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Excerpt - Becoming Mine



Bailamos (Enrique Iglesias)



T CE.
Frozen cold solid water.

A death trap.

Okay. Maybe I'm exaggerating with that last one. But why is it so damn terrifying from where I sit? There's nothing scary about it—it's not lined with spikes, there's no fiery pit of hell to fall into. So why does it feel like I'm burning and being pricked all over every time I think about getting back on?

It's just ice. Smooth, clear, innocent, ice.

I wasn't even on this rink when I fell.

But I had just as many viewers as the Buffalo Blades do.

Taking my eyes off my old friends—the Ice Girls, who are now labeled as the BB Queens, something I still refuse to call them—I bend to pull up the striped leg warmer that has slid down slightly while I was sitting. When I look up, I'm just as disinterested in seeing the rest of this disaster of a routine as I was when they started.

I hate being so unsupportive and unenthusiastic, but I can't help feeling that my choreography was just more...inventive.

Trying to look alive, I stand and cheer for them—feeling like a complete and utter hypocrite.

"That was... amazing you guys." I smile brightly and pray that the glossiness in my eyes comes off as tears of happiness rather than the yawn I'm fighting to hold back.

They cheer happily that I approve and blow me a kiss from the rink. "We're going to go change then we'll go to Bridges," Jess calls.

Bridges.

The team's favorite sports bar. No thank you. Not tonight.

Of all nights.

The one none of them seem to remember.

Stupid of me to want to laugh and cry at the same time when I thought—maybe, just maybe—they'd have remembered and planned something for me.

God, I don't even know what. Just... 'hey, we know what today is and we didn't want you to be alone'.

My head snaps up when the Zamboni gears to life and I watch, lost in the monstrosity as it glides across the rink.

Accepting the fact that I'd only been asked to come tonight so I can watch the girls strut their stuff like they own the rink, I stand and pick up my mesh tote bag.

Well, this was worthless.

The arena is clearing out at this point, and I'm relieved for it. I'm in a cashmere sweater, leggings, and ankle boots, and still cold. While my friends were just on the ice in a sports bra and pleated mini skirt, completely unfazed

of the forty-degree temperature. Their smiles firmly in place. And Jesus, it's nine o'clock—aren't they exhausted?

And why were they so *on* tonight? It's just practice. There's no audience. All they did was rehearse a few new moves for intermission during the next home game.

Was that really me just over two years ago? So cheerful and carefree? I definitely wasn't all rah-rah like Chloe, Kerri and Jess.

No—definitely not. In fact, I'm pretty sure I remember telling them things like "save it for the ice, ladies" and "okay, less happy juice for you next time, Chloe."

Yep. It's no wonder I was never a favorite to the guys on the team.

Like I care. At least most of them were cool enough to treat me with respect.

Except for Jace Knight, of course, whose idea of respect is not tripping the Coach's daughter when she steps onto the ice—nope, she could do that all on her own.

Asshole.

There's howling to my left as the guys come back through the arena, dressed out of their uniform with duffle bags over their shoulders, heading out for the night. Some of the Ice Girls—also now finally back in clothes that won't give them hypothermia—follow them out.

I pretend to gather my things since I don't want to be walking out with any of them. Even though once we all get together, we do tend to have a good time—when I'm not chastising someone on the team for being total dipshits.

Jace and Garret being the top of that list. For entirely different reasons. Jace is stubborn, hypocritical, cocky as shit and thinks he's God's gift to Earth.

Garret—a little less tolerable, The guy just skeeves me out. But not enough for me to avoid calling him out when he's been a tool.

Once they leave, I plant myself back on the seat usually dedicated to me when I come to watch a game. I hate it because it's right behind the player's bench.

Way too close to all the action.

The temptation to jump on hasn't faded. My best friend Nicole is still holding me to a stupid promise I made to her. One that entailed giving her one hour on the ice—with me in an effort to get over my fear.

I won't do it.

I've been putting it off for months, but the bitch just won't let it go.

"Angel, need a ride?" The familiar deep voice comes from behind me and I turn. At home, Dad rarely uses my name. He'll say "Hey, sweety" or something, but here—at work—where he's head Coach of the Buffalo Blades, Royce Collins is all business and hard scowl at all times.

At today's practice, Dad's *don't fuck with me* and *don't piss me off* vibes were on high. But even after the painful practice—and whatever lecture he gave the team in the locker room—he manages to give me a weak smile.

"Thanks. I'm not sure what I'm doing yet. I might stick around for a bit and then meet you at home."

Dad glances from me to the rink—and then down the leg warmers around my calves. He takes two steps down and lowers his voice. "You know I've still got them in my office."

I smile knowingly at him. It's hard to keep much from my dad. He's always been the all-knowing, always too intuitive—which was useful in his hockey playing days...but as a father, it hasn't always been to my favor. But he's been there for me a hell of a lot more than my mother has since the

divorce, so I'll take it. "Thanks, Dad. I'm not here for that. Just—miss the air when it's quiet, that's all."

He nods, running a hand through his salt and pepper hair. "Have fun. See you at home."

"Love you."

He heads out and I know if it weren't for my little sister, Rory—his almost six year old daughter—he'd have stayed here and kept himself "busy" until I was ready to go.

He's a good father and it amazes me how smoothly he switches modes from being a father to his toddler to his twenty-four-year-old.

Rory's mother isn't in the picture. A brief fling—with a floozy who wanted to nail one of Buffalo's most eligible bachelors—ended with a baby.

I watch the Zamboni make its exit and my eyes travel back to the glossysmooth, empty rink, wiped of evidence of any activity.

I jump when Kerri creeps up behind me. "Angeelll," she shrieks. "I'm so happy you came to watch the new dance. It's our last rehearsal before the next game. What'd you think? Be honest."

Aside from being an amazing dancer, Kerri Reynolds is beautiful. Short dark hair, petite figure, and a dazzling smile. From the hopeful look on her face, I gather that *she* choreographed the new dance.

Do I tell her I thought it was unoriginal and mediocre at best? That she didn't in the least capture that wow factor in the sixty seconds that the Ice Girls get to entertain the crowd during intermission?

Hell, do I tell her that in a matter of the first fifteen seconds, I thought of three cool