.

Conor groans into my mouth as I tug his bottom lip between my teeth. As I let my tongue touch his in the way I really wish other parts of our bodies could be doing right now. He tastes like beer and mint and desire. He has been drinking, and I can't bring myself to care. At least he walked here.

"Fuck." His eyes are hazy and heated when we finally pull apart. And more illuminated than they were minutes ago, which tells me someone turned some more outside lights on.

Dread chases away some of the lust coursing through me like a waterfall.

"I've got to go. They're going to wonder what's taking so long." And a lot more than that. I've got a questioning akin to the Spanish Inquisition waiting for me, I'm certain.

"Yeah, okay."

He steps away, and I tug my sweatshirt back down around my waist. My body feels cold again, the loss of his touch taking away the last remnants of heat with it. I play with the hem, unsure what to say. I no longer view Conor with contempt. I've slept with him. His tongue was just in my mouth. But I have no clue what to say or do in this moment.

I can't stop thinking about you.

That's what he told me a few minutes ago, and I don't know what to do with it. I could say the same thing to him. I would mean it. Conor Hart takes up a lot of real estate in my brain. He has for weeks. Months.

The rest of my body is already involved with him in some way. In our running sessions. In the act that took place in that laundry room and I could win some money for betting will happen again.

But my heart? I haven't given that to him, and I can't. The muscular frame dripping with sex appeal and roguish charm is heartbreak waiting to happen. People on campus aren't just talking about records when they call him *Hart-breaker*.

"I was winning in Monopoly."

I have no idea why I tell him that. Probably has something to do with the fact that Conor's touch seems to sap away all common sense. I think I did a decent job of hiding it last time. This time is worse. Knowing it's not going to be the only time makes it worse. I'm nervous and excited and horny, and it's got me spewing nonsense.

Conor smiles like he's enjoying an inside joke. "Good luck with that." He runs a hand through his hair, drawing my attention to the fact my fingers raked it into total disarray. Making me want to do so again. "I'll see you around, Hayes."

“Okay.” I want to ask what him showing up here means.

But I don’t.

Because I have no idea what I want the answer to be.

Conor heads for the driveway, then pauses. He glances back, half-smiling, when he catches me staring after him.

“Hey, Harlow?”

“Yeah?”

“Happy Holidays.”

I huff a laugh. I don’t know what I was expecting—hoping—for him to say, but it wasn’t that. “Yeah. You, too.”

He nods, then keeps walking. This time, he doesn’t glance back.



No one is playing Monopoly when I head back inside. There’s a clanging from the kitchen that tells me Allison is doing the dinner dishes. I walk toward the den like I’m headed to my execution. It sure feels like I am.

Landon is slouched in the same spot I left him. The only change is that anger and annoyance have replaced confusion.

I sink down in the armchair Hugh was sitting in before. There’s no sign of him now.

“Long chat.” Landon speaks first. “Lot longer than it takes to tell a guy to fuck off.”

I sigh. He’s not going to take this well, no matter what. “Landon, I’m sorr—”

“My *half-brother*, Harlow? My fucking asshole of a half-brother?”

“He can be a total ass,” I state. “A complete and utter ass. But also... sometimes... he’s not.”

“Sometimes he’s not an ass? The guy who has done everything he can to make me miserable—to make *my parents*, who took you in, miserable—shows up at our house for the first time in *fifteen* years to talk to *you*. And all you have to say is that sometimes he’s not an ass? Just most of the time.” He laughs, but it’s a sound lacking any humor.

“I didn’t mean for it to happen, Landon.”

“You didn’t mean for what to happen?”

I don’t answer. He knows.

“He’s a mistake, Harlow.”

I shrug. “Maybe.” Probably. “My decision to make.”

Landon huffs out an annoyed sigh. “Mistake, you mean.”

“Could have said the same thing about Kelly. If you ask me, she showed her true colors long before you guys broke up.”

“Kelly didn’t make it her mission in life to make my family miserable.”

“She wasn’t very welcoming toward me,” I point out.

“Yeah, well, she always thought there was something going on between us.” I assumed as much. Having your boyfriend’s best friend be a straight girl who happens to live with him can’t be the easiest part of a relationship. “Conor doesn’t have any concerns about you and me?” Landon’s voice is mocking now. A little vulnerable.

The truth—that I don't think Conor considers Landon much at all—won't go over well, so I hedge. "I don't... think so."

Landon snorts, reading the subtext anyway. "Right."

He looks away at the roaring flames licking the logs in the fireplace.

"Is it just a physical thing?" he asks me quietly.

"I'm not discussing that with you." We're close, but not in that way. I've never discussed my sex life with Landon. I'm not about to start when the guy in question is a blood relative.

"What could you *possibly* like about him, Harlow?"

"You don't know him, Landon. You never gave him a chance." He starts to protest, and I cut him off. "I know—he didn't give you one, either."

"What's he like, then?"

"What?" I start.

"Conor. What is he like?" Landon enunciates each word.

"He's..." Lots of adjectives spring to mind, but none of them are ones Landon will want to hear. "Complex, I guess?"

He slants a glance my way, then snorts. "*Complex?*"

"Yeah."

"What does that even mean?"

I take a deep breath. "He's funny. Smart. Honest. Driven." I tick off more traits than I thought I'd be able to come up with offhand.

"And how many Nobel Peace Prizes has he won?" Landon asks sarcastically.

“You asked me a serious question. I gave you a serious answer. He’s not perfect. But he is all those things I just said.”

“I can’t believe this, Harlow. I really can’t believe this.” Landon shakes his head. In disappointment? Anger? Disbelief? Probably all of the above.

“Look, I’m not dating him. The only reason we started hanging out was the marathon. He offered to help me train—”

Landon snorts. Hard enough, I’m surprised snot doesn’t come flying out like a disgusting projectile. “*Help you train?* That’s how he picks up girls?”

I act like he didn’t say anything. “—for the marathon. We ran together a few times, and things... happened from there. I didn’t tell you because I knew you’d react like this.”

He scoffs, stands, and strides out of the room. I lean back against the cushions with a sigh.

I’m still sitting in the den staring into space when Hugh returns. He lets out a long sigh when he sees me.

“Some door slamming upstairs.”

“Landon is having a bad night,” I reply.

“Are you?”

I look up and meet Hugh’s probing gaze. “It’s had some good parts.”

He nods. “Conor hasn’t been here in fifteen years. He gave up on the weekend trips when he was seven.”

“Landon mentioned it’d been a while.”

“*You’ve* never mentioned Conor.”

“Yeah.” I sigh. “It’s nothing, really. He... he’s helping me train for the marathon. Didn’t seem worth mentioning.

Especially since I kind of figured it would go down... not great.”

“It’s definitely a surprise. To all of us.”

“To me too.”

“You weren’t expecting him tonight?”

“No. Definitely not,” I reply swiftly.

“Landon will...” Hugh sighs. “He and Conor—well, that’s my main regret. Aside from my own relationship with him. I hate that my boys became enemies, not brothers.”

“I met Anna.” I’m not sure why I blurt that, but I do.

Hugh’s eyes jump to mine. “You did?”

I nod. “She came to a game right before break. Conor mentioned some... more recent history there. Between you and her.”

He looks away at the fireplace. “I’ve made a lot of mistakes, Harlow. A lot of mistakes that hurt a lot of people. No one is perfect, but I’m a damn ways away, that’s for sure.”

“I’m not judging, Hugh.”

“Allison knows everything that’s happened. Landon... doesn’t.”

I nod, having assumed as much. “Landon resents Conor for how he’s treated you. Treats you.”

“I know.”

“I’m not saying Conor handled it the right way. But... he had some good reasons to lash out. Landon doesn’t know that.”

“You’re right,” Hugh says quietly.

A log cracks in the fireplace.

“What’s he like?”

“Conor?”

Hugh nods. It’s the second time I’ve been asked that in a span of twenty minutes. I’ve spent far longer talking to Conor, and he’s never once asked me a single question about Hugh or Landon. I know Landon is hoping my connection to Conor is temporary. Hugh? His face is lit up with the feverish light of forbidden knowledge.

“He’s popular. Has tons of friends. Always surrounded by people.” I exclude the fact they’re mostly female. “He’s good at hockey. Really good.”

“I’ve never seen him play,” Hugh admits.

“Why not?”

Hugh glances at me in surprise. “I just never... I assumed... Conor’s made it clear he’s not interested in me having any involvement in his life.”

“Maybe that’s a decision he should keep having to make,” I suggest. Hugh’s eyes widen. I quickly move on. “He’s smart. An English major.”

“English?” Hugh marvels.

“Yeah. He’s also honest. Doesn’t bother sugarcoating anything.” Hugh lets out a wry laugh and I smile. “Guess you know that.”

“Are you... uh, interested in him?” Hugh shifts, caught up in the confusing, unprecedented predicament of giving me guy advice about *his* son.

“No. We’re just sort of friendly now. Run together sometimes. Hang out.”

“I see.”

He doesn’t. But there’s no way I’m going to share any more details.

The fact I’m unwilling to is not a surprise.

What is a surprise? The reason I don’t want to isn’t that I’m embarrassed. It’s because I’m protective of those moments. I’m protective of Conor.

Life is filled with moments that can alter the trajectory of your time on Earth. I’ve experienced how quickly a central component of your life can change. Can disappear. I don’t make thoughtless decisions. I think things through. My feelings for Conor Hart aren’t rational. They’re surprising and intense and all-consuming.

I need to decide whether I’m going to allow myself to get swept along or fight the current.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

HARLOW

“Hey, you busy?” Landon pushes the ajar door open fully and enters my room before I answer. It’s what best friends do. We’ve always been comfortable, easy, effortless with each other. Comes with the territory of knowing someone all your life. Through the ease of early childhood, the awkward stretch of being a teenager, until now.

“Woah.” Landon says when he sees me sitting in my desk chair.

I don’t put much effort into my appearance ordinarily. As long as I’ve showered recently and am wearing clean clothes, a swipe of lip gloss and some mascara is about as far as my beauty routine extends.

Tonight, I made an effort. I straightened my sometimes wavy, sometimes curly hair. I put on some eyeliner and foundation that’s been collecting dust for the last few months. And I’m wearing a pair of black jeans so tight I had to do an awkward shimmy to get them on.

“Did Steve text you too? About the party?”

Shit. It should have occurred to me that Landon might have heard about the party tonight, but it didn’t. He and his group of friends from high school mostly stick to themselves, like for the Lord of the Rings marathon I had to sit through.

“Steve? No.” I pause. “But, uh, Conor asked if I wanted to go. He’s supposed to pick me up in a few minutes.”

Landon’s face hardens. “Oh.” His jaw works visibly, trying to contain the words he’s let spill freely before.

“I didn’t think you would be going,” I explain.

“Because I’m not a party animal like *Conor*?”

I chew on my bottom lip. “Because you don’t usually go to parties when you’re back here, yeah.”

“Well, I’m going to this one.”

“Okay,” I say passively. I grab my phone from its charger and stand. “Guessing you don’t want to ride with us?”

Landon doesn’t find my joke all that funny. “He invited you to fuck with me, Harlow. Everyone in town knows who you are. You showing up with *him*? They’ll all talk.”

I pull my favorite jacket off the hook hanging on the back of the closet door and pull it on. “I’ll see you there.”

Landon doesn’t say anything as I walk into the hallway and head downstairs. *Is* that why Conor invited me tonight? I have no idea. I wasn’t expecting to see him again until we both returned to Holt’s campus. When he texted me earlier saying he was headed to a small gathering with a few friends and invited me, I didn’t hesitate to say yes. Now I’m wondering if I should have. I’m walking a tightrope wire when it comes to Conor and the Garrisons, and I’m well aware of it, which makes it seem even more perilous.

Hugh and Allison are seated in the living room. Hugh is reading a book and Allison is knitting. They both glance up when I pass by.

“I’m headed out,” I say awkwardly.

I rarely go out at night when I'm home, because I know hardly anyone in town—even fewer who I would socialize with. When I have gone out, it's usually with Landon.

Sure enough. “Landon going with you?” Hugh asks.

“Um, no. We are headed to the same place, though.”

“Ah,” Hugh realizes what that means. Rather than worried, he looks pleased.

“Be careful,” Allison says. Unlike every other time she's said that to me, there's an underlying warning. Our relationship weathered the uncertain transition from family friend to maternal figure well up until now, but that's because there wasn't anything to weather. Weekly calls and failed date anecdotes don't incite any of the controversy Conor Hart does. It's uncharted waters in more ways than one. I'm not her daughter, but I'm living in her house. Conor's a stranger to her, but also her stepson. Not exactly a predicament covered in a parenting book.

“Yeah, I will be,” I reply.

With a quick smile, I head outside. A blast of cold air reminds me my down jacket would have been a more appropriate choice of attire, but for once I'm prioritizing fashion. I lean against the railing that surrounds the front porch, staring out at the empty street. A dulled staccato makes me turn to the right and round the corner of the house. Conor's standing in the driveway, sending a basketball through the hoop affixed to the garage over and over again.

“Is there a sport you're bad at?”

He turns with a prepared grin that falters when I step under the illumination of the floodlights. A low whistle leaves his mouth as he stares at me.

“Tennis,” he finally answers.

“What are you doing out here?”

“Waiting for you.”

“You could have rung the doorbell.”

“Yeah, I could have. Would have, if I was sure you’d be the one to answer it.”

I don’t know how to respond to that, so I state the obvious. “I don’t live here alone.”

“Right.”

“You ready to go? It’s freezing out.”

“Not so bad if you’re moving.” He passes me the basketball. I grip the weathered rubber. “Come on. Try. I won’t laugh if you suck.”

“Wow. That’s *really* nice of you.”

Conor grins.

I spin the ball in my hands, trying to recall the last time I held a basketball. I can’t come up with it, which means that despite what Conor says, he’s probably going to be laughing pretty soon. I squint up at the net, trying to visualize the ball sinking right through the pattern of white strings hanging down. It leaves my hands and bounces off the orange rim before dropping back down on the asphalt.

Not great, but not embarrassing either.

Conor snags the basketball before it rolls off into the bushes.

“Try again.” He bounces it back to me.

I grab it and gesture to myself. “Do you have any idea how long this took me?”

“Do I look like I’m familiar with putting on makeup and styling my hair?”

“A long time, okay? I don’t want to show up looking like a sweaty mess.”

“Why not? *I* already saw it all.” The devastating smirk I wish I was immune to makes an appearance.

“Cocky is not sexy,” I inform him.

Conor laughs, and the warm, husky tone of it warms me more than the faux fur I’m wearing. Makes my last statement a complete and utter lie. “Just make one basket and then we can go.”

I shoot the ball again, prepared to throw my hands up in the air when it sinks through with a *swish*. Unfortunately, it bounces off the backboard instead. I huff a sigh.

Conor retrieves the ball again. Rather than pass it to me, he walks over while still holding it. He hands the basketball to me, then moves behind my body, barely pressing against me. It’s bowling all over again.

“Hayes?” he murmurs.

“Yeah?” I whisper.

“You look good. Really fucking good.”

“You’re talking about my jump shot form, right?”

Despite the layers we’re both wearing, I can feel the chuckle vibrate in his chest. “Absolutely.”

I propel the basketball out of my hands again. This time, it does *swish*.

“Ha! Did it,” I inform Conor.

“You were the one doubting it.”

“Come on. Let’s go!” I tug on the jacket he’s wearing—a *Holt Hockey* one, shockingly. “Do you own any clothes that don’t have a sport team logo on it?”

“Own? Yeah. Wear? Not if I can help it.”

I roll my eyes as I climb into the passenger seat of his SUV.

“So... Landon is coming tonight.”

“Makes sense. You won’t be home to play board games with.”

“Conor.”

“I won’t start shit, okay? As long as he doesn’t.”

I nod. The chances of Landon saying anything to Conor seem unlikely. Up until recently, his preferred method of dealing with his half-brother was pretending as though he doesn’t exist. I’m guessing that will be his strategy tonight. The two of them are opposites when it comes to a lot more than their personalities. Landon avoids conflict as effectively as Conor seems to find it.

We pull up outside a two-story house a few minutes later.

“Whose house is this?” I ask Conor.

“Holden Aldridge’s.”

“Friend of yours?”

“We were never tight, but he’s a decent dude. One of those people who gets with everyone, you know?”

I nod, relieved. Sounds like neutral territory.

Entering a house in Claremont with Conor is a lot different than stepping inside one with Landon. Landon likes to fly under the radar. Conor comes with his own spotlight.

Shouts of “Hart!” and “hey, man” surround as we walk through the living room. Guys give me curious, admiring looks. Girls give me discerning, haughty ones. People are shouting at Conor. Grabbing him. Desperate for some small scrap of attention.

Landon doesn't like to talk about high school. I've always had a good idea why. It can't be easy watching other people fawn over someone you despise. I sympathize with it, even as I recognize I'm just as susceptible to it as everyone else here. More so, maybe. I've held Conor Hart's undivided attention, and that makes the lack of it feel all the starker. Like a loss.

We're swept into the kitchen. Conor grabs a soda, then quirks an eyebrow at me in a silent question. I shrug, and he hands me one as well. He turns to talk to someone as I crack the can open, leaning back against the countertop. Surveying the scene in front of me the way I study the sea.

The parties I attended before moving to the States were small. Groups and cliques getting together to sneak alcohol and gossip about one another. Social gatherings at Holt are loud and riotous and open invitation.

This kitchen contains the familiarity of hosting an event that's taken place many times before. I gulp my soda as I study the groups. It's barely chilled. But it's something to do as Conor chats with a couple of guys. Gets pulled from conversation to conversation as everyone scrambles to talk to him.

Landon arrives with Steve twenty minutes later. A few people look his way. So does Conor. Then, his gaze slides to

me.

“I’ll be right back,” I tell him.

A muscle tenses in Conor’s jaw before he nods. “Fine.”

I slip off the counter and head for Steve and Landon.

“Hey, guys!” My tone is too cheery. False.

“Hi, Harlow.” Steve smiles. I notice his eyes flit right to Conor behind me. After our last conversation, me showing up with him is especially intriguing. He doesn’t say a word in front of Landon.

“I hope you know what the hell you’re doing,” Landon cautions, also looking at Conor behind me.

“I can handle myself,” I tell him.

“What I mean is, don’t do what you’re doing. You’re drinking?” Landon is eyeing the can in my hand.

I spin the label. “It’s *soda*.”

“Hmmm.” Landon hums. I don’t touch that response. He’s pissed. I don’t blame him, but I’m also annoyed by it. I know he feels betrayed. That me having any relationship with Conor is a possibility that never occurred to him. But it’s been over a week since Conor showed up at the Garrisons’. Landon spent one day ignoring me and, until tonight, acted as though nothing ever happened. He’s been like that since we were kids. He blows up about something and then acts hunky-dory. This encounter is forcing him to face reality.

“I’m going to run to the restroom. I’ll see you guys later,” I say, then head down the hallway. I don’t bother telling Conor where I’m going. He’s barely paid me any attention since we arrived. Plus, it will piss off Landon more.

I find and use the restroom. Rather than head back into the crowded kitchen, I walk outside onto the porch. I take a seat on the swing, tilting my head back and watching puffs of my breath dissipate in the air. I rub my finger along the rim of the can I'm clutching.

The door opens and closes. Somehow, I know it's him without looking over. The porch swing shifts when he takes a seat, compensating for the fact he's got a lot more muscle than me. I look over at him, only to discover he's already looking at me. This is a different Conor than the one in the kitchen.

"Come here," he murmurs.

I comply, sliding toward him at the same time he moves toward me. The wooden swing we're on creaks as we meet in the middle. I'm pressed up against him, but it's not close enough. I swing my right leg over both of his, so I'm straddling a pair of strong thighs. Conor's hands slide up my legs, only stopping to splay on my ass. I stare into those blue depths, the color darker than usual in the limited light of the night. His pupils dilate with lust.

Slowly, I lean forward, barely brushing my lips against his. I tease them like a whisper, feeling his breath leave his mouth in warm gusts.

"The things I want to do to you, Harlow Hayes," he murmurs to me.

I feel my lips curve upward as they brush against his. "So do them," I challenge.

He traces my bottom lip with his tongue. "I'm going to."

Our mouths go from barely touching to desperate. There's nothing but sensation. Urgency and need and heat. Desire dulls

my reflexes, and that's why rather than the sound of footsteps approaching, the first thing I register is, "Shit."

I pull back from Conor, looking right up into Steve Essex's face. Landon is behind him, wearing a horrified expression I would find funny in any other scenario.

"Carmen said she saw you head out here, Harlow," Steve explains. "We were just... checking on you." He slants a nervous glance toward Landon, who's doing a spot-on imitation of a statue. Not moving. Not speaking. I can't even tell if he's breathing.

"Oh," is all I can think to say.

Conor's right hand slides up from its spot on my ass, up beneath the bulk of my jacket. It's a possessive gesture, one I know Landon catches. He finally moves, first clenching his fists, then looking away.

"Let's go, Steve." He starts walking, turning the corner of the porch immediately and moving out of sight.

Steve gives me a small smile before he follows.

I sigh. "Great."

Conor is studying me. I glance back, straight into his intense gaze. His hand slides up further. My heartbeat quickens. Landon's appearance should have doused the heat between us. It flares right back to life, faster and stronger than it should. I'm a *terrible* friend.

"Let's go," Conor says abruptly.

"What? You're the one who wanted to come."

"Nah. Evan asked me to stop by, but I'll see him tomorrow before I head back to Holt. I just invited you to give you a break from the family board games."

I stiffen. “Don’t be a jerk.”

“I’m not. I want to take you someplace else.” Blue eyes bear into mine.

“You haven’t had anything to drink?”

“Not a drop,” he replies. “I swear.”

Against my better judgment, I acquiesce. “Okay.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CONOR

It feels like I'm on a date. It's the third time I've thought that about an outing with Harlow Hayes. The double date she insisted wasn't actually one. Running into her at a Mexican restaurant in Loughton.

This time, it's worse. I'm the one initiating it.

"What's that smell?" she asks after we've climbed into my car.

"Don't diss your own gift," I tease, nodding to the pine air freshener she gave me. "It was there last time you were in here. You're just unobservant."

"You actually kept it?" Surprise saturates her voice.

"Why wouldn't I? It's a perfectly good air freshener."

"It was a joke."

"If you have to explain it, it wasn't very funny, Hayes."

She scoffs. "Where are we going?"

"You'll see," I reply.

Harlow sighs before she turns to look out the window. But I'm getting good at reading her. She's not genuinely annoyed.

When I park outside our destination, all I see is confusion. "A bar?"

“It’s got more to offer than alcohol,” I promise.

Harlow raises both eyebrows, but she climbs out of the car and heads for the entrance without comment.

“How do you know about this place?” she asks as we near the front door.

“You mean aside from growing up in Claremont?” I reply, smiling. “I used to come here a lot in high school.”

Harlow laughs. “Why am I not surprised?”

“You never rebelled as a teen?”

“I didn’t say that,” she responds, smirking.

I tug her through the front door and inside the bar. A metal bar top runs the full length of one side of the space, with shelves covered with bottles of liquor lining each one. In the back of the room is the reason I brought her here. A small stage is tucked away in the corner. A guy with a full beard is plugging in wires and setting up microphones.

“Do you want a drink?” I ask Harlow.

She studies me for a minute. “Yeah, sure,” she finally says.

It would have been fine—more than fine—if she’d said no and asked me to take her home. But she didn’t do either of those things. It means more to me than I expected it would.

“What do you want?”

“Uh... Moscow Mule, I guess?”

I turn and relay her order to the bartender.

“There’s live music here?” Harlow’s green eyes are wide as she scans our surroundings.

“What do you think we’re doing here?”

“Honestly?”

“No. Lie to me.”

Harlow chews her bottom lip. She looks over at the stage, then back to me. “Did you invite me to the party earlier just to rub me in Landon’s face?”

Talk about a loaded question. “If I say no, are you going to think I’m lying?”

“No,” Harlow replies, not all that convincingly.

I quirk a brow. “Okay. No.”

“Okay.”

“It doesn’t have to have anything to do with us, Hayes.” I don’t realize just how much I want that statement to be true until I utter it out loud. How much I want Harlow to be separate from the Garrisons and parts of my life I don’t like to think about. “Whatever we are—or aren’t—it can be separate.”

“Moscow Mule.” The bartender sets Harlow’s drink down before she can say anything.

“Do you know this band?” Harlow asks, nodding to the back corner.

Message received. “No, I just saw they’re an indie folk band.”

“Is it stereotypical of me to assume you listen to rap music like most athletes?” Harlow asks.

I laugh. “Yes. But I mostly do. You mentioned you like indie folk, though.” She looks surprised by the admission, so I quickly add, “And I know how much you love supporting local musicians.”

Harlow narrows her eyes as she takes a sip of her drink. “Subtle, Hart.”

I grin. “Come on.” I grab her hand and pull her away from the bar, toward the small crowd that’s gathered to watch two girls and a guy climb on to the stage that’s been set up. It’s a younger crowd, college students and a few slightly older patrons. This bar is located a town over from Claremont, even closer to Brighton University.

This is the first time I’m seeing a band perform here. In high school, we’d sneak in to test out our fakes. I have low expectations of the music, and maybe that’s why I’m pleasantly surprised by the acoustic sound drifting out of the speakers. But I’m pretty sure it has more to do with the redhead by my side.

The lead singer has a raspy, worn voice that fits well with the darkened, no-frills atmosphere of the bar. She’s wearing a fedora-style hat that looks like it’s made of felt and paired with a denim dress that’s exactly what I envision an indie folk singer would wear. I glance over at Harlow. She’s grinning up at the stage with her head tossed back happily. Red strands sway from side to side as she moves in time with the music.

I stare at her.

I’ve always known Harlow is pretty. Heard guys on campus talk about the “hot redhead.” Appreciated her appearance even when I didn’t want to.

I admitted to myself a while ago I’m attracted to her. The encounter in the laundry room will go down as one of the hottest sexual experiences of my life.

The sight of her hits differently at this moment. Maybe it’s because we’re surrounded by strangers, and that enhances

familiarity. Maybe it's because I'm not only attracted to Harlow, I like being around her. Maybe it's because she could be anywhere right now—the house she shares with the Garrisons, at the party with Landon, out with another guy—and instead she's here with me.

Harlow glances over. "Aren't they amazing?" she shouts at me. Her cheeks are flushed and her eyes are shining.

"Yeah, they are," I reply, smiling at her.

She smiles back before looking at the stage again. I keep studying her.

A few songs later, she catches me looking again.

"Why aren't you dancing?"

"I think you're doing enough for the both of us," I reply.

Harlow sticks out her tongue at me. "Don't be that guy."

"What guy? The one who has no clue how to dance to this music? Because yeah, that's me."

Harlow laughs, then spins so she's in front of me. Her ass lines up with my crotch, and I'm no longer thinking about dancing, that's for damn sure. She tilts her head back, so it's tucked under my chin, and I rest it on the top of her head. She smells like citrus and ginger, which I'm assuming is attributable to the Moscow Mule she's holding.

"Thanks for bringing me here, Hart."

With Harlow nestled against me, I'm uncomfortably hard. But as I stare down at her happy face, I'm not thinking about sex.

I'm thinking about how good it feels to have her look at me like that.



“Wait!” Harlow calls as we’re walking out of the bar two hours later.

“What?”

“They have posters!”

I snort. “For what?”

“To hang, dumbass. I want one. I’ll be right back.”

She darts off, returning a couple of minutes later clutching a rectangular sheet of what looks like cardstock.

“Isn’t it cool?” she asks me, holding it up for inspection.

It’s a watercolor style print that depicts the Seattle skyline and the band’s name underneath in block letters. As far as wall art goes, it’s nice. I’m not sure if it’s worthy of the starry-eyed expression Harlow is flashing its way, but at least it’s not boy band merchandise.

“Yeah, sure. It’s cool,” I agree.

Harlow rolls her eyes. “Well, *I* like it.”

“I didn’t say I don’t,” I argue as we head outside.

“Uh-huh, your face was *real* convincing,” she teases. “You only like posters with hockey players or naked women on them?”

“That’s more stereotypical than rap music,” I inform her.

Harlow grins as we reach my car. “Sorry for offending you.”

She keeps chatting as we drive back toward Claremont. About the band, about the bar, about the entire evening. I smile

for most of the drive. Harlow's enthusiasm is contagious.

I don't know if she considers tonight a date.

I don't know if I do.

But if it was, it was a damn successful one.

"Can we stop for fries?" she asks as golden arches appear off the side of the road halfway back to Claremont.

"For real?" I glance over at her. She only had one drink.

"Why would I joke about fried food?" she replies with a smirk.

I pull into the drive thru.

"Now that we're here, I'm also considering a milkshake," Harlow tells me. "Thoughts?"

"Flavor?" I counter.

"It's chocolate or vanilla, Hart," she responds. "You choose."

We reach the window, and I end up ordering large fries and two milkshakes: one vanilla and one chocolate. Rather than pull right back on the highway when they appear, I park in a corner of the fast-food place's parking lot.

"Oh my God, it's so good," Harlow moans as she alternates between chomping fries and sucking sips of milkshake.

I watch her, smiling.

"What?" she asks, pausing between bites. "What are you thinking?"

"Dirty thoughts, Hayes. Dirty thoughts."

Harlow sets her milkshake in the cupholder and dusts the salt off her hands. A wicked smile unfurls across her face as she unbuckles her seatbelt and breaches the boundary of the center console.

“What kind of dirty thoughts?” she whispers.

“The kind I need more space for,” I respond, settling my hands on her waist and pulling her the rest of the way to me. She straddles my lap. “But I’ve got plenty of room to do this.”

I kiss her, the way I’ve been imagining doing so ever since we were interrupted on the porch swing.

I’ve made out with a lot of girls. Fact. There’s no logical reason why kissing Harlow should feel any different. My concerns in life so far have never included worries about girls. They’ve always been there. Interested in me. Interested in kissing me. Interested in doing more than kissing me.

This blinding urgency is new. I know we’re not going to do anything more than kiss. Even if we weren’t working within the tight confines of my car, we’re in a parking lot along with plenty of other people and bright lights. But I’m still desperate. I’m not viewing kissing Harlow as a means to an end. I’m seeing kissing as the end.

We kiss and kiss and kiss. Neither of us attempt to do anything more. We’ve already had sex. Now it feels like we’ve come to some unspoken mutual agreement that anticipation can enhance the act.

“You were right,” Harlow whispers to me between kisses. “One time wasn’t enough.”

I feel my lips curve up into a smile. “Yeah, I’m usually right.”

“I told you cocky isn’t sexy, Hart.”

“Oh, yeah? It seems like you find me plenty sexy,” I counter, moving my lips along the length of her jaw. She arches against me.

“Shut up,” Harlow mutters, before kissing me again. She sucks on my tongue, and I growl. Eventually, I manage to talk my lust-addled brain into pulling back.

“We should go.”

She looks at me for a minute, half smiling. “Yeah. Okay. I’m sick of kissing you, too.”

I grin. “That’s not what I meant, Hayes. More that this is getting less uncomfortable and more painful.”

She grinds down on my lap before shifting back over to the right side of the car.

I roll my eyes before turning on the car and pulling back on to the highway. Harlow stares out the window for the rest of the drive, seeming lost in thought. I stop in front of the stately brick house ten minutes later.

It’s strange how you can recall bad memories so perfectly. You’d think the brain would want to help out; repress them. The building before me has starred in many a moment I’d love to bleach from my recollection. Yelling at my father I wish he wasn’t mine. Taunting Landon about how he could never run as far or as fast as I could. Refusing to speak to Allison.

I shove those moments my brain hasn’t forgotten away and turn my gaze to Harlow.

“Thanks for tonight, Conor.” She fiddles with the edge of the poster she got. “It was fun. Really fun.”

“Good.” I smile at her. She seems nervous all of a sudden, and it’s kind of cute.

“Okay. Good night.”

“Good night,” I echo. Without allowing myself to think about it, I lean forward and kiss her softly one more time.

Harlow opens the passenger side door. My car’s interior lights flicker to life, bathing her features with their harsh glow. Pink cheeks. Swollen lips. Dancing eyes.

“I know I usually say good luck, but I’m not going to. Because I think you’re the type of person who makes their own luck. And because it’ll be enough, Conor. Okay? Win or lose the next few games. It’ll be enough.”

I nod, and then she shuts the door.

The car lights turn off a few seconds later.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

HARLOW

Rain pelts the window. I stir, torn between dreams and reality. It's not until I crack one eye open that awareness starts to trickle in.

I'm not in my own bed.

The warm hand splayed across my stomach shifts. My mind isn't fully awake. But my nerves race, reacting to the feel of Conor's calloused skin touching mine. I lost track of how many times we had sex last night, but the hard length poking my thigh is reigniting the heat sleep temporarily abated.

He teased me once wouldn't be enough the first time we slept together, and the desire to prove him wrong has been nowhere near a sufficient deterrent to keep me from screwing him repeatedly over the past three weeks we've been back on campus since the end of winter break. I can't get enough of him, and despite his joking, Conor seems just as surprised by the way we can't keep our hands off each other.

He's spooning me from behind. I shift in bed, so that he's nestled between my legs. The hot, firm skin pressed against me moves. Conor groans and murmurs something unintelligible before sliding his hand from its spot spread on my stomach down between my legs. He groans again when he discovers I'm already wet.

“I have to go soon,” I murmur. This sleepover was a bad idea for several reasons.

The bed shifts as Conor leans away and pulls a condom out of his bedside table. We’ve used one every time, because not using one would require a conversation about who else we’re sleeping with, a conversation I don’t want to have. Conor doesn’t seem to want to have it, either. It’s much easier to just act like we’re having a series of one-night stands.

His chest presses against my back as he lifts my leg up and eases inside of me from behind. Last night was a frenzy. This is a languid exploration. One muscular thigh settles between mine, giving Conor deeper access as he slides in and out while simultaneously moving his hands over every part of my body that he can reach. I don’t know if any other guy has ever known it so well.

I know his, too. The purple bruises that often mar the skin covering his ribs. The freckle just above the curve of his hipbone. The dusting of dark hair above his navel.

I’ve seen and explored every inch of him.

He slips out of me and rolls onto his back. “Ride me,” he rasps.

“Lazy ass,” I mutter as I roll over.

Conor chuckles. “I didn’t get much sleep last night, Hayes.”

I would never admit this to him, but I love when he calls me by my last name in bed. No other guy has ever done so, and for some reason, it feels especially intimate.

The sculpted muscles of his stomach and chest tighten as straddle him and then slowly sink down onto his cock. His

abdominals clench as I experience the pleasurable pain of being stretched open by him.

“Planning to move anytime soon?” Conor smirks at me as he tucks his arms behind his head, making his biceps bulge. His dark hair is a ruffled mess. There’s a scratch above his left pec I think I’m to blame for. He’s gorgeous. For the moment, he’s also mine.

I tighten my inner muscles, and he curses. He feels bigger from this angle, something I didn’t think was possible. I rest my hands on the hard planes of his chest as I start to move.

Any amused indifference disappears from Conor’s face as he watches me impale myself on him again and again. Those mysterious-colored eyes glint with lust as I use his body to pleasure myself, chasing the euphoria that’s rapidly building.

Conor moves so fast I miss it. One minute he’s lying back, the next he’s sitting up, shifting the angle so he’s impossibly deeper. His hands are everywhere, pulling me closer to him. I kiss him: a hungry, open-mouthed one that tells him how close I am to the edge.

I fall first, becoming boneless. Thoughtless. Reckless. I feel Conor jerk inside of me as he follows, muttering curses as he thrusts a few more times and then stills.

The only sound in the room is us trying to catch our breath.

Conor doesn’t say anything; he just starts running his fingers up and down my bare back. I melt against him. An accomplishment, since our bodies were already pressed together.

My heart rate slows, and I pull away. “I need to go.”

“Okay.”

I slide off him and away, moving to the edge of the bed so I can grab the clothes that spent the night in a heap on his floor. Conor sprawls back out on the wrinkled sheets.

“You’re seriously going swimming at this hour?” Conor asks, watching me get dressed.

“No.” I laugh, nervously. “I—uh, I’m going fishing.”

“*Fishing?*” Conor sits up, looking incredulous. “I thought you were all Mother Teresa about preserving and protecting the oceans. Now you’re headed out at the crack of dawn to kill helpless fish?”

I sigh. “*I’m* not actually going to be fishing. I just... go out on the boat.”

“You go out on a fishing boat? To do what?”

“I like looking out at the ocean,” I admit. “It’s my simple place.”

Conor stands and pulls on a pair of boxers. “Can I come?”

I’m too shocked to reply right away. “You want to come on a fishing boat?”

“Yup.”

“Um... okay.”

He pulls on a pair of joggers and a sweatshirt. We creep down the hallway that leads from his room to the stairs. I haven’t asked Conor if any of his roommates know we’re sleeping together. Mostly because I’m sure he’ll be honest, and if they do, I don’t want to know.

“I’ll drive,” I say, once we’re outside. The mechanic who worked on my car assured me it’s not liable to break down again anytime soon.

“Works for me.” Conor yawns.

I study him. “You sure you want to come? Don’t you have practice later?”

Despite his joking earlier, Conor really didn’t get much sleep last night. I’m surprised fishing is enough to pique his interest in leaving bed at this hour.

“I’m sure,” he confirms. “I’ve never been out on the Sound before.”

“It’ll be a few hours,” I warn.

“Do you not want me to come?” Conor asks, leveling me with a look.

“No—it’s not—” I scramble to assemble a coherent thought. I’m not sure how to explain to Conor that I’m worried all the lines I drew around him are blurring, and that sharing this piece of myself I’ve never told anyone else about might erase them more. “I just want to make sure you know what you’re getting in to. Adjust your expectations.”

“Consider my expectations adjusted. Let’s go.”



“Wow.” Conor looks around at the hustle and bustle surrounding us with surprise as we walk along the marina. This is probably the only place around with this level of activity at this hour. “How often do you come here?”

“Once a week,” I reply, before taking a sip of the coffee we stopped for.

“For how long?”

“Since freshman year.”

“Just to... sightsee?”

I glance at him. He doesn't appear mocking, just curious. “Yes. There are a few pods of orcas around here. If we're lucky, we'll see some.”

“*Lucky?* Aren't they called *killer* whales?”

“What's wrong with being an apex predator?” I challenge.

Conor laughs. “Nothing.”

We reach Sam's boat. None of his crew are anywhere to be seen, but Sam is perched in the captain's chair.

“Harlow!” He stands and walks over.

“Morning, Sam,” I greet, handing him his coffee. “I brought a friend today. I hope that's okay.”

“Of course.” Sam's blue eyes jump between me and Conor, and I pray he won't press the friends title. It feels especially disingenuous after last night's—and this morning's—naked activities. “I'm Sam—Sam Prescott,” he says to Conor. “Pleasure to meet you.”

Conor shakes his offered hand. “Same here. Conor Hart.”

Sam's eyes widen. “Huh. Well, how about that? You're having one hell of a season, son.”

“We've had some lucky breaks,” Conor responds.

“He's being modest,” I state as I climb onto the boat.

“Put that together myself, Harlow,” Sam says, looking amused.

“Rest of the guys running late?” I ask, glancing about the empty deck.

“Timmy is off socializing,” Sam replies. “Brent should be here shortly. Jerry and his boys are sick. Came down with the flu a couple of days ago. They’re both doing better, but not to the extent they’re up for hauling nets.”

I nod. “It’s been going around campus too.”

Timmy and Brent both appear a few minutes later. I introduce Conor, and then we set off into the Sound. Although it’s both smaller and older than most of the fishing boats that head out from the marina each morning, the barnacle-covered hull parts the churning, salty water effortlessly. Timmy and Brent move about the deck, tying lines and dropping nets. Sam steers us along; an easier job today than on most. It’s turning into a brilliantly clear day, with sunlight dazzling the surface of the sea and illuminating the snowy peaks of the mountains in the distance. It looks like a postcard.

“It’s so clear today,” Conor comments from his spot beside me.

I startle. I’m not used to anyone being next to me during these outings.

“Yeah, it is,” I agree. The mist is noticeably absent. The only limit to the scenery is my eyesight.

“So, what is the—*shit!*”

The curse is practically a shout. It took the black and white body breaching the surface for Conor to spot what I noticed a few seconds ago; three orcas are nearby. One just came up closer than I was expecting. So close, a few droplets of salty water hit my cheeks.

“Holy...” Conor glances wildly to me, then back at the frothing water that’s the only evidence of what just occurred. “That was... wow.”

I nod eagerly. “Right?”

In my limited life experience, I’ve found there’s nothing like it. The ocean itself is a vast, powerful, fathomless force. Witnessing the animals who engineer that strength in streamlined speed is breathtaking.

“That’s what you come out here for? The whales?”

“Mostly, yeah. Cool, right?”

“A little warning would have been nice, Hayes. Jesus.” Conor shakes his head a couple of times, but I notice he’s keeping his gaze on the water, like he’s reluctant to miss any more sightings.

“Are they going to leap up again?” he asks.

“Not that group. They’re already headed back around the island. Probably to meet up with the rest of their pod. See?” I point at the tall, black dorsal fins cutting through the water like sharp knives.

Conor squints. “Maybe?”

I pull my phone out and mark the sighting on my spreadsheet.

“Not a bad show, eh?” Sam calls from the captain’s chair.

I shake my head and grin.

That ends up being the extent of the orca excitement, which bodes well for the fishing haul. This time of year, the harbor seals look far more enticing for a six-ton mammal than any of the salmon or cod Sam and the other fishermen are after. But no fish is going to hang around and risk it.

“Yeah, okay. This view is pretty incredible,” Conor says as we pull into the marina.

“I mean, it’s no hockey rink,” I tease.

“No, it’s not,” Conor replies seriously. “You usually come alone?”

“I always come alone,” I correct.

“You let me come?”

I shrug. “You asked. Far be it from me to stand in the way of someone discovering their love of the ocean.”

“Right.” Conor’s lips quirk. “Thanks for letting me.”

“How hard was it for you not to make that an innuendo?” I question.

Conor laughs. “Hard, Hayes. Hard.”

I try to suppress it, but a small smile springs out anyway as we reach the wooden dock. Timmy jumps out from the hull and starts tying us to the metal cleats. Brent begins offloading the day’s catch so it can be packed in ice and shipped away.

“Thanks, Sam,” I call out.

“Bye, Harlow,” he replies, glancing up from the bins he’s sorting through. “Nice to meet you, Conor.”

“You too,” Conor replies, before we disembark the boat together.

Winter air sighs along the shoreline as we head for the parking lot.

“Can you drop me at the rink?” Conor asks once we’re inside the car. “I’m cutting it close for practice.”

“Yeah, of course,” I reply. “I’m sorry if—”

“Don’t apologize, Harlow. It’s fine. I’ve got time and I’ve got all my gear at the rink. Aidan or Hunter can give me a lift

back home.”

“Okay.”

The ride to the rink is mostly silent. I flick on some music in the background. It feels like something shifted between us during the past couple hours, grew more familiar. Given the intimate acts we’ve engaged in many times together, it doesn’t seem like a whale watch should have been all that much of a bonding experience.

“I’ll text you later, ’kay?” Conor says once we reach the rink.

“Okay,” I reply.

He studies me. Then he leans forward and kisses me. Softly. Sweetly. “Thanks for letting me come today.” His boyish grin turns impish. “Both times.” He winks at me before climbing out of my car and heading toward the set of double doors that lead into the hockey arena. I reverse and head home.

Conor and I have yet to discuss how our relationship has unexpectedly progressed from vengeful strangers to friends with benefits. He hasn’t brought it up. Neither have I. I’m worried doing so will ruin things between us. I want to keep answering his random questions about my classes while we go for our runs. I want to keep sleeping with him. I want to hear him complain about hockey or something stupid one of his teammates did. I want to enjoy this oasis where I can keep Conor and the Garrisons as separate parts of my life. Landon has gone back to acting like the encounters with Conor over winter break never happened. The next time I return to Claremont, I’ll act the same. Nothing between us is permanent and pretending otherwise is dangerous for the one part of my body I promised he wouldn’t touch.

Eve is lounging on the couch when I enter the living room.

“Morning,” I say, shrugging off my raincoat and tossing it over one of the kitchen chairs.

“Looks like it’s been a good one,” Eve comments, sipping some tea.

I know I look like a mess. Windblown hair. Wrinkled clothes. I have a hazy memory of Conor sucking on my neck last night, so I’m probably sporting a hickey as well.

I shrug as I head over to the fridge and start pulling fruit out of the freezer to make a smoothie. “It was all right.”

“You said you’d be back last night.”

“I overestimated my self-control,” I say before flicking the blender on.

I grab a glass while it whirs, feeling Eve’s eyes on me the whole time. She speaks as soon as the blender stops spinning.

“Are you being careful?”

“Is this a safe sex talk?” I tease.

“I’m worried you’re too wrapped up in him.”

I huff. “How many dates did you drag me along on this year? Saying I move on too fast and don’t give any guy a chance. Now you’re worried I’m *too* committed?”

“So you’re giving Conor Hart a chance?”

“No!”

“I’ve never seen you like this about a guy before. And... I get the appeal. I totally do. He’s gorgeous. All the guys I set you up with were good ones, though. None of the girls on campus call *them* Hart-breakers.”

I pour my smoothie into a glass. “Look, it’s sweet that you’re worried about me. Really. But I’m not in love with Conor Hart, and I never will be in love with him. I’m using him every bit as much as he’s using me. I promise.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

CONOR

I'm half-asleep by the time I stumble into the weight room. The thrill of this morning's outing has long since worn off, along with the caffeine I consumed.

"Late night, Hart?" Hunter asks as I drop down on one of the weight benches and cover a yawn.

"Sort of," I reply, yawning again.

"Do I know her?" He grins.

"Nah, just some random chick."

"Uh-huh, sure." Hunter looks like he knows I'm lying, but he doesn't call me out on it.

I haven't told anyone about anything regarding Harlow, much less that it's taken a turn toward the sexual. I do think I've been acting a little too excited to go out on my runs lately, though. We still go on runs together—long ones, now that Harlow has built up her endurance some. We also have sex. A lot of it. It's fantastic. It also freaks me out. I'm not looking to involve anyone else in my question mark of a future.

Even if I were, Harlow Hayes is not an option. It was easy to tell her the Garrisons don't have anything to do with us over winter break. When we're at Holt, my past feels far away. But they'll always be a part of her life.

I'm not going to ask her to choose.

That means everything between us is temporary.

Coach Dean scrawls out the day's schedule. There are a couple of groans around the room when the guys get a good look at it. I haul myself up and head to add weights to the bar we use for squats.

Aidan lumbers over to me as I'm adding them. "Hart! Where the hell were you last night? I texted you five times about Thomas's party."

"I didn't see them," I reply, truthfully.

"Man, there's commitment, and then there's crazy. You are rapidly heading toward the second category. Have some fun, all right?"

I'm half tempted to tell Aidan the truth: that I missed the party commemorating the end of the basketball team's season because I was busy having the best sex of my life. Just to get him off my back about being too committed to hockey. But Aidan has a huge mouth. If I tell him, the entire team—hell, the entire school—will probably hear about it.

"I have plenty of fun, Phillips," I reply. "Worry about your slapshot, and let me worry about my social life, okay?"

"Plenty of fun? Good one, Hart."

"This is my shot, Phillips," I remind him.

He's wrong that I'm consumed by nothing but hockey, but he's right that I'm focused on it. I'm worried some guys on the team have gotten complacent about winning. Easier to do than you'd think, when you're coasting on an undefeated season. When you're expecting to win. But our next game is the first one of the playoffs. Even at the lowest Division level, that

means the pressure and the expectations will ratchet up. I can't be the only one prepared for it to. That's what has happened for the past three seasons.

"Yeah, I know," Aidan replies, losing his smirk. "Second line will be ready. I promise. But you have to promise that if we win, you'll come to Mexico for spring break."

"Seriously?" I groan.

"Yes. You crapped out last year. This time we're going. And I can't believe I'm having to talk you into this. Open bar, warm weather, hot chicks? C'mon!"

"Okay, I'll go," I agree. Aidan pumps the air. "Now start the circuit," I instruct.

He mock salutes me. "Yes, sir!"

I roll my eyes before turning and starting my own exercises. I hate lifting weights. I get it's a necessary part of building muscle and how that strength will translate on the ice. But I'd much prefer to be running or on the ice than lifting and lowering a weighted bar repeatedly. There's nothing to think about or focus on, just studying the cracked plaster ceiling of the weight room as I convince my muscles to keep cooperating, even after they begin to tremble.

The entire weight-training circuit takes about an hour, and then we move to the film room to watch some tape on our opponents next weekend.

Calling it a film room is a misnomer. Unlike schools that are generous with their athletic budgets and have a robust one to begin with, ours is bare bones. Reminiscent of a middle school physical education classroom. Scuffed linoleum, walls that were once painted white but veered gray a long time ago, and metal folding chairs that squeak when you sit in them.

There's a whiteboard that lost its ability to be wiped clean. Faded swipes of black and blue marker mar the surface, adding squiggly lines to the video that's being projected up on the screen.

Coach Keller's coaching strategy has always leaned heavily on watching film. I know players—and other coaches—who prefer to work on individual skills than spy on opponents. I suppose there is a mental component to it. Watching a superior team can be demoralizing. But anticipating other players' moves has always been a strength of mine. It's far easier to do that when I have a good sense of their playing style before stepping on to the ice.

Weekend practices can often be a crapshoot. Filled with distractions and grumbles. I'm impressed there aren't any mutters or time checks throughout the entire film session. Or when Coach announces that we'll have ice time tonight because the Somerville Sharks lost their first game of the youth hockey playoffs. I hope history won't be repeating itself on the same sheet of ice. But I am impressed by the guys' composure. Maybe they're more focused than I thought. Despite my dedicated pursuit of it, I'm under no illusions a championship is a safe bet. Confidence in my teammates, in not only their skill but also their commitment, will go a long way.

"Hart. Got a minute?" Coach asks as the rest of the guys shuffle out of the darkened room.

"Yeah, sure," I call back. "Can you wait for me?" I ask Hunter.

He widens his eyes in mock shock. "I thought you hated when Phillips and I do that."

"Not when I need a ride," I respond.

“How’d you get here?” he questions suspiciously.

“Magic portal. You waiting, or do I need to ask someone else who’s not headed to the exact same location?” I glance at Jack, who’s waiting for us to clear out of the row so he can reach the door. “Sorry, Williams. Move it, Morgan.”

Hunter moves to the end of the row.

“No need to get pissy. We’ll wait. Come on, Phillips. Let’s go hang out in the parking lot.”

“I’m so hungry,” Aidan grumbles dramatically as he and Hunter head into the hallway.

I walk up to where Coach is fiddling with the projector.

“What’s up, Coach?”

“Been getting a few calls, Hart.”

My heart leaps. “You have?”

“Yup,” he confirms. “No such thing as a guarantee in sports, but you’re in a good spot. Keep plugging away.”

“That’s the plan, Coach.”

“Good. Now get out of here before Phillips or Morgan come looking for you.”

I laugh. I doubt they’ve even had time to reach the parking lot. But neither Aidan nor Hunter are known for their patience.

“Okay. See you later, Coach.”

Coach Keller nods before he turns back to his prior task of shutting off the projector.

Jack is in the hallway when I leave the film room, filling up his water bottle.

“See you later, Williams,” I say as I pass him.

“Don’t fuck it up, Hart.” Jack calls after me.

I freeze, then spin around. “What?”

“Your ‘magic portal’ this morning? Looked a lot like Harlow Hayes. Don’t fuck it up.”

“I don’t know what you think you saw, but...”

“Cut the bullshit, Hart. We’re good. I’ll do my part for the team. I’ll show up to every practice and do my best to make certain that we’re the ones holding up that trophy. But hockey is just a game. Harlow?” He pauses. “She looks at you the way I looked at her. Things between us were never right. Took me a while to figure that out. Don’t fuck it up with her.”

He gives me a stern look, then walks away.

CHAPTER TWENTY

HARLOW

There's a knock on the door, but I don't move from my comfy spot on the couch.

"I'm not expecting anyone!" Eve calls from the kitchen. In other words, *you're getting the door*.

I pause the movie I'm watching on Ryan Gosling's perfect face and heave a sigh before standing and stretching.

"I'm not expecting anyone, either," I tell Eve as I head for the front door. "And you're much closer to the door." She just got back from brunch. She hasn't even taken her jacket off yet.

She shrugs. "It's probably Hottie McHart here to beg you to come to his game after all," Eve predicts.

"It's definitely not," I refute.

Conor actually seemed relieved when I told him I wasn't coming to the first game of the playoffs this afternoon. I haven't gone to a single one of the regular season games in the month since we've been back on campus after winter break.

If I'd never kissed Conor in that laundry room after our bowling date, I probably *would* go tonight. I'd cheer him on because it turns out I genuinely enjoy watching hockey—especially if he's playing—and as a thank you for running with me.

But I *did* kiss Conor, and things have spiraled into what feels like a relationship. We see each other all the time. Text frequently. I'm not involved with any other guys, and I don't think he's sleeping with other girls. I've never asked. For all my assurances during our first hook-up, we've never clarified or discussed anything between us since.

I'm still acting like a complete coward. I don't want to be the one to lay my cards down first. Mostly because I'm pretty sure doing so will crumble things between us like a poorly stacked house of them.

I swing the front door open. I was right.

It's not Conor.

It's three people I wasn't expecting to see in Somerville until graduation in May.

"Wh—what are you guys doing here?" I ask Hugh, Allison, and Landon.

Landon looks to his father. "Told you coming here was a bad idea."

"Landon," Allison chastises.

"Uh, no, it's great to see you guys. Come on in." I step to the side to allow them inside the duplex. No one answered my question, but if Landon is unhappy about this visit, I have a sinking suspicion I know why they're here.

"I've been thinking a lot about what you said when you were home," Hugh says once they're all inside. "I checked the Holt Hockey schedule... and here we are." He misreads the uneasiness on my face. "Don't worry. Allison and I will find our own seats. You can sit with your friends. You won't even know we're there."

Shit. This is why you don't stick your nose in other people's explosive family drama. I'm pissed at myself, and I'm also annoyed with Conor. Why did he have to show up at the Garrisons' house? Invite me to that party? Drag me further into this mess?

Eve rounds the corner and smiles. "Woah, surprise visit! This is so cool of you guys!"

Cool is not the first adjective I would have chosen.

Allison smiles. "It's nice to see you, Eve. How has senior year been going?"

"Eh, can't complain," Eve replies. "Ben isn't as good-looking as Conor Hart, but he has some good qualities." She grins.

"Eve, really?" I send her a death glare. With any other guy, I'd be embarrassed. With Conor, I'm mortified.

"Sorry, does the family not know you're banging the big man on campus on a regular basis?"

I don't look at the Garrisons, just drag Eve back into the kitchen. As soon as we're out of sight, I whirl on her.

"What the fuck are you doing? Seriously?"

"Too much? Sorry. You know I have no filter when alcohol is involved."

"You're drunk at—" I glance at the clock on the microwave "—2 PM on a Sunday?"

"I had a couple mimosas at brunch with Mary," Eve admits. "I had to in order to get through the story about the crew guy she's after now. I'm still bummed things didn't work out with Clayton. He was much more entertaining to hear stories about. Like when—"

“We’re getting way off track. Do not mention my sex life or Conor to the Garrisons in any way, shape, or form. Capiche?”

Eve sighs. “Capiche.” After a minute, she adds a sheepish “Sorry.”

I take a deep breath and head back out into the living room. The Garrisons are all standing around uncomfortably. “Sorry. Eve overindulged at brunch and likes to spout off nonsense.”

Allison gives me a small smile.

“So... you’re here for the game?” It comes out like more of a question than a statement.

“That was the plan,” Hugh replies.

Landon is looking between the nest I made on the couch and me. “You weren’t planning to go to the game?” he asks me.

I shift awkwardly. “Um, no.”

“Oh,” Allison says, exchanging a glance with Hugh. Obviously, this wasn’t an outcome they were expecting.

“I had some... stuff to do,” I explain. “But it’s fine. I’ll go. Let’s all go.” I summon some fake cheer. “Just let me go get changed. Be right back!”

I dart down the hall before any of them can say anything. I change out of the sweatpants I’m wearing into jeans and a sweater, pulling on a *Holt* ballcap at the last minute so it’s clear what school I’m supporting. There’s a knock on my door just as I’m pulling my hair back.

“Yeah?”

I'm expecting it to be Eve, either with more drunken nonsense or apologies, but a male voice is the one that asks, "Can I come in?"

"Sure," I call back.

The door opens and Landon steps into my room. He looks around curiously for a minute before settling his gaze on me. He came to help me move in back in August, but this is the first time he's been here since.

"Room came out well," he says.

"Thanks." I snap an elastic in place so my hair is pulled back into a bun.

"So... what the hell did you say to Dad when you were home?"

"What do you mean?" I ask carefully. "And why aren't you at Brighton?"

"I was home for a gig last night. Matt's uncle hooked us up, after all. This morning, Dad was all 'let's go visit Harlow and catch a hockey game' like it was no big fucking deal. What did you say to him?"

"That he'd never seen Conor play," I reply. "Which is true. I had no idea he'd decide to come to a game. I was just... I don't know. I shouldn't have said anything."

"You're damn right you shouldn't have," Landon snaps. "It's none of your business, Harlow."

"Hugh was asking me about him, Landon. Are you really so insecure you can't handle your dad seeing his other son play once? After you've had him to yourself your whole life?"

Landon's eyes flash. "That was *Conor's* choice. He decided he didn't want a dad, and he wasn't very nice about it,

I might add. That's not on me. That's not on my dad."

"You would have handled it differently? If the roles had been reversed? What if Hugh had stayed with Anna? You would have been happy spending every other weekend there?"

Landon snorts. "Jesus. He's done a real number on you. My parents took you in, Harlow. You really think they're such terrible people?"

"I don't think they're terrible at all, and you know that. I love Hugh and Allison. I'm just trying to get you to see the other side of things. Conor's side."

"He ask you to say something?"

I laugh at the absurdity. "No."

"What does *that* mean?"

"Conor isn't big on having heartfelt conversations about anything involving you guys."

"Great, so he gets to skip the therapy session, but I have to listen to how I should put myself in his shoes?"

"I said he isn't big on them, not that we haven't had them," I reply, then sigh. "Come on, let's go."

We head out into the hallway. Landon lets out a long breath. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have snapped at you. I hate fighting with you. It's just... he's always been that *one* thing, you know? You dating him? It never even occurred to me."

"I'm not dating him."

I can tell Landon wants to ask more questions, but he doesn't have a chance to before we reach the living room. Allison and Hugh have taken seats on the couch.

“Ready?” I ask with a bright smile. “We can drive around campus for a bit, grab some coffee, and then hit the rink.”

“Okay,” Allison replies carefully.

“Bye, Eve!” I call as we head outside.

It’s raining out. No surprise there. The misty, wet weather matches my mood. Anxious. Uncertain. Things between me and Conor are constantly shifting. Mostly toward closer, but I know neither of us has forgotten the complicating factors. Selfishly, I’m worried this visit is going to upset the fragile balance between us.

I’m careful not to display any of those concerns as I lead Hugh, Allison, and Landon around Holt’s campus and then downtown. Allison is in her element, explaining everything that’s changed to the rest of us. Hugh studies the campus curiously, almost nervously. I wonder if he’s picturing Conor around every corner. Or anticipating seeing him play later. Landon appears bored, but I know him well enough to tell he’s apprehensive about the game later as well.

We stop in town for coffee and doughnuts, then head to the ice rink. Trepidation ratchets up several more notches in the car when we reach the packed parking lot. Unsurprisingly, the fact that this is the first playoff game has drawn an even larger crowd than usual. The Garrisons all appear as taken aback by the turnout as I was the first game I attended here.

“Wow. This is really something,” Allison states, looking around at the crowd.

It’s not just Holt students here. There are a few flashes of maroon indicating loyalty to the opposing team, but also some younger and older attendees who are clearly local residents or family members.

“We’ll go find some seats,” Hugh says. “Meet you guys after the game?”

“Sure, sounds good,” I reply. “Come on,” I tell Landon.

I lead him over to where I’ve already spotted Mary sitting with a few friends. I introduce Landon to them all, and then we settle onto the wooden bleachers just as navy and maroon jerseys start to spill out on the ice.

Mary and Landon are chatting easily, and I let them talk as I focus my gaze on the ice. On number fifteen.

Warm-ups end. The national anthem is sung. I look over at Landon. He’s still talking with Mary, but sneaking looks at the ice.

“—seen much hockey?” Mary asks.

I tune back in to their conversation, curious to hear what Landon’s response will be.

“None,” he replies. “This is my first game.”

“Oh, wow. Well, I’m far from an expert, but if you have any questions, I’ll try to answer them.”

“Great. Thanks.”

“You picked up the game pretty quickly, right Harlow?” Mary leans forward to ask me.

“Sure,” I reply.

“She’d never been to one before this season,” she explains to Landon.

“That’s what I heard,” he replies. “Pretty surprising she’s become such a rabid fan all of a sudden.”

I send Landon a pointed glare for that comment. “This is only the second game I’ve been to.”

“I’m pretty sure it was Conor Hart-motivated,” Mary mock whispers.

I start to regret not sharing the fact my best friend is biologically related to Conor with any of my friends here.

“I’m sitting right here, Mary,” I state.

“I know! You’ve been so stingy with details. You were all over each other when we went bowling, and then—”

“The game is starting!” I interrupt.

Mary isn’t fooled by my attempt to change the subject but has the manners not to press me on it further. “Okay, fine. Your business.” She turns to look at the ice.

“I’m sorry. None of them know about... you know,” I whisper to Landon.

Rather than acknowledge my apology, he asks “How come you weren’t planning to come?”

“I’m not that big of a hockey fan,” I reply.

Landon raises both eyebrows.

I try again. “Things between us are complicated.”

“Huh.” Landon looks at the ice, where streaks of color are now darting about and chasing the puck.

As far as reactions go, I guess I’ve witnessed worse.



The game ends an hour later. Holt is one step closer to a championship.

The jubilant crowd trickles out slowly. Hugh and Allison meet us in the lobby. I’m curious to hear what they both have

to say about the game, but they're in a conversation with another middle-aged couple they met from Wisconsin. I assume they have a child on one of the teams because it seems like an awfully long trip to make otherwise.

Their conversation drags and drags. Landon lets out a bored sigh and drifts over to the concession stand to get a water. He leans against the wall and starts scrolling through his phone.

I have a bad feeling even before I hear the door slam.

Conor rounds the corner, and all the exuberance and excitement he displayed on the ice earlier disappears like a balloon that's been popped. The broad grin he was sporting slides off his face. He huffs an unamused laugh, then keeps walking.

Right past me toward the exit.

"Conor!" No response or reaction. He just keeps walking.
"*Conor!*"

Still nothing. I don't look at the Garrisons; I jog after him. He reaches the double doors that lead out to the parking lot right as I reach him.

"Conor," I snap again.

He whirls on me. "What the fuck are they doing here, Harlow? You said you weren't even coming."

"Hi, Harlow, thanks for coming to my game. Really nice of you to support the team.' 'Aw, thanks Hart. Congrats on the win. We should celebrate later,'" I say sarcastically.

Rather than crack a smile at my impersonation of his voice or apologize, he stares at me. And I see it.

How much I underestimated his hatred of the Garrisons.

How much I overestimated any affection toward me.

“They’re your family, Conor,” I say softly. “They wanted to support you.”

“Those people don’t mean anything to me,” he snaps. “And if you want this shit between us to continue, you need to figure that out!”

“By this ‘shit between us,’ you mean the fact that you fuck me every chance you get?”

“Don’t make yourself a package deal with them,” Conor warns. “Things between us are despite your association with them, not because I want to have any. Got it?”

“Yup, I *got it*.” I start to turn away, but look back. He’s still in the same spot. “Nothing to do with us, huh?”

Then, I stalk away.



“You didn’t see the video of it?” Landon sounds incredulous. “Come on, the guy sounded just like Jim.”

“I’ll look it up later.”

“You have your phone, right? Just type in—”

“I’ll look later, Landon.”

“Okay, fine.” He shrugs, confused about my reluctance to go on social media.

I’m glad he’s clueless.

We’ve both attempted to act normal with each other since Conor’s blow-up earlier. Pretty sure Landon realizing I don’t want to go on my phone because I follow most of the hockey

team and don't want to see the way they're celebrating this afternoon's playoff win would not go over well.

The doorbell rings just as another episode of *The Office* comes on.

"Pause it," I say as I stand.

"Pause it?" Landon laughs. "We've seen this episode at least eight times."

"My place, my rules," I state, smirking. "Pause it."

Landon sighs dramatically but complies. Pausing whatever we're watching together has been a source of controversy between us for as long as I can remember. As long as it's something we've seen before—which is almost always the case—Landon is more than fine with never stopping anything. I'm the exact opposite. Whether I know what gaps to fill in or not, I have to experience the whole thing every time.

"Someone's at the door," Eve tells me as I pass by the kitchen table. She doesn't even look up from the notes she's studying.

"Yeah, I heard," I reply, rolling my eyes.

Any amusement evaporates when I walk into the entryway and open the door. Conor looks up from his feet, then down at my front stoop, then back at me again. It's started drizzling out. Droplets of water are dripping from his hair and rolling down the chiseled planes of his face. He seems unbothered by the rivulets as he shoves his hands into his pockets.

The only sound is the patter of raindrops as I step onto the porch and close the door behind me.

"I'm sorry," he finally says. "I shouldn't have gone off on you like that."

“I was just trying to get you to see that they care, Conor. That they’d showed up and were proud of you.”

“Yeah. They’re great at taking the high road.” Conor scoffs and looks away at the rain dribbling off the roof.

“It could have been your last game of the season. The last college game you’ll play in. They showed up... and I don’t know. I thought that maybe in some small way you’d want them to see you play. I was wrong. Obviously.”

“It wasn’t my last game.”

“I’m sure you’ll make it to the championship. I didn’t mean it like that.”

“My mom was supposed to come.”

“She didn’t not come because they—”

“No. She just got called into the hospital last minute.” Conor studies me. “Is Landon here? Staying with you?”

“Yes,” I answer carefully.

“Anything happen between you two?”

I laugh. “What? Are you serious?” His face says yes. “Things aren’t like that between us, Conor. They never have been.”

“They’re like that for him, Harlow.” I start to speak, but he keeps talking. “Not that guys and girls can’t just be friends. It’s just highly unlikely if the girl in that scenario looks like you.”

“You’re wrong,” I inform him.

Conor shrugs. “Maybe. I don’t think so. Especially since this.” He gestures between us.

“Is that why you came over here?” I snap. “Because you’re worried I’m going to hook up with your brother to punish you for acting like a jerk?”

“Nah. Pretty sure you don’t feel that way about him. I came over because I feel shitty about our last conversation.”

“I feel shitty about it, too,” I admit. I’m mad at him. I also want to step forward and kiss him.

Conor doesn’t react to my admission. He’s looking away again, this time at the grass that’s getting a good soaking. I trace his profile. The strong jaw and the proud clench to it. Thanks to the rain, I can smell his cedarwood cologne. I inhale deeply, trying to drag up some resolution. I can’t do this with him anymore. The highs are headed for a pitfall. It will hurt less if I crash us myself.

I hope.

“I’m in a senior thesis class this semester,” I start. He knows; he’s listened to me talk about it. But I need to file away any familiarity. “This girl I’ve had a few other classes with is in it... she’s running the Boston Marathon this summer. Suggested we train together.”

“You should do it,” Conor encourages, looking at me again.

“Yeah, I’m going to.” I smile as my stomach falls. I should be glad he’s making this so easy on me. I’m not, and the crushing disappointment edges into a frightening reality.

“We should probably stop sleeping together, too.” I keep my voice even and calm. Nonchalant.

“Oh.” The word doesn’t tell me anything, and neither does his tone. It’s as if neutral had a sound. When he speaks again, it’s not what I expect. “Giving it another go with Aquaman?”

I laugh like it will be that easy to move on. Like feelings are a switch you can turn on and off whenever you feel like it. Maybe they are. For Conor.

“We’ll see.” I won’t be. Eric has been nothing but gracious since I turned down his offer of a second date. I’ve made it clear to him I’d rather be friends. But leaving Conor with the impression I’m unbothered by ending our friends with benefits arrangement is my main objective in this conversation, so I keep the possibility open.

I don’t tease him back about returning to his playboy ways. Maybe he never strayed from them. Maybe he’s been screwing half of campus the whole time he’s been screwing me. Conor studies me, and I worry my silence is saying more than any words might.

“Good luck with the rest of the season. I might even come to another game. The last one—well last one before today—wasn’t terrible.” There, that sounded carefree.

“I *am* sorry, Harlow. I know you didn’t mean to... Things with them... they’re just a mess.”

“I know they’re a mess,” I say. “Now you won’t have to worry about seeing any of them.”

“Yeah. Right.” He kicks the cement step a couple of times. “Well, I’ll see you around.”

“See you.”

He nods once before he turns and walks away.

I stay in place, leaning against the doorframe and inhaling the perfume of fresh rain. Watching the water fall outside and yelling at my eyeballs to keep it at bay.

I told myself I’d never, ever fall in love with Conor Hart.

Famous last words.



Landon's sitting slouched in the same position as he was when I left the living room. Except now his forearms are tensed and his back is rigid.

"Was that Conor?"

"Nope," I lie smoothly. Landon is the last person I feel like confiding in about what just happened.

"It—it wasn't?" Landon's thrown.

"No. Just some girl looking for directions to a party." My lying skills aren't much better than Eve's, clearly.

Landon looks surprised. "What? Was she drunk?"

"Maybe," I reply breezily. "Want to go get some doughnuts?"

I'm craving either that or alcohol, but Landon will probably sense something's wrong if I start pounding shots. Fried dough it is. Dinner with Garrisons earlier was a strained event after the scene with Conor. None of us ordered dessert before Hugh and Allison headed to their hotel and Landon and I returned here.

"Uh, sure."

"Great." I stand and shrug on a sweatshirt. "Ready?"

"Now?"

"I'm hungry."

Landon eyes the half-eaten bowl of popcorn but stands. "Yeah, all right."

He follows me into the kitchen.

“Want a doughnut?” I ask Eve.

“No, I’m good,” she replies.

She’s eyeing me closely, but thankfully keeps her mouth shut. I’m glad Conor came over while she was sober.

The drive to Holey Moley is filled with a recap of Landon’s gig last night. The doughnut shop is mostly empty when we enter. It’s too late in the day for any coffee drinkers and too early for any drunk students.

“Have you ever thought about us dating?” I blurt as we sit down.

Landon eyes me as he takes a bite of his doughnut. He swallows and takes a sip of water. “I had a big crush on you when we were little. My mom used to tease me about it all the time. Said we’d get married one day.”

I half smile. “My mom teased me too. I was always so excited for you guys to come visit.”

“My friends would always tell me to ask you out,” Landon admits. “I’d show them photos from our trips and they’d go on and on about how hot you were.”

“I’m not hot anymore?” I tease.

Landon rolls his eyes. “You know you are. But your parents... you came to live with us... I don’t know. I was happy being friends. I met Kelly freshman year.”

“Do you think you’ll get back together with her?” I ask.

“No. I don’t think so. She...” he pauses again, weighing his words. “She tried to hook up with Conor over winter break.”

I school my expression into neutral, but it doesn't matter. We've known each other practically since we were born. He can read the truth on my face.

"He told you."

"Yeah," I admit.

"He tell you he took her upstairs? Three different people told me they saw them leaving the same bedroom."

He didn't, and I know Landon catches my flinch.

"No. He didn't tell me that." Conor did tell me he didn't sleep with Kelly, and despite what Landon thinks, I believe him.

"You were the one girl I thought would always pick me over him."

"I'm sorry, Land. I've been a shitty friend. I got caught up in him."

"It's fine, Harlie. Really. We're good. Although, I hope you asking me if I've ever considered us dating isn't your way of hitting on me. Because I seriously expected better game from you."

I snort. "No, I'm not hitting on you. You're an amazing guy, but I've never felt that way about you."

"Phew. Because if you and I started dating, I'm certain Conor will hate me even more than he does now."

"Conor couldn't care less."

Landon's hazel eyes assess me. "Lost girl stopped by, huh?"

I flush. "Sorry. I just didn't want to get into another fight."

"Do you want to talk about it?"

“No. I really don’t.”

“Okay,” Landon replies.

That’s the end of our conversation.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

CONOR

The annoying buzz of my phone wakes me up. At first, I think it's the alarm I set before promptly passing out. Instead, I roll over to see *Mom* flashing across the screen.

“Hey,” I answer, my voice gravelly with sleep. I clear my throat. “Everything okay?” My mom is more the quick text than long conversation type.

“I can't call my only child?”

“You *can*. You just normally text.”

“If I'd texted, would I have gotten a warmer greeting?”

I let out a long exhale. “Sorry. I'm stressed.”

“Girl trouble?” she teases.

I don't answer right away, hoping she'll drop it. Aside from giving me the safe sex talk more times than I could count—side effect of experiencing a surprise pregnancy herself, I guess—my mother's never been the type to ask me about my love life.

Rather than move on, she asks “Are you still seeing Harlow?”

“Nah. That was just casual.”

“Conor...”

“What? I wasn’t rude about it. And *she* was the one who ended things with *me*, okay?”

“Really?”

“Yes.” The word stings.

I’ve barely seen Harlow in the month since she ended our fuck buddies arrangement. I’ve dedicated every minute I can to pursuing one goal and one goal only. It’s paid off. We’re playing for the Division III championship tomorrow. After that game ends—win or lose—I’m a little worried about how I’ll handle that. Even throwing myself into hockey, I’ve spent an unhealthy amount of time thinking about her.

I miss having her in my bed. No surprise there. But I also miss things I didn’t expect to. That ugly yellow raincoat. How she usually smells like chlorine. The way her lip twitches when I say something she’s too stubborn to laugh at.

“Hmmm,” is my mother’s infuriatingly vague response.

I roll my eyes. I’m not touching it.

“I should get to dinner. Kind of a big day tomorrow.”

“I’m sorry I can’t be there, Conor.”

“It’s fine, Mom. Really.”

“I’m proud of you, kid. No matter what happens.”

“Thanks,” I mutter, embarrassed.

“And... so is your father. He wanted me to wish you good luck.”

Shock ripples through me. “You *talked* to him?”

“He stopped by a couple of days ago. Said you haven’t been returning his calls.”

“I haven’t.” I owe whoever invented caller ID.

She sighs. “Conor...”

“What?” I snap.

“He just wants to know what’s going on in your life.”

“He doesn’t have any right to.”

“He’s your father. He loves you. Whatever his faults, the mistakes he’s made, his shortcomings—I’m not denying or defending any of them—he’s still your father and he loves you, Conor.”

“Doesn’t change anything that happened.”

“I know. It could change what happens, though.”

“You’re seriously telling me to let everything go? It’s just been an unfortunate twenty-two years so far. Let’s move on and be one big happy family?”

“It doesn’t have to be all or nothing,” she replies. “It can be one phone call. Coffee.” I snort. Her voice softens. “I know my past with him has played a role in your relationship with him, and I was selfish to let it. He’s a good person, Conor. Don’t be afraid to find that out for yourself.”

“I guess now I know why you didn’t text.” I sigh.

“Just think about it. I love you, Conor.”

“Yeah. Love you, too,” I reply before hanging up.

Hunter is still passed out in the twin bed beside mine. His feet are hanging off the end of it, and I snap a photo before I call his name. “Morgan! Let’s go!”

He mumbles gibberish as I move about the room, pulling on my matching *Holt Hockey* apparel and then grabbing a room key as well. Hunter stumbles to his feet with a groan.

“How long of a nap was that? Ten minutes?”

I check the time on my phone. “Two hours.”

“Ugh. All right, I guess I’ll be awake enough to hit the bars.” He catches a glimpse of my face and laughs. “Relax, Hart. I’ll be bright-eyed and bushy-tailed tomorrow.”

“You better be.”

“I will be. I know what this game means to you, man.” He’s uncharacteristically serious. “I won’t fuck it up.”

“I know you won’t. Sorry. I’m just...”

Hunter pulls on his own *Holt Hockey* apparel. “Well aware you’re a stressed-out control freak most of the time, Hart. Let’s go grab some grub, okay?”

I scoff but nod as we head out into the carpeted hallway. The hotel Holt put us up in for the championship is a shithole. No surprise there. The carpeting is stained and scuffed, and the smell of artificial cleaner hangs heavily in the air. It’s the type of place you’d see on a murder documentary and think, *yeah, of course it took place there.*

I’ve spent the better part of a year preparing for tomorrow, though, so I don’t let the subpar accommodations get into my head. I don’t let myself think about the cheap furnishings or the funky smell. I let plays and opponents’ weaknesses infiltrate my brain instead. I don’t care where I sleep, as long as tomorrow is the last day I wake up without a national championship.

I’m so close I can taste it. Imagine the weight of the trophy when I lift it above my head. Picture the silver flashing under the stadium’s lights. Reality, not just a dream.

“Hart. HART!”

“Yeah?” I startle, glancing over at Hunter.

“You’ve got to press the button, dude.”

“Oh. Right.” I jab the *Down* button.

The rest of the team is waiting in the lobby. Lacking any creativity, we end up in the hotel’s restaurant. It’s half-empty, which doesn’t bode well for its cuisine. I know anything I eat tonight will taste like sawdust, though.

Dinner is punctuated by the occasional joke or tease, but the majority is filled by the clank of metal utensils against china. Nervous energy hums through the air, electric and tangible. Willis’ knee bounces so nervously it’s a wonder the whole tabletop doesn’t slide off and hit the floor. Hopefully he’ll have better control of his limbs in goal tomorrow.

Anxiety reaches a fever pitch when the meal ends. Coach Keller stands and clears his throat.

Silence falls. Among us, and the half dozen other people who made the questionable decision not only to sleep in this hotel, but also to eat here.

“I’m no Kurt Russell,” he starts.

“Holy shit. Did Coach seriously just make a pop culture reference?” Hunter whispers to me.

“*Miracle* is more than a decade old. Doesn’t count,” Aidan counters from my other side.

Robby raises his hand like the impertinent asshole he is.

Coach sighs. “Sampson.”

“Coach. The team wants to know. If we win, will we see any positive emotion from you at all?”

Coach Keller's face looks like it was carved from stone. "Win, and you'll find out. I don't believe in luck or happenstance or fate. I believe in hard work and drive and determination. You boys... you're unlike any team I've ever coached. For the past three years, I've watched Hart work harder than any one player should to keep this team afloat. For the first time, all of the rest of you rose to the challenge. That's not to say other teams haven't tried to. But the simple fact is, not everyone is born with the will and the urge to succeed to win. I've struggled with it myself. There were parts of my life I hoped might turn out one way. Instead, they turned out another. I didn't fight those circumstances. Not the way I should have. Not the way you all have. Truth is, Division III sports are a crapshoot. We're the teams no one cares about unless they compete against us. This season, you made people care. People think they love to root for the underdog. The truth is, they only love to do so if the underdog wins. And that is exactly what we're going to do tomorrow, boys. We're going to win. Because we're the better team. Because you've earned it with sweat and blood. Because if you don't give it your all tomorrow, you'll regret it. I promise you that. These moments, they stay with you, boys. Win or lose. Remember that."

Coach Keller looks around the table with a stoic expression.

"I'm headed to bed. Any of you choose other ways to spend the evening hours, and I'll have some words for you. I imagine Hart will as well."

He heads for the elevators, with Dean close behind.

"Night, guys." I gulp the rest of my soda and trace Coach's steps. None of my teammates follow me, and I'm not

surprised. I'm relieved. I need a minute to get my raging emotions under control.

Coach's speech made tomorrow real. Not in a way that lowered any of the expectations on me. Coach is right. This season, the rest of the guys stepped up in a way most I've played with never did. That doesn't mean all eyes won't still be on me tomorrow.

I head back to the room I'm sharing with Hunter. I went especially hard during practice earlier, both to burn off nervous energy and to ensure I sleep well tonight. We'll see if either were successful attempts.

Hunter enters the room as I'm leaving the bathroom.

"Thanks for not waiting, Hart," he tells me.

"I had no idea how long you'd be talking for. I'm trying to get a decent night's sleep," I reply. "How many of the guys went out?"

Hunter looks amused. "Hart. There's not a guy on the team going out tonight. Are you kidding me? We all know how hard you've worked for this. How much you want it. You seriously think any of us are going to do anything to jeopardize that for you?"

"Well, not on purpose," I acquiesce.

"Not by accident, either," Hunter replies. "And not to take away from the team's thoughtfulness, but there's something to be said for limited options, too. It's not like we're staying in a mecca of entertainment and nightlife."

I chuckle. "True."

The neutral location selected by the college hockey committee has even less to offer than Somerville. A deliberate

choice, I'm certain.

Hunter finishes getting ready for bed as I slide under the covers. He flicks out the light before climbing into the twin bed across from me.

"Night, Hart," he tells me, then promptly passes out.

I listen to Hunter's deep, even snores enviously. Random thoughts percolate through my head. Hockey plays. English assignments. The conversation with my mom earlier. Harlow.

Sick of lying here trapped in my own head, I grab my phone and room key and walk into the hallway. The dulled hum of fluorescent lights sounds above me as I walk to the end of the hall and look out the hotel's window. There's not much of a view. Just the mowed stretch of grass that extends for about twenty feet before being interrupted by the asphalt of the parking lot.

I pull out my phone and study it for a good minute before tapping a number. This is one of those borderline regret-doing-it, or regret-not-doing-it-more moments.

Hugh answers on the third ring. "Hello?" he asks, sounding cautious. I take it to mean he programmed my number in his phone.

"Hi. It's Conor," I say anyway.

"Oh." Something drops in the background. "Hi. I mean, hello."

Silence. I edge closer to regretting doing it.

"Big day tomorrow? The championship?"

"Yes," I confirm.

"Do you feel ready?"

“I think it’s one of those things you can’t feel ready for. But I’m prepared.” I let out a small laugh, thinking of all the work that’s gone into getting ready for the game tomorrow. “I’m really prepared.”

“That’s all you can ask for. I’m impressed—proud—Conor. Everything you’ve accomplished with hockey, with so many things.”

“Thanks.” My voice comes out hoarse, so I clear my throat. I’ve never had any issues being honest with Hugh Garrison. “I’m not sure if I’ll ever get over it. What happened with you and Mom. With you and me.”

“It’s okay if you don’t. You don’t owe me anything. All I want is for you to be happy. If that can involve me, I’d love it to. If not, well, I’ll understand that too.”

“Okay,” I say quietly. “I should, uh, get to bed.”

“Sure. And Conor?”

“Yeah?”

“The playoff game was all me, okay? Harlow—she didn’t have anything to do with us showing up. Aside from telling me my attempts to be involved in your life shouldn’t have ended when you stopped coming over. She was right. The decision was—is—yours, but that doesn’t mean you shouldn’t have had the option. I’m sorry about that. Sorry for a lot of things.”

“Okay,” I reply.

“One other thing? I don’t know when—if—we’ll talk again, and that’s completely up to you. But I’ve known Harlow since she was a toddler. She speaks up about the things she feels strongly about. For the people she feels strongly about.”

“Oh,” is my brilliant response.

“Good luck tomorrow, Conor. Not that you need it.”



For a game I’ve spent months—years—anticipating, the championship passes in a complete blur. Time tends to slow down when I’m on the ice. Cease to exist altogether, even. I’m not dreading or looking forward to anything else. I’m completely focused on the task at hand. On skating as fast as I can and shooting as accurately as possible.

And it pays off. The scoreboard reads 4-2 when the final buzzer sounds. Any fatigue fades when I look up at the glowing set of numbers that proclaim Holt—proclaim me—champions.

I’m swarmed by teammates who are hooting and hollering. Joyous and exuberant. I chased this victory as a steppingstone for what I hope will involve victories played in front of sold-out crowds rather than half-empty arenas. Lifting the Stanley Cup instead of a scratched trophy shorter than my forearm. But for all the other guys on the ice with me? This is their final destination. The pinnacle of their athletic careers is taking place right now.

The same is true of Coach Keller. I watch as he stands with Coach Dean, his mouth opening and closing twice as he stares out at the navy jerseys celebrating. No matter his confidence in me, in the rest of the guys, sports are filled with unknowns. It’s why each match up remains entertaining. There’s always the chance for a new narrative to be spun. Underdog versus dynasty. Legend versus up and comer. Being a coach—being a

player—there's always a limit to what you can control. Injuries. Calls on the ice. Plain old luck. They all play a role.

We shake hands, take a team picture, and then file off the ice into our temporary locker room. The initial shock has begun to fade, letting in disbelief and incredulity.

“It's not that I didn't think we would win. It's just... we *actually* won,” Robby says as we enter the locker room.

“I know,” Aidan responds, sounding awed.

The locker room is louder than I've ever heard it as we all pull off our gear. But silence descends when Coach Keller enters the space.

“You all know I can't give speeches for shit,” he states. “It's why I'm a hockey coach, not a motivational speaker.”

“Hear, hear!” Robby calls.

“Can it, Sampson,” Coach shouts. His voice softens a hair. “That being said, I'm proud of you all. Each one of you. You stepped up all season, and you just played a hell of a game. Been a pleasure to coach you all. For those of you who aren't seniors, I'll deny ever saying that. Now get showered and get on the bus. I'm not spending the next six hours sitting and smelling your funk.”

Hunter is the one who starts the clap. The rest of us join in, letting the slap of our hands echo against the metal lockers lining the walls.

“Yeah, yeah. Get changed, boys.” Coach is as brusque as ever, but I catch a pink tinge in his cheeks that makes me think he doesn't hate the recognition as much as he acts like he does.

The whole team showers and changes, then heads out into the parking lot where the coach bus that's waiting to transport

us back to Somerville is located.

I toss my hockey bag into the cargo container. A strong hand grips my shoulder. I glance over at Coach Keller.

“Hell of a game, Hart. If you don’t get signed, there’s not a decent scout left. There isn’t a thing more you could have done, you hear me?”

I nod. “Yeah, I hear you. Thanks, Coach.”

He squeezes my shoulder and gives me a small smile before moving away. When you want something badly—so badly the thought of *not* getting it makes your stomach ache and your heart hurt—your worst fear is looking back and wondering if you could have done something differently. Despite Coach’s assurance, I know if I don’t make it to the pros, I’ll always wonder if there was something else I could have done. But at least I’ll always have the memory of staring up at the scoreboard at this tiny rink in the middle of nowhere, knowing I achieved what I set out to.

I climb up the stairs of the bus, feeling exhaustion permeate my body. Every face I pass looks just as tired, and I experience a swell of appreciation for everything the rest of the guys on this bus contributed to my glimmer of a shot. I flop down in the first open seat I come across, pulling my water bottle and a granola bar out of my backpack. I grab my phone out of my pocket when my wireless headphones don’t automatically connect, annoyed.

How great is not having wires, anyway? The only time I’ve appreciated their existence was when Hunter’s headphones died while lifting and we all learned he was listening to a podcast on squirrel populations rather than rap music like the rest of us.

I scroll through some of the messages people have sent as I wait for the headphones to connect. They're mostly from numbers I don't even have saved.

Loud music starts blasting in my ears. Right as I reach Harlow's name. I stare at the *congrats!* she sent until my eyes hurt. I type out three different responses and delete every one of them. I have no idea what to say to her, and I'm too drained—emotionally, physically, mentally—to try and figure it out. I turn off my phone and slide it back into my pocket, closing my eyes and settling in for the long drive back to Somerville.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

HARLOW

My thesis presentation is as good as it's going to get, so I shut my laptop and slide it into my backpack.

“Yay! She’s *finally* done!” Eve celebrates.

“The entire presentation is only allowed to last twenty minutes,” I inform her. “There’s no way that was more than fifteen.”

“It felt like longer.”

Mary laughs from her seat across from me.

“I can’t take anything you say seriously in that, anyway,” I tell Eve, shaking my head at her sheep-patterned pajamas

“Yeah, what is up with the outfit?” Mary asks. “Laundry day?”

“It’s part of her senior year bucket list,” I explain.

“*Our* senior year bucket list,” Eve corrects. “Despite the fact Harlow has yet to contribute to it.”

“Hey! Not true,” I contend. “I went to the basketball game.”

“Yeah, but I was already going. That would have gotten crossed off the list regardless,” Eve counters.

“Well, we should have put double date on the list, because I contributed to that endeavor plenty.”

“You didn’t seem to mind all that much,” Mary tells me slyly.

Eve laughs. “That last date with David was rough. I’ve tried to block it out, but I know way more about French films than I ever wanted to. Ben said he was super nervous.”

I give Eve a grateful smile. Mary still thinks Conor and I have a... something, and I appreciate Eve’s effort to turn the conversation to other topics. Even if it’s a failed dating endeavor.

“What’s still on the list?” Mary asks.

“Well, now that I’ve worn pajamas to class, all that’s left is making out with a stranger and sex in a study room.”

“Wow.” Mary chokes a little on the water she’s drinking. “You really swung for the fences, huh?”

“Yup. And since Harlow is the single one between us, I’m relying on her for the stranger kiss. I keep telling her to find a hot guy with an accent in Ireland.”

“You’re going to Ireland?” Mary asks me.

I nod. “For spring break.”

“That’s so cool! Have you been there before?”

“Yeah,” I reply. “Lots, actually. I was born there, and still have family there.”

“Are your parents going, too?”

I swallow at her innocuous question. “Nope. Just me.”

Eve gives me a concerned look I pretend not to see.

“I’ve got to get to class,” I announce, standing and gathering my stuff from the table in the student center we’re sitting at. “See you guys later.”

Eve and Mary both say goodbye and then begin talking about their own spring break plans. I head past the campus coffee shop, round the corner, and come face to face with... Conor.

We both stop in place. I inhale sharply as I drink in the sight of him. My life has been consumed by my senior thesis presentation and applying to every marine research program I can find. I’ve spent most of the past few weeks in the library and only gone out to Gaffney’s twice. I’ve been being responsible. I’ve also been avoiding this exact moment.

“Hi,” he states.

“Hi,” I reply. “Congrats.”

I utter the same solitary word I’m sure he’s heard countless times as of late.

The same solitary word I texted him because I didn’t know what else to send him.

The same solitary word he never acknowledged.

“Thanks.” There’s no cocky grin. No self-assured smirk.

I may know nothing—next to nothing—about hockey, but I know winning a division championship is a big deal. Looking at Conor’s face right now, you’d never know that. Modesty is not a look I’ve seen on him before. Turns out it’s not one I particularly like. I miss his confidence.

Is he worried about getting signed?

Stressed about something else?

If I was ever the person he might confide fears in, I'm definitely not any longer. I don't ask what's bothering him. Don't tell him I'm proud of him or that I watched the game.

"Training going okay?" he asks me.

We've come full circle.

"Yeah." I nod. When he doesn't say anything, I add, "Lucy and I ran almost the full distance yesterday. I think I'll actually make it to the finish line this summer."

"Great." Not dry. Genuine.

I grasp for something to say. "Big spring break plans?"

"Mexico," he replies.

I'm careful to hide any surprise. I expected him to be going home. Not headed to the land of tequila shots and tan girls in bikinis.

"Oh. Fun." Despite my best attempt, I think some jealousy seeps into my voice. It doesn't take any imagination to picture what that trip will be like.

"I've heard good things," Conor replies easily. I think he's being serious, but I'm not sure. I'm reading so much into what he's saying I'm worried I'm misreading it. "Rest of the guys went without me last year. I was busy training."

So the whole hockey team is involved. *Wonderful.*

"Work hard, play hard, huh?" I admire his work ethic. When he plays, I want it to be with me.

"Something like that. You going anywhere?"

"Uh, yeah. Ireland. I'm visiting my dad's family at their place in the country. They have a sheep farm."

I chide myself for adding those details, then scold myself for chiding myself. Who cares if I made it sound like I'll be isolated on the moor with relatives and farm animals rather than partying in pubs with guys who look like Jamie Fraser?

Conor looks bemused. "Sheep, huh?"

I do my best to act like that was an important thing to share. "Yup. They're cute. It's lambing season."

Amusement flickers, but then he turns serious again. "I'm glad you're going back."

"Yeah, it'll be good. And it's exciting you're leaving the States for the first time."

Some other emotion flashes across his face. Maybe it's the reminder we used to have more meaningful conversations than this collection of awkward small talk.

"Yeah. I've got to get to class. Good to see you, Harlow."

"Yeah. You, too," I reply.

He gives me a small, polite smile, then keeps walking. I stare at the spot where he just was, trying to figure out how that brief encounter was both so meaningful and so empty.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

CONOR

Hunter passes me a shot, then hands a second to Robby. I eye the clear liquid. I've already had more than I should. Five months of sobriety, and my alcohol tolerance is so low it might as well be nonexistent. My teammates couldn't care less. The resort we're staying at has an open bar, and they may have to rethink that policy after hosting hockey players on spring break.

“Bottoms up, boys!”

Everyone around me laughs. Cheers. Shouts.

I suck down the alcohol without cracking a smile.

Aidan gives me a concerned look, but the rest of the guys are too busy eyeing the girls lounging by the pool. They're all accustomed to me acting like a moody motherfucker. They know there's one phone call that will determine my future. I don't really have a back-up plan, aside from the degree I'll get in a couple of months.

Hockey is it.

I'm plenty worried winning a championship won't be enough. But I've come to terms with the fact it's out of my hands now. A waiting game. I'm now plagued by things I *do* have some control over.

I take a seat on one of the stools that line the bar, staring out at the pool. At the turquoise water and white sand just past it that stretch as far as the eye can see. Aside from a trip to Malibu with my mom when I was in middle school, this is the only time I've been to a beach. Washington's dark gray sand and craggy coastline isn't conducive to sunbathing most of the time. The tropical oasis I'm surrounded by is nothing like the damp, cloudy climate I'm used to. I should be having the time of my life right now. Enjoying myself, at the very least.

"This seat taken?"

A blonde girl has appeared next to me. She's pretty. Wearing a blue bikini and a confident expression that tells me this isn't the first time she's approached a guy at a bar.

"Nope."

She takes a seat beside me, leaning back on her elbows against the tiki bar. "You here for spring break?"

"Yeah. You?"

"How'd you know?" She grins and nods to a group of girls watching us, all laughing uncontrollably and clutching margaritas.

"Lucky guess."

I look back at the pool.

I haven't touched a girl since I last slept with Harlow. It wasn't a conscious decision. I just... haven't. Haven't felt any desire to. Not when I was training like crazy and could have used a stress relief. Not when girls were pawing at me as we celebrated winning the championship. Not right now, when I know I could sleep with the girl next to me with minimal effort. Nothing. I'd think there was something wrong with me, if not for the fact seeing Harlow in the student center three

days ago made it clear I'm perfectly capable of experiencing a heady amount of desire. Even now, the memory of her messy red waves and pouty lips stirs my blood. I redirect my thoughts before the chick next to me thinks I'm reacting to her.

"You here with them?" The blonde nods to where Aidan, Hunter, and Robby are gathered a dozen feet away, talking to the bartender. Hunter is gesticulating wildly. Probably bemoaning the lack of Jell-O in the free shots.

"Yup," I reply.

"You as wild as the rest of your friends?"

A flirty response is perched on the tip of my tongue, but I don't let it out. The alcohol coursing through me is making me nauseous, and as pretty as the blonde is, my interest level in her is at an unwavering zero.

"They set a high bar," I reply. "Nice talking to you." I send a small smile her way before getting up and heading over to the guys.

"You're not ditching us for the hot blonde? What the fuck is wrong with you, Hart?" Aidan asks.

"I feel like shit from all the tequila you've been pouring down my throat. That's what is wrong with me. I'm going to chill in the room for a bit."

"Fine. Don't forget about dinner at seven."

"Yes, Mom," I reply.

Aidan flips me off before I leave.



I stare out at the sparkling sea. The waves of the Gulf pound on the sandy shore we played volleyball on earlier. The pool, the ocean, they both remind me of her. How she'd roll out of bed to go swimming. How her eyes would light up when she'd spout some obscure fact about the ocean.

I miss Harlow.

I wonder what she's doing. Constantly.

She's back home. Her real home, not the adopted landscape of Canada. Or of Washington. A place where she has family and roots and history. A place it would make sense for her to settle. There's no shortage of ocean to study from Ireland. It's a freaking island.

"Jesus. We've been looking all over for you." Hunter drops down on the sand beside me. Aidan sits on my other side.

"You must not have looked very hard," I reply. It's pretty much here, the bar, or the pool.

"Okay, Hart." Aidan takes over. "What the fuck is going on with you? If I knew you'd be this much of a wet blanket, I would have thrown you in the dryer before we left Somerville."

"I still haven't heard. You know that."

"Yup, I do. I also think your perpetually bad mood doesn't have anything to do with hockey. Try again."

I blow out a long breath. "I think I fucked up."

"Unsurprising," Hunter mutters.

"Ignore Morgan," Aidan instructs. "Fucked up how? With what?"

"I did more than run with Harlow Hayes."

“God damn it!” Hunter swears.

“Pay up,” Aidan says smugly.

“Seriously? You two are the worst,” I say as Hunter hands Aidan a few bills from his wallet.

“Sorry,” Aidan replies, taking the money and not looking the least bit repentant. “I bet Morgan fifty bucks you’d sleep with her.”

“Unbelievable,” Hunter bemoans. “I should have known. I just figured with your... thing with her...”

Aidan takes over again. “So... what happened?”

“I went off on her about something that wasn’t her fault. She called it quits, and I said okay. And that was it.”

“And you don’t want it to be it?”

“No,” I admit. “I like her. I like her a lot.”

“Did you apologize?” Aidan asks.

“Yes!”

“Genuinely?”

“Yes!”

Aidan looks stumped.

“How was the sex?” Hunter asks.

Aidan snorts; I glare.

“How is that helping?” I question.

“Maybe the sex was bad, and she was using you being a dick to stop getting yours.”

Aidan laughs.

“The sex definitely wasn’t part of the problem,” I reply.

“What *is* the problem, then?” Aidan asks, looking confused. “Just tell her you like her and want to keep screwing. Simple.”

I snort. If only anything between me and Harlow was simple.

“She’s best friends with my half-brother,” I admit. “He and I... we’re not close. We’ve never been close. Things with my dad, with him... They’re a mess. Harlow’s a connection to that clusterfuck.”

“That’s why you used to avoid her,” Hunter realizes.

“Yup. I had every intention of continuing to do so. Then Phillips got involved—”

“Hey!” Aidan protests

“—things got complicated. I didn’t think I’d ever be able to stop seeing her as a connection to them.”

“Sounds like you need to decide whether it’s worth it. If she’s worth it,” Aidan says.

I made that decision a while ago.

I just don’t know if she did.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

CONOR

I grab the bag of pretzels from the vending machine slot and turn to head back toward my study room. I round the corner, and there she is. Talking to a girl with a bob and glasses who takes one look at me and blushes. “Thanks, Harlow. Bye!” She darts off.

Harlow doesn’t look at me until the other girl disappears. Her hair is damp, pulled up into a messy topknot that red strands are already falling out of. She’s wearing athletic shorts and a faded t-shirt. And looking at her makes me feel like I’ve just been leveled on the ice.

“Hey.” She finally glances at me as she fiddles with the strap of her backpack.

“Hey,” I repeat.

“You have a good break?”

“It was all right,” I respond.

Harlow raises both eyebrows. I know the trip was well-documented on social media. I know she follows most of the guys. Follows me, even though I barely posted anything.

“You’re tan,” she notes.

“Lot of sun down there.”

“Right.” She smirks at my lame comment.

My game around Harlow Hayes? Nonexistent.

“How was Ireland?”

“Cloudy.” She grins, and I huff a laugh. “No, it was nice. To see everyone, to be back there.”

“You going back again anytime soon?”

I hold my breath as I wait for her response.

“I don’t think so. North America feels more like home now.”

The rush of relief is ridiculous. I could end up playing anywhere in the country. Just because there won’t be the Atlantic between us doesn’t mean there won’t be plenty of other distance. We’re not together, and Harlow has never given me any indication she wants to be.

“I should go find a spot to study,” Harlow tells me.

“I have a room down the hall... if you want.”

She studies me, as I hope she accepts. Pray she declines.

“Yeah, okay. Sure.”

She follows me down the hall and into the last room on this floor. I clear my shit off half the table, and she settles down in the chair beside me, pulling thick textbooks out of her bag.

This was a terrible idea, I immediately realize. The study rooms are tiny. Pockets of space that line the outer edge of the stacks that fill the center of the library. We’re on the fifth floor, with a sweeping view of campus spread out the back window. There’s one desk that takes up the bulk of the space in the room. A whiteboard hanging on the wall next to the door. The

ventilation system hums in the background. All it's doing is swirling the scent of her citrus shampoo around me.

I open my laptop and try to focus on the essay I'm halfway finished with. Harlow pulls out a bunch of pens and begins flipping through a spiral-bound notebook, highlighting bits and pieces. I'm painfully aware of each centimeter of space between her arm and mine. Awareness sizzles on my skin.

Harlow seems oblivious, pulling out another textbook and skipping through sections. She pulls a bottle of water out of her bag and takes a few sips. Checks her phone and types a message. Pulls her leg up to rest her chin on her knee. Her thigh brushes my arm, and she says "sorry" before glancing over at me.

Busted.

I'm already looking at her.

"This was probably not the greatest idea," I admit.

Harlow just looks at me, twin lines of confusion wrinkling between her green eyes. I close my computer.

"I should head home, anyway. Aidan wants to go to the batting cages."

"No, don't be ridiculous. You were here first. I'll find another spot." Harlow closes her textbook. "I just... you offered."

"I know I did."

She studies me. "I don't want things to be weird. I—I was hoping we could be friendly. Friends."

"We can," I reply. "Just not in small spaces together. Alone."

Her gaze drops. My mesh shorts aren't masking my reaction to her.

"Oh," she realizes.

"Yeah." I start gathering the books I've spread out.

I expect Harlow to do the same. Instead, she leans forward. The smell of grapefruit surrounds me. "Have you ever done it in one of these?"

I still. "What?"

"Have you ever had sex in one of these study rooms?"

"No. Have you?"

"No. I know lots of people who have, though," she tells me. "Kind of always wanted to."

She leans even closer. Her palm makes contact with my thigh, running upwards until she encounters my half-hard dick. She strokes me through the mesh.

"Harlow." Her name is a tortured whisper.

"Will you fuck me against the wall, Hart?"

She's a vixen in faded cotton. I grab her wrist, because I'd much rather come inside her than in my shorts.

"A little quick on the trigger?" She's teasing.

She sees this proposition as a remnant of our ill-fated friends with benefits arrangement because I never told Harlow sex with her means more to me. She's just looking for a final, forbidden fuck. That's all she wants.

"Probably," I answer seriously. "It's been a while."

Her smile fades. "Spring break was only a few weeks ago."

I know guys who would consider a few weeks a while. But I'm talking about a much longer stretch of time. She studies me, but doesn't ask.

“Go over by the wall.”

If she wants this, I'm going to give it to her. It's not like it will be some huge sacrifice on my part. I'm hard enough to hammer nails.

Harlow complies.

I drag the chair she was sitting on around the table and prop it beneath the doorjamb. The doors in the study rooms don't lock, for obvious reasons. You can't see anywhere but directly ahead through the small window, but there's nothing stopping anyone from walking right in. Not that even the threat of that dissuades many horny college students. I know Aidan's trips here rarely involve any academics.

I've never seen the appeal.

Until I approach Harlow leaning back against the white wall, looking at me with want in her eyes. I walk until I'm pressed against her, tucked away in the corner of this room meant for other purposes. I rest my hands on her waist. She sucks in a sharp breath as soon as I touch her.

There's heat in her gaze, but there's also longing. Affection. Intimacy. Lines blur on both sides.

I lean down and kiss her for the first time in months. She moans into my mouth as I tilt my head and tangle my tongue with hers. It's a possessive kiss. A claiming.

In this moment, she's mine.

Harlow grabs my shirt, pulling me even closer. But she doesn't immediately yank it off or delve beneath the material,

the way I'm expecting her to. The way she used to. She wraps a long leg around me, anchoring me to her. I slide my hands under her ass, lifting her up and pulling her more firmly against me. The two layers of fabric between us might as well not exist. The rough slide of her center against my cock is enough to make my balls start tingling. We're fully clothed. That's how insane she makes me.

“Conor. God, Conor. *Conor.*”

Naked need fills her voice as she whispers my name. Sucks on my neck. Pulls at my hair. Dry humps me until I can barely see straight.

“I've missed you. I've missed this.” She murmurs the words against my skin.

I let the wall support her weight and allow my hands to roam. Up the soft skin of her stomach and beneath the flimsy protection of her sports bra. She gasps when I touch her breasts. Trace a trail along her neck with my tongue.

“Please, Conor. Please.” She wriggles against me, trying to force more friction.

“You want my cock?”

“Yes,” she breathes.

I set her down but don't move away. Harlow yanks down her shorts and underwear, then reaches inside my shorts and pulls out my cock. It's an angry purple color, veins protruding. I grab my wallet out of my pocket and toss it over my shoulder once I've pulled the foil packet out of it. The sound of it landing echoes through the room. On the desk, on the floor, who cares?

My dick bobs between us as she fists me, the bulbous tip touching her stomach. I roll the condom on as fast as humanly

possible.

Harlow stretches up and kisses me again, returning her hand to my covered cock. I groan into her mouth as she guides the tip to her entrance, rubbing it against the wetness gathered there.

“I’m already so fucking close, Conor,” she whispers. “I want you inside me.”

I run my hands down her body and curl my palms around her thighs, tilting her open for me. I enter her slowly, inch by inch until I’m fully seated inside of her. Her legs wind around me again. I drag in and out of her languidly, almost all the way out before I sink back in. Both of us watch the spot where our bodies are connected.

It’s torture. Delicious, pleasurable, agonizing torture.

Harlow tightens her legs around me, pulling me deeper inside. I start to move faster. Her fingernails dig into my skin.

“You feel so good,” I whisper. “So fucking good.”

Her head tilts back against the wall, her chest heaving. She’s close. I can feel her starting to pulsate and tighten around me. I quicken my pace, fucking her harder and faster. Harlow convulses around me. She leans forward, kissing me desperately. She bites down on my bottom lip and I come, so hard my vision blurs. I keep moving, prolonging the pleasure. Even once I’ve stopped jerking, I stay inside her. I keep kissing her.

Bit by bit, reality sinks back in. The fact we’re not in my bedroom, or hers. The mountain of work waiting for me. The reasons why we haven’t done this in months.

I slide out of her and set her down. We both move away. Harlow pulls her shorts back on. I tuck myself back into mine

and grab a tissue from the box on the table to fold the condom in before I toss it in the trash.

“I should go. It’s getting late. I forgot my computer charger. I have my thesis presentation tomorrow.” She tosses out the excuses like confetti as she scoops up her books and shoves them into her backpack.

I nod. She’s fleeing. Harlow swings her backpack on and turns to me. The knot holding her hair up is history, most of it tumbling down around her shoulders.

“Good luck with finals,” she tells me.

“Yup. You, too.”

“Thanks for the sex.” Harlow Hayes always surprises me. Propositioning me one minute, frank yet flustered the next.

“Yeah. You, too.”

She told me she misses me during it. Does that count? Do I say it back now?

I don’t have any time to decide. She’s heading for the door. I sink back into my seat, knowing I’ll be minutes behind her. I can’t stay in this room. Won’t be able to focus, thinking about what just happened between us in here. The air smells like sex.

Harlow pulls the chair away from the door, then turns back to me. I expect her to say something, but she doesn’t. She just looks at me. Her cheeks are flushed, her expression unreadable.

“I—I don’t...” Her voice trails off and she exhales. “It’d been a while for me, too.”

She leaves before I can say anything else.

And I’m more confused than ever.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

CONOR

“Congrats, Conor.” My mom hugs me tightly. “I’m so proud of you.”

“Thanks, Mom,” I mutter, embarrassed.

“Now, what place were you saying we should—”

My mom stops talking abruptly.

The crowds at Holt University’s graduation ceremony part to show Harlow and the three Garrisons gathered like one big happy family.

I swallow as Hugh looks over and catches my eye. Recognition, indecision, and uncertainty all scroll across his face.

They’re standing next to one of the gateways that leads out from the central quad where the graduation ceremony just took place. Meaning that, in order to leave, my mom and I will need to walk directly past them. Unless we pull the wildly conspicuous move of walking over to the next nearest gate a hundred feet away.

“Hello, Conor. Anna,” Allison greets as we approach.

I’m not surprised she’s the first to speak. Of the six of us, she has undoubtedly made the most attempts to mend fences. Build bridges. Whatever.

“Hello,” my mother replies politely.

I know the possibility of an encounter like this taking place occurred to the both of us, but the possibility is different from the reality. And we definitely didn’t discuss how we might handle it.

“It was a beautiful ceremony,” Hugh states. “Hopefully it doesn’t rain for Landon’s next year, either. That’s assuming he makes it across the stage and doesn’t run off on a rock tour, of course.”

“I’m going to graduate, Dad.” Landon rolls his eyes.

Hugh grins at him, and I feel sad. Sad for him. Sad for me. We’ve never shared a light-hearted moment like that.

“Congratulations, Harlow,” my mother says.

“Thanks, Anna,” Harlow replies.

Allison and Landon don’t do a great job of hiding their surprise Harlow is on a first name basis with my mother. If I had to guess, they both assumed this is the first time Harlow is meeting the infamous Anna Hart.

“I heard you won the marine biology department’s top award for your thesis presentation. That’s very impressive.”

My mother: worst wingwoman ever. I give her a look she returns with a serene smile.

Harlow beams. “Thank you.” She steps forward. It takes me a couple of seconds to realize she’s headed toward me. Just enough time to open my arms and let her press against me. She smells amazing. Flowery and familiar. The last time we were this close together, I was inside of her. Not a thought I dwell on in front of my mother. My father.

“Congrats, Conor,” she whispers as I tighten my arms around her waist.

“Yeah. You too,” I whisper back.

“Just remember, things will be fine. Either way.”

Hockey. She’s talking about hockey.

“Yeah, I know.”

She steps back. “Can I talk to you for a minute? Alone?”

“Uh, yeah. Sure.” I give my mom a quick glance.

“I’ll wait by that bench.” She doesn’t want to be left alone with the Garrisons. I don’t blame her.

Harlow paces a couple dozen feet away. I reach her and stop.

“So...” She fidgets with the fabric of her graduation gown. “I just wanted to... You asked me a while ago why I’m running the marathon. I lied when you did, and I know that you know that. The truth is...” She takes a deep breath. “My hometown hosts one every summer. This year, it’s being run in memory of my parents. To raise money to donate to an organization that keeps drunk drivers off the road. That’s why I’m running it.”

I don’t say anything as I process this revelation. That marathon is the reason staring at Harlow right now incites emotions aside from anger. I know how hard it is for her to bring her parents up. She still trusts me. But I’m more preoccupied by the fact she’s choosing to tell me this here and now. She’s saying goodbye.

“And I asked you to train me because I was curious. I wanted to know if there was anything more to you. If there

was something beneath the surface. Turns out... it's just surface."

I roll my eyes. She laughs.

"I've got to go finish packing. I may have exaggerated to the Garrisons about exactly how much Eve and I managed to get done last night. Maybe I'll see you later?"

"Uh, yeah. Maybe." Hunter and Aidan have been talking about the epic graduation party they're organizing for the past three weeks. I'm not in the mood to celebrate. Despite receiving a college degree today, my future still feels very uncertain. In no small part, thanks to the girl in front of me. I don't know how to say goodbye to her. Don't know how not to.

I don't know *what* to say. I'm paralyzed with indecision.

"Okay. Bye, Conor." She gives me a bright, carefree smile, then heads back to the Garrisons.



My mom and I end up at a seafood shack by the water for lunch. It's an unseasonably nice day for May: sunny and warm. It's far too early in the season for tourists, though, so we pretty much have the place to ourselves.

"Want to talk about it?" my mom asks after our food is delivered to the table.

I play dumb as I take a bite of fried fish. "Talk about what?"

My mom smiles. "Most of life is messy, Conor."

"That's uplifting. Thanks for the graduation speech."

She laughs before taking a bite of her own food. “Sharing it with someone you care about makes it simpler.”

“Nothing about me and Harlow is simple.”

“Are you in love with her?”

I scoff. “Seriously? Mom, come on.”

“Conor.”

“Okay, fine. A little. Maybe.”

“So yes?”

I sigh. “Yeah. I’m in love with her.”

“So tell her.”

“That’s a bad idea.”

“You don’t think she feels the same way about you?”

I let the recent moments we’ve shared play through my head like a movie. “I’m not sure.”

“And you’re fine never knowing?”

“She’s like his daughter, Mom. How the hell is that supposed to work?”

She sighs and looks away, out at the water. “I handled things with your father the only way I could at the time. I was young and stubborn and I got into a fight with my boyfriend. He went out and got drunk and cheated on me. I found out I was pregnant. She found out she was pregnant. He chose her over me. He didn’t choose Landon over you, Conor. I was scared and hurt, and it was easier to focus on being angry and mad. You were always on my side, and I loved that. Your father made mistakes lots of people do, though. He just paid a higher price because of some crappy timing. It took me a long time to come to terms with that, but I have. You’re more than

old enough to decide how you want to act around him. If you want a relationship with him.”

“I feel like I’d have to forgive him to move forward with Harlow,” I confess. “And I’m not sure if I can do that.”

“Did she say that?”

“Not exactly. I just feel like it’s not fair, constantly putting her in the middle.”

My mom smiles. “Maybe she’s less in the middle than you think. When he came over, Hugh said he told Landon about our mutual mistake after you both were born. That—that one’s on me too, Conor. I’d been the women scorned, and I wanted to know what it felt like to be the scorners. I’m not sure I would have ever chosen to tell you. It would have been really hard for Hugh to tell Landon. It happened fifteen years ago. Something—someone—must have convinced him to finally say something. Make Landon understand your perspective more.”

My mother seems to sense my brain is a tangle.

“Enough heavy. Let’s finish lunch and then you promised me a tour of town.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

HARLOW

Packing up a place is never easy. No matter how excited you are for the next chapter. Because I am. Excited. My thesis award put me over the top for being accepted into the Canadian conservation program that was my first choice for post-grad plans. I'm headed back to the Garrisons' home tomorrow, and then in a couple of weeks I'll be returning to the town I grew up in. First for the marathon, then to start my new life there.

Embarking on the path you always expected—hoped—to walk along is an exciting event. It's also terrifying. I wonder if it's how Conor feels about hockey. Seeing him earlier was hard. If you'd asked who would be the person here I would most miss, Conor Hart wouldn't have been on the list. He would have been on the list of people I never would have considered.

It's funny how you stop viewing people as a whole once you get to know them. I don't just miss Conor. I miss random things I never even knew I noticed about him.

“The wall art all goes, right?” Landon asks, entering my bedroom.

He's half changed from graduation. Suit pants and fancy dress shoes on the bottom, and he's stripped down to a white

undershirt on top that's been paired with a backwards *Brighton* baseball cap and the hammer he's twirling in the air.

"Yeah, it goes," I reply. Landon nods, taking his moving duties seriously. I watch him pry a couple of my framed posters from the wall. One is from the concert I went to with Conor over winter break, and it elicits a mixture of joy and pain. It also serves as a reminder to not buy any mementos with a fuck buddy you're developing feelings for. Because they're a reminder you probably won't want later.

"Harlow, sweetie, what are you thinking about the kitchen equipment? Are you and Eve splitting it up?" Allison walks into the bedroom. "Be careful, Landon! You're going to damage the plaster."

"I think I can manage removing a few posters, Mom," Landon replies dryly.

"All of Eve's stuff is on the island. Mine is on the counter by the fridge," I reply to Allison's original question.

"Okay, perfect." Allison gives Landon a worried look, then disappears.

"No trust," Landon mutters.

I smile before grabbing two plastic bins of clothes and heading down the hallway to stack them in the living room. Hugh is sitting on the living room floor, disassembling the coffee table.

"You don't happen to have the original instructions for this, do you?" he asks when I appear.

"I can check with Eve, but probably not."

"No worries," Hugh replies. His jaw clenches with determination. "I'll figure it out."

I laugh. “Okay.”

I set the bins down and head back into my bedroom. Landon has gotten everything off the walls and stacks the frames all carefully before carrying them down the hall. I stack a couple more bins and turn to follow him.

Eve ducks into my bedroom. “Guess what I remembered to snag from the kitchen before our parents showed up?”

A ripped sheet of lined paper is waved in front of my face.

“Our senior year bucket list?” *Senior Year Bucket List* is scrawled along the top of the paper, so I’m certain it’s a pretty good guess.

“Ding, ding, ding!” Eve studies the list. “We didn’t do terrible. Nine never happened, but I had my doubts about it, anyway. Unless you think the library is still open? Ben might be more amenable now that we don’t have to worry about getting caught and not graduating.”

I glance at the piece of paper. Number nine is *have sex in a study room*.

“Uh, doubtful. You seem to have no idea what a library’s actual hours are. But... that one has already been taken care of.”

“Shut the fuck up! Seriously?”

I nod, feeling my cheeks flush.

“How was it? Were you freaked out about someone walking in the whole time?”

“No. Conor—”

I stop talking, because I didn’t exactly mean for Eve to know who I engaged in semi-public sex with. Based on her

smirk, she already knew.

“Dad got the coffee table disassembled.” Landon walks back into the room and zeroes in on the paper in Eve’s hand. “What’s that?”

“Nothing. Girl stuff.” She tucks the paper in her pocket.

Landon doesn’t look convinced but grabs a suitcase without further comment. Eve flashes me a wide smile before disappearing back into the hallway.



As I walk into the frat house, it occurs to me that this is my last college party. The thought is tinged with more nostalgia than I expected. Yes, they’re mostly sweaty, alcohol-saturated events, but they’ve also been the setting for some of my favorite moments from college.

“Is that Mary?” Landon asks as we enter the living room.

“Someone have a crush?” I tease.

“Shut up, Harlow.” Landon’s ears are pink. “But do I look okay?”

I study the button-down shirt and jeans he changed into after moving and before dinner with Allison and Hugh. “Yes. Very classy casual. Go over and say hi. I’ll grab drinks.”

“Okay,” Landon agrees.

I watch him head over to Mary with a smile, then start in the direction of the kitchen. The house is packed. I’m not the only one looking for a final hurrah in college, clearly.

A familiar figure appears in front of me.

“Hey, Aidan,” I greet, tentatively. Along with their captain, I’ve avoided most of the hockey team for the past couple of months. “Congrats on graduating. And on the championship.”

“Yeah, thanks.” He glances behind me. “New boyfriend?”

I follow his gaze to where Landon is standing, talking to Mary. I’m happy to see they’re both smiling. “Oh. No. He’s just a friend.”

“Huh.” The syllable is heavy with disbelief.

“He is,” I insist, then glance behind him. I spot Hunter Morgan right away. Robby Sampson is next to him. Jack catches my eye and gives me a small smile I return. He’s talking to a pretty blonde, and it doesn’t bother me at all. I’m happy for him. “No, uh, Conor tonight?”

Aidan studies me with the most serious expression I’ve ever seen on the face usually uplifted into a bright smile. “You really think you have a right to ask that?”

I jerk my head back. “Excuse me?”

“Conor’s been a mess for weeks, Harlow. Hell, months. Ever tried living with someone in a perpetually bad mood? It sucks.”

“That doesn’t have anything to do with me. He’s worried about getting signed.”

“He is worried about that,” Aidan agrees. “But you’re wrong it doesn’t have anything to do with you.”

“Look, there’s a lot you don’t know about—”

“Yeah, he told us. You’re friends with the brother he hates. Big fucking deal.”

“Conor said it was no big fucking deal?”

“I’m paraphrasing, okay? Point is, I never would have pushed you guys together if I’d known. You’re a cool chick, but Hart is like a brother to me. Not to mention he’s been a shitty wingman ever since you guys hooked up. Exhibit A: he’s not even here.”

“Look, I’m sorry if you think I messed with Conor. You may not have known about our past, but he did. If he didn’t think he could handle it or it would mess with hockey or whatever you’re implying, then—”

“This doesn’t have anything to do with that. You’re the one who’s been fucking with Hart’s head, Harlow.”

“I—what? He told you that?”

“Hart is the less is more type when it comes to talking about feelings. But he didn’t have to tell me shit. It’s obvious he’s crazy about you.”

“If he didn’t tell you that, I don’t know how you could possibly know that.”

“I’ve known Hart for four years. Seen him with a lot of girls. You seriously had no idea you were a lot more than a hook-up to him?”

“I—” Truthfully, I don’t know. I hoped. “I have no idea what he’s thinking most of the time.”

“Maybe try asking him?” I glare at Aidan. He laughs, some of his usual good humor restored. “I mean it. Or tell him how you feel about him.”

“What do you mean?” I ask carefully.

“I mean, I’m certain Hart has no idea how you feel about him.”

“What makes you think *you* know how I feel about him?” I contend.

“Rather than make polite chit chat with me like you used to at parties, you asked about Hart. Obviously, you have heart eyes for him.”

I don’t argue, because he’s not wrong. Something the smug smirk he gives me most definitely catches.

“Hart mentioned turning in his key to the rink earlier. Might try there. Not that you’re interested in seeing him, or anything.”

I roll my eyes at his sarcasm. “I’ll see you around, Aidan.” Reluctantly, I add, “Thanks.”

“Far be it from me to stand in the way of true love. Especially since I take some credit for instigating this whole thing.”

I scoff at Aidan uttering the phrase true love, but Conor clearly said something to him about us, so I also take it as a possible promising sign.

“Jell-O shot?” Hunter makes his way over to us, holding several.

“Seriously, Morgan? I was psyching Harlow up to talk to Hart.”

“Oh,” Hunter realizes. Then, he turns and holds a blue one out to me. “In that case, take one. Just in case, you know.”

“In case of what?” I counter, but I slurp it down. Disgusting texture, but effective. I feel the burn of alcohol immediately.

“Nothing. Hart is super easygoing and easy to read. It’ll be fine.”

I snort. “Aidan is a better wingman.” I turn to leave, but then reconsider. I spin back and grab another Jell-O shot from Hunter, this time red. “But you’re right. So just in case.”

I gulp a second shot down as well. Rather than continue to the kitchen, I head back for Landon. He’s talking to a guy I’ve never seen before, but heads over to me as soon as he sees me walking toward him.

“You good?” He glances behind me, suggesting Hunter and Aidan are still standing there.

“Where’s Mary?” I ask.

“She went to the bathroom. Where are our drinks?”

“I got side-tracked,” I admit. “And now... Can you drive me someplace?”

“Now?” Landon glances around incredulously, as if checking to see if anyone else is witnessing the crazy spewing out of my mouth.

“Now,” I confirm. “You haven’t had anything to drink, right?”

“I’m spending the night in the same hotel room as my parents because it’s marginally better than sleeping on the floor of your place now that the couch is gone. No, I haven’t had anything to drink.”

“Great. Let’s go.”

I grab his hand and haul him outside.

“How much have *you* had to drink?” Landon questions as I tug him in the direction of my car. “Is this some sort of senior prank Eve came up with? Because you might be free from college, but I’m not. I’m pretty sure Brighton can expel me for defacing a statue here.”

I snort. “We’re not doing anything illegal, I promise.”

Landon sighs but agrees. “Okay.”

“You were a lot more fun when we were kids,” I tell him when we reach my sedan.

“Ouch.” Landon holds one hand to his chest as he uses the other to unlock the car. “I liked you better before you were old enough to drink.”

“I haven’t had very much,” I reply. “I’m just really nervous.”

“You’re *really nervous*? You said this isn’t illegal!”

“It’s not,” I assure him. “Stay straight for two blocks.”

Landon looks doubtful, but twenty years of friendship are worth something, I guess, because he listens to me.

“Turn right here,” I instruct. “Then take the first left.”

“I’m not an Uber driver, Harlow. Why can’t you just tell me wh—oh.”

We arrive at the Holt hockey rink. Relief mixes with nerves when I see his car.

“I know I’m a spectacularly shitty friend for asking you to bring me here,” I state.

Landon’s silent.

“Lan—”

“It’s fine,” he says. I shoot him a disbelieving look. “Really. I mean it. Who knows? Maybe this will end with you actually becoming my sister.”

I half laugh, half scoff. “You are getting way ahead of things. I don’t even know if he... I don’t know.”

“Better go find out.” Landon must see the explosion of nerves on my face because he laughs. “I don’t know the guy well. At all. But I don’t really think you need to be worried.” He pauses. “Did you know Conor called him before his championship game? Hugh.”

I stare at him, shocked. “He did?”

Landon nods. “Yeah. You should have seen Dad. He... I don’t think the smile disappeared from his face for days. You did that, Harlow. You.”

“Conor makes his own decisions,” I argue. “We weren’t even talking then.”

“You think he magically decided to call after twenty-two years of mostly radio silence?” Landon scoffs. “Come on. I mean, fine, there may have been some other factors. It was a big moment for him. But I don’t think he would have called if you guys had never been... whatever you were.”

I take a deep breath. “Thanks for the ride, Land. I’ll order a car to get back if I need to. You should go back to the party. Enjoy yourself. Hang out with Mary.”

“Are you sure? I can...”

“Yeah. I’m sure.”

I give him a small smile and climb out of the car. The May breeze carries an underlying chill that I haven’t drunk enough alcohol to combat. I resist the urge to shiver as I enter what I belatedly realize will be an even colder climate.

All of the lights are on inside. They cast an artificial glow over the surface of ice that gleams with the sheen of an unmarred surface. The dulled colors of the lines layered below frozen sheets of water are the only interruption from the long stretch of gray-white.

There's no one on the ice, but there is one lone figure sitting halfway up in the lower section of stands. The door to the arena slams shut, echoing like a gunshot through the empty space. Conor glances over. If his expression changes, I can't tell from this distance.

I make my way over to where he's sitting. The weight of his gaze sits on me the whole trek, and it makes me wish I had the presence of mind to shut the door quietly. I wouldn't have minded a little more time to decide what I'm going to say.

I need a good icebreaker. Pun intended.

Conor doesn't say anything when I reach him. I take a seat on the wood beside him, taking a deep breath that chills me from the inside out. He's changed out of his suit from earlier, into a pair of sweatpants and a faded t-shirt. His trusty *Holt Hockey* sweatshirt is flung across the bleachers beside him.

Silence.

He speaks first. "You trying to catch hypothermia?"

At least he noticed the dress I put on in hopes of seeing him.

"This outfit was meant for a hot frat house," I explain.

"Why aren't you there, then?"

"Because you weren't."

More silence. In a practiced move that could only be successfully completed by a skilled athlete, the gray sweatshirt leaves its spot on the bleachers and ends up in my lap.

I'm too cold to be stubborn. I grab the soft cotton and pull it over my head to combat the chill. The smell of cedarwood surrounds me.

Conor keeps staring straight ahead. I follow his gaze. We're at the dead center of the ice, looking right at the center circle and the two team benches. I tilt my head up and study the navy banner that's been added to the rafters.

"It looks good up there," I say, studying the silky material that proclaims Holt University men's hockey team its division champions.

"Yeah, it does," Conor agrees. He leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "You asked me if I would have played hockey if Hugh had."

"Yeah, I remember."

"I lied when I said I didn't know. I wouldn't have."

"Oh. Okay."

Conor sighs. "My whole life, I've never wanted to be anything like him. It's not just the cheating. It was my way of punishing him. If he didn't want me; I didn't want him."

"I get it, Conor. You don't have to explain."

"No, I do." He glances over at me, and those damn gray-blue eyes bear into me. "I don't love hockey more than I hate Hugh. But I do love you more. I stopped associating how I feel about you with him—with any of the Garrisons—a long time ago, and I probably should have told you that a while ago. I'm telling you now, though."

I chew on my bottom lip. My stomach sinks. My heart flies. He's saying everything I want to hear. I'm not sure if I can allow myself to believe it, though.

He also ruined *my* love declaration by saying it first.

"Conor..."

“Do you love me?”

I swallow and look away. “Yes,” I whisper.

“Things between me and Hugh—me and Landon—they’ll always be messy. Too much has happened. I didn’t choose them as my family. I’m choosing you, though.”

“And you’re asking *me* to choose?”

“No. I get your relationship with them is important to you. I really do. I’m just saying I can’t make any promises. Things with Hugh, well, there’s *a* thing, which is more than I’ve ever been able to say. Things with Landon, I don’t know what they’ll ever look like. I’m saying my relationship with them will probably always be what it is. I’m asking if you’re able to *not* choose them over me.”

I laugh. “I stopped doing that when I showed up at the track for the first time. You realize that, right? I should have steered clear. I knew things have the potential to get complicated. Not *this* complicated, but complicated. I showed up anyway.”

“I’m sorry they’re so complicated. I wish they weren’t. I just—”

“Hey.” I scootch closer to him on the bleachers. “Don’t apologize, okay? It’s not your fault. I get where you’re coming from. I really do. It’s why I lectured Hugh about being more involved in your life and he showed up at that game. I know you’re mad about it but—”

“No, I’m not.” He pauses. “You were... right. I’m glad he saw me play. I overreacted, and then you broke up with me.”

“Breaking up requires being together in the first place,” I point out.

“I know,” Conor says quietly. “It felt like we were together, though.”

“I was worried,” I admit. “That I was in over my head with you, and I was just a conquest to you.”

“So you missed the l-bomb I just dropped?”

I smile. “No, I didn’t.”

Conor turns toward me, and I get lost in those depths. For once, I don’t try to swim or float. I just dive in.

“I love you, Harlow Hayes.”

A flock of butterflies takes off in my chest. “Really?” Even hearing the words and watching his face, I have trouble believing it.

“Really,” he confirms.

“I mean, Aidan said that you were crazy about me, but—”

“Fucking Phillips,” Conor mutters, then pulls my mouth to his. I quickly drown in the sensation of kissing him again. Of the heat and the urgency and the emotions. I crawl into his lap, caught up in the feeling of not just kissing him, but kissing him while having *I love you, Harlow Hayes* echoing around in my head.

We make out until we’re both breathless.

Until my head is spinning and my heart is pounding.

“Want to go skating?” Conor whispers to me.

I laugh. “What? Now?”

“Uh-huh.” He ghosts his lips against my jawline, and I shiver. Not from cold this time, but from pleasure.

“Are you going to pull me around again?”

“Most definitely.” He kisses my neck and I squirm in his lap.

“I’m wearing a dress, Conor.”

“Yeah, I noticed.” His hands slide up my calves and under the hem of said garment. “I have clothes you can change into in my locker here.”

I’m not surprised to learn Conor has kept clothes here more than a month after the hockey season ended. I am surprised to hear he thinks they’ll fit me.

“Are they clean?” I ask, doubtfully.

His chest rumbles with a laugh. “Yes.”

“Okay,” I agree.

The effervescence of happiness is bubbling up inside of me, and I’m pretty sure it means Conor could suggest skydiving right now, and I’d be amenable.

He stands while still holding me, then slowly slides me down his muscular frame until my shoes hit the cement floor again. The move makes me wish we were in a bedroom instead of a hockey arena.

We descend the stairs, and Conor tugs me toward the right. The arena curves around to end at a nondescript door. The pathway leading to it is lined with black mats. I know without Conor saying so that this is the route to the locker room. Sure enough, I follow him into a room lined with lockers. They’re all empty. With the exception of one.

“Having trouble letting go?” I tease.

“Yes,” he replies seriously.

My smile fades as I nod. “I get it.”

I wish I could call up a professional hockey scout and scream *Sign Conor Hart!* Wish his drive and dedication to the sport were as obvious to the people with the potential to make Conor's dreams come true as it is to me.

Conor walks over to his locker and grabs a wad of navy fabric. He tosses it to me, and it falls apart to reveal it's a pair of sweatpants. I pull them on under my dress, then catch the pair of socks Conor flings at me next. I'm sure I look far from fashionable, but the glance he gives me is filled with appreciation.

I guess that's the beauty of being around someone who truly knows you. It doesn't matter what you look like. They see the real you, regardless.

We head back out into the main part of the arena. Conor already has his skates on, and he hands me the same pair I wore last time as we pass the shelf where all the extra pairs are stored.

I lace them up and step onto the ice. Wobbly and unsure, just like last time. Unlike last time, Conor doesn't grab my hands and skate backward. He settles behind me and moves me forward like a boat's propeller. I lean my head back against his shoulder and watch as our surroundings pass by in a blur of plastic panels and wooden seating.

It feels like I'm flying.

In more ways than one.

EPILOGUE

CONOR

“It’s raining,” I state flatly as we walk toward the automatic doors that lead outside the airport. They glide open as we approach.

Harlow laughs. “It can’t be *that* shocking.”

“I never said it was shocking,” I reply, studying the water dripping down the overhang built for precisely this purpose. “It’s just annoying.”

“The weather isn’t supposed to be sunny every day. It’s not natural.”

“I think you’re just jealous of my tan,” I tease.

She scoffs. “Sure.”

I’ve adjusted to living in Florida more easily than Harlow has. Not just because I don’t have to slather myself with sunscreen the way she does every time she leaves our condo. Moving to the Sunshine State symbolized achieving the dream I’ve been chasing for as long as I can remember. Since I figured out I was pretty damn good at playing hockey and learned it is possible to make a career of doing just that. The euphoria of receiving the call—of officially becoming a professional hockey player—washed away any trepidation about where it would require me to relocate. Would Tampa

have been my first choice to live? Probably not. But beggars can't be choosers, and I was *begging* for a team to take a chance on me.

The complicating factor was... Harlow.

I found out where I'd be playing a month after we swapped I love you's. She'd just settled in Canada, working at *her* dream job. I figured there was a decent chance that might be it for us. Me living on the east coast of the United States and her living on the west coast of Canada wasn't exactly conducive to seeing each other every other weekend. Especially with my intensive training schedule and trying to find my place on a new team.

Harlow surprised me by making it a non-issue. She applied for a position in Tampa researching and rescuing manatees, packed up her place in Canada, and moved south. I'm not sure if she completely understands how much that meant to me. Her choosing me so thoroughly and resolutely. Rearranging her whole plan to accommodate my dream.

This trip to Claremont is my attempt to tell her how much it did. Thankfully, I play for a professional sports league that allows its players to have Thanksgiving off. I know Harlow misses the cloudy, damp Washington climate. I also know she misses the Garrisons.

I haven't seen or spoken to any of them since the unexpected run-in at graduation. Harlow talks to all three of them regularly. She's never hidden it, but she's never made any attempt to push me to do the same, either. She usually calls them while I'm out, and I'll occasionally catch the tail end of the conversation when I return home. I am curious how they reacted to Harlow moving to Florida to be with me, but I've never asked.

“There she is!” Harlow waves to my mom, who’s pulled up alongside the curb. She heads for the silver SUV, and I’m right behind her.

“Harlow!” my mom embraces my girlfriend as soon as we reach the car. Then she turns to me, beaming. “Hi, honey.”

“Hey, Mom.” I hug her tightly. She was able to come down to Florida for one home game, but that’s the only time I’ve seen her since I moved. She smells the same as always, like the mint lotion she uses to moisturize her hands between frequent washing at the hospital.

I load our bags into the back and then Harlow and I climb into the car. It’s the exact opposite of the first time Harlow met my mom, and I wonder if either of them are aware of the same.

“How was the flight?” my mom asks as we head in the direction of Claremont.

“Not bad,” Harlow replies. “Just long. Conor already misses the sun.”

“I didn’t say that,” I protest. “Just that I wished it wasn’t raining.”

“Honey, it’s almost always raining here,” my mom says.

Harlow gives me a *told you so* look. I’ve learned the path of least resistance with the women in my life is to admit when they’re right, so I say nothing.

We pull up outside the condo where I grew up twenty minutes later. It looks the exact same as the last time I was here, but this is the first time Harlow has ever been here. I give her a quick tour of the downstairs: kitchen, eating nook, living room, and my mom’s office. I put our bags in my old bedroom, and we both change out of our airplane clothes.

When we arrive back downstairs, my mom has set out a few plates of snacks and brewed a fresh pot of coffee. We sit and catch up for a while before my mom asks what time we need to leave.

“Probably pretty soon,” Harlow says, glancing at me.

“You should bring these flowers over there,” my mom suggests, nodding to the colorful centerpiece. “A neighbor brought them and they’ll just go to waste sitting here. There’s a pie on the counter to take, too.”

“You don’t need to do that, Mom. Just because...” I glance at Harlow. “Nothing has changed. I still—”

“I know, Conor,” she replies sharply. She sighs, and her tone softens. “There’s a difference between forgiving and letting things go, okay? Logan said—”

She stops talking abruptly.

“Logan? Who the hell is Logan?”

Pink tinges my mother’s cheeks, and I’m pretty sure she’s blushing. “A friend from work. He made the pie.”

“A friend? Are you *dating* this guy?”

To my knowledge, my mother has never so much as gone out with a man since her relationship with my father ended. She threw herself into work. Into me.

“We’ve... hung out a couple of times,” my mother replies. Pink has turned into red.

“Hung out? Is it serious?”

“It might be.”

Not the answer I was expecting. “You work with him? How long have you known him? How old is he?” I fire the

questions off rapid fire, and Harlow squeezes my knee under the table.

I glance at her, and she shakes her head in a silent warning. I look back at my mom, who looks nervous.

“Sorry. It’s just been a... I just worry about you.”

My mom smiles. “I know. It’s okay. Logan was hoping to come over this afternoon, actually. Meet you both. He got called in on an emergency last minute.” She pauses. “He’s a forty-eight-year-old trauma surgeon I’ve known for fifteen years.”

“Oh. Um, that’s nice.”

I’m not sure what else to say, and Harlow comes to my rescue. “He sounds wonderful, Anna. I hope we’ll get a chance to meet him soon.”

“I hope so, too,” my mom replies.

“We should get going,” I say, reluctantly. Our next destination is one I’m apprehensive about, to say the least. “It’s almost four.”

My mom nods. “Don’t forget the pie. I’ll see you two tonight.” She stands and starts clearing the dishes.

“Let me help with those,” Harlow says, standing as well.

“No, no,” my mom replies. “You two get going. Really.”

“Okay,” Harlow answers. There’s some trepidation in her voice, and I wonder if she’s just as unsure how the next few hours might unfold.

We gather up our jackets and the pie and head outside. It’s stopped raining, but is still cloudy and overcast.

“My mom has a boyfriend,” I state as we climb into my mom’s car. Harlow balances the pie in her lap. “How bizarre is that?”

“I think it’s exciting,” she replies. “She seems happy.”

“Yeah, she does,” I admit. “He’s a surgeon. Do you think that means he’s a total tool?”

“I think your mom is a good judge of character.”

“That’s debatable,” I reply pointedly.

“She likes me.”

I laugh. “True.”

The drive from my mom’s to the Garrisons’ takes less than ten minutes. Claremont is filled with winding, quiet streets that are empty at the moment. Most people have reached their Thanksgiving destinations by now.

I park on the street in front of ours.

For a place that houses a lot of negative memories, it’s beautiful. Against the backdrop of a Washington fall, the brick home stands tall and proud.

Harlow angles an uncertain expression my way as we climb out of the car. I’m too wrapped up in my own thoughts to offer her a comforting expression. I’m on edge. I was less nervous before playing in my first professional hockey game last month. Hopefully this meal is as much of a success. I’m not certain it will be. I’m far more comfortable in my identity as a hockey player than I’ll ever be as Hugh Garrison’s son.

The doormat has changed from the last time I was here. Rather than sunflowers, there’s a scattering of multi-colored leaves illustrated on the stiff brown fibers.

“You ready?” Harlow asks.

“As I’ll ever be,” I reply.

Harlow opens her mouth at the same time the door swings open.

“Oh. Hi.” I look away from Harlow, at my half-brother. Landon is standing in the doorway, still holding the door handle. I’m glad Harlow picked my outfit out, because the sweatpants I wore on the plane would definitely stand out next to his slacks and button-down.

“Hi, Landon,” Harlow says cheerily. She steps forward and hugs him. He returns it, holding my gaze the whole time.

I exhale. I’m going to have to say something to him eventually. “Landon.”

“Conor,” he replies.

“You’re heading out?” Harlow asks.

“Uh, yeah. Mom forgot to get cranberries earlier. Mel isn’t here yet, so I’m trying to be fast. You’re early.”

“Trying to make a good first impression.” Harlow smiles.

“Ha. Glad to see endless sunshine hasn’t affected your sense of humor,” Landon replies. “I’ll be back soon.” He does an awkward shimmy around me and Harlow and darts down the front steps.

Harlow grabs my hand and pulls me inside the house. She hands me the pie and shrugs out of her jacket before hanging it up on the ornately carved wooden coatrack.

“We’re here!” she calls, then continues walking further into the house. She veers right, and I follow her into the kitchen.

“Harlow!” Allison Garrison abandons her spot at the stove and walks over to us. She looks just as put together as every other time I’ve seen her, in a plum-colored silk dress. “So good to see you.”

“You, too,” Harlow replies. “It smells delicious in here.”

Allison beams. Her gaze leaves Harlow and lands on me.

“Hi, Conor.” She gives me a tentative smile.

“Hi,” I reply, matching it. “Thanks for having us.”

“Of course! Hugh is in the den, making a fire. Or setting the house on fire. One of the two.” She chuckles. “Can I get you guys anything to drink? Wine? Beer? Water?”

As tempted as I am to consume something alcoholic to ease the tension that’s simmering, I opt for water. Harlow accepts a glass of wine.

“I know you had your doubts, Allison, but—” My father stops speaking when he realizes his wife is no longer the only person in the kitchen. “—fire is all set,” he finishes.

“Nice work, honey,” Allison replies. “Harlow and Conor have arrived.”

“I see that.” My father’s Adam’s apple bobs a couple of times. “Welcome.”

“Thanks, Hugh,” Harlow replies.

She doesn’t hug him the way she did Landon, and I wonder if she usually does. They’ve spent several Thanksgivings together. I’m the outlier here.

“How was—” The sound of the doorbell cuts off whatever Hugh was going to say.

“Landon wouldn’t...” Harlow starts.

Allison's eyes widen. "That must be Melanie!"

Harlow grins. "Landon's going to be pissed we had the chance to embarrass him."

"Yup," Allison agrees. "Do you want to go, or should I?"

"I'll go," Harlow replies, then darts out into the hallway.

"Melanie and Landon just started dating at the start of the fall semester. We haven't had the chance to meet her yet," Hugh tells me after Harlow disappears.

"Uh, yeah. Harlow mentioned," I reply. Thanks to Harlow, I know far more about Landon's dating life than I really want to. About his dates with Mary, the girl who went bowling with us, which ended when she moved to Massachusetts at the end of the summer for a new job. About his awkward interactions with his ex Kelly, which were especially uncomfortable after Harlow told me someone—Landon—informed her I was with her in a bedroom.

"Ah, right."

The sound of female voices drifts in from the hallway, and Harlow appears in the entryway a minute later. There's a petite girl with light brown hair following her. She's a good six inches shorter than Harlow. I don't know Landon anywhere near enough to guess what his type is when it comes to women, but she's practically the polar opposite of Kelly at first glance. She has a friendly, open expression, and if she's wearing any makeup, it's very minimal. Rather than the risqué ensemble Kelly was wearing when she propositioned me a year ago, Melanie is wearing a sweater dress that leaves a lot to the imagination.

Harlow mentions something about cranberries, so I assume she's filling Melanie in on the reason for Landon's absence.

She introduces Melanie to Hugh and Allison, and then looks at me. “That’s my boyfriend, Conor.”

I smile at Melanie. “Nice to meet you.”

“You, too,” she replies, giving me a small smile in return. She’s clearly nervous, and it eases my own nerves some.

I wonder what Landon’s told her about me. If he’s told her anything about me, aside from the fact I’m dating his best friend. Kelly made it sound like I was a frequent topic of conversation between her and Landon, but I’m not inclined to believe anything she says. I wonder what I would have told a girl if I’d ever gotten serious about anyone prior to meeting Harlow. What I might have said if she’d asked about my dad. If I have any siblings.

I have no idea.

“I had to go to three different—Mel! You’re here!” Landon walks into the kitchen.

“Yeah. Traffic wasn’t bad,” Melanie replies, smiling at Landon.

We all watch as they attempt an awkward hug. Harlow smirks at me and I wink back.

“Is everyone ready to eat?” Allison asks. “The food is all ready, but I can keep it warm if we want to wait.”

“I’m hungry,” Harlow says. I nod my agreement, and so do Landon, Melanie, and Hugh.

Ten minutes later, we’re all sitting around the large dining room table. There’s no attempt to go around and list all the things we’re grateful for, or anything like that, which *I’m* grateful for.

The food is all delicious, and I shovel it into my mouth as Allison and Hugh pepper Melanie with questions about her family, her interests, and her time at Brighton so far. She handles it better than I would have, which I suppose is the one upside of being Hugh's estranged son. He's too nervous around me to give me the third degree about dating Harlow.

"Landon mentioned you play hockey, Conor?" Melanie asks me when there's a lull in the inquisition. Her attempt to shift the attention away from herself, I'm guessing.

"Yeah," I reply. "I do."

"That's so cool!"

"Yeah, thanks." I smile at her.

"Landon said you're really good."

"He did, huh?" I look at my half-brother. He doesn't meet my gaze, which doesn't surprise me. The fact he complimented me about anything does.

Melanie seems oblivious to the fact she said anything out of the ordinary. That answers any questioning on whether Landon told her we're related.

Dinner ends, and Allison serves up the apple pie we brought, along with a pumpkin one.

"This looks delicious," she says as she drops crust and cinnamon coated apples on a plate. "Homemade?"

"Yes," Harlow replies, then looks to me. She's wondering how much she should disclose about the pastry chef in question.

"My mom's boyfriend made it," I supply.

Allison clearly isn't sure how to respond to that. "Well, it looks delicious."

The dessert *is* really good, I admit. Whenever I meet Logan the trauma surgeon, he'll have scored a few brownie points in the form of pie.

We all help clear the dishes and then loiter around the kitchen, unsure of what to do next. Despite a conflict-free meal, uncertainty and awkwardness still hover in the air.

Before I lose my nerve—or someone suggests playing a board game—I grab the basketball located in one of the cubbies next to the back door that leads out onto the deck. I spin it on my finger. "What do you say, old man?"

Harlow smiles at me, and I roll my eyes. But her expression makes the offer worthwhile. I haven't changed my opinion of my father or half-brother much. I don't know if I ever will. I've harbored resentment toward them both for my entire life. It will take a lot more than the small number of hours we've spent around each other to chip away at any of my resolution. But we're not quite the total strangers we once were. All thanks to Harlow Hayes. Because she was nothing like I expected her to be and everything I didn't know I needed. Because there isn't much—anything—I wouldn't do to put a smile on her face.

"I say, I don't know who you're calling old," Hugh replies. He's trying to hide them, but I can see both the excitement and eagerness in his hazel eyes. It makes me nervous. I may not mean to mess with him any longer, but that doesn't mean I won't. I've spent so long fighting the idea of having a functioning relationship with my father, I'm worried I've forgotten how to.

"Landon?" I ask.

My brother—half-brother, rather—looks shocked.

“Uh...”

“Why don’t we all head outside?” Allison asks with a gentle smile.

During the little time I’ve spent in her presence, I’ve learned that’s her preferred role: peacekeeper. It makes me wonder if maybe she was better suited to Hugh all along. There are a lot of ways I’d describe my mother. Headstrong and obstinate are two of the first adjectives that come to mind. Peacekeeper is most certainly not. From the little my mother has shared about her time with Hugh, I know that it was fraught with plenty of arguments and disagreements that suggest they may not have been the two most compatible people on the planet.

It makes me wonder things I’ve never considered before. Like whether things work out the way they should. Like whether my parents were always doomed to be a failed relationship, even before Allison entered the picture.

The six of us head outside. The November air is brisk, but nothing too terrible. Since no one else seems to be particularly inclined to, I take the lead. I begin bouncing the basketball against the hard asphalt of the driveway.

“H-O-R-S-E?” I suggest.

Harlow snorts. “First to ten, Hart.”

“I’m not sure you know what you’re getting into, Hayes,” I tease.

“Please.” Harlow scoffs. “You’ve seen my jump shot.”

“Yeah, exactly.”

“It’s gotten better,” she informs me.

I smirk. “Oh, yeah? You’ve been practicing?”

She nods, but I know she’s full of shit. Since the marathon passed, the only form of exercise Harlow engages in is swimming. “All for this takedown.”

I pass to her. “Your move, Hayes.”

The curve of her lips tells me she remembers the last time I said that to her.

Allison and Melanie opt to watch from the deck. I yank off my sweater and roll the sleeves of my button-down up. I catch Harlow ogling my forearms as she pulls her red curls back into a ponytail, and I wink at her.

Landon and Hugh watch us with wide eyes.

“You two take sports seriously?” Landon asks as he studies the adjustments to our outfits.

“Relax, Land,” Harlow replies. “You play with Conor. He’s a good coach.”

Landon looks doubtful, but he does swap spots with Harlow so that I’m next to him and she’s next to Hugh. We start playing. Harlow is decent, and so is Hugh. I could beat them both single-handedly if I tried. Landon is terrible, but I keep passing to him anyway.

Hugh’s face is lit up like a Christmas tree. For once, I feel like a kid hanging out with his dad. Carefree. I’m not thinking about the past. Analyzing what I need to say or do to ensure the interaction with my father is as quick and awkward as possible.

Harlow tries to go for a lay-up, and I snag my arm around her waist and spin her around, away from the net. I generally avoid touching Harlow around the Garrisons. We’ve barely

spent any time around them as a couple. It feels disrespectful, since I know Harlow is like a daughter to them. It also feels like I'm giving them insight into my life—our life—that I'm not sure I want to. My instinct is still to deprive, to shield myself. Born from the petty instinct of a kid who felt like his father didn't want him.

“Foul!” Harlow shouts, shoving at my chest. I don't let her go. “Want to cheat your way to a win, Hart?”

“If I wanted to cheat, I'd do this.” I ghost my lips across her cheek, and Harlow's breath catches.

“Don't forget I can make things hard for you,” she whispers, purposefully rubbing against me.

I let her go. Because, yeah, she sure can.

She laughs and takes the shot she was aiming for previously. It misses, and I smirk at her.

The game ends a few minutes later.

“Jeez,” Landon huffs. He winces as he stretches his arm. “I'm going to feel that tomorrow.”

“Imagine how you'd feel if you hadn't gotten paired with the professional athlete on the court,” Hugh comments. The pride when he says “professional athlete” is unmistakable in his voice, and it affects me more than I expect it to. Strained, barely existent relationship or not, it feels really good to hear my father sound proud of me.

“No offense, Harlow,” Hugh adds quickly.

“None taken,” she replies. “I know my limits when it comes to sports.”

Hugh and Landon walk over toward where Allison and Melanie are sitting on the deck, watching.

Harlow and I stay in place on the court.

I tug her to me and smile down at her. She grins back up at me. “My team won.”

She scoffs. “I noticed.”

“Any prizes offered around here for first place?”

“On such short notice? We can make out behind the garage when everyone else goes inside?”

I laugh. “Deal.”

We head for the house, and I know the next time I’m here—however soon or far into the future it is—it won’t just be bad memories that come to mind.

The End

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Thank you so much for taking the time to read *Famous Last Words*. I hope you enjoyed Harlow and Conor's story!

Please take a moment to rate or review this book. It's an irreplaceable way to help me reach new readers, but more importantly, I'd love to hear your thoughts!

All the best,

C.W. Farnsworth

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

C.W. Farnsworth is the author of seven novels. She has always been a voracious reader, and grew up devouring books by flashlight under the covers long after she was supposed to be asleep. She primarily writes young adult and new adult romance, her favorite genres to read, often involving sports.

Charlotte is a native New Englander, but attended college in New York, and now resides in Washington, D.C. Find her on Facebook @cwfarnsworth, Instagram @authorewfarnsworth, Twitter @cw_farnsworth, and check out her website www.authorewfarnsworth.com for upcoming book news!



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The Hard Way Home

The Easy Way Out

Come Break My Heart Again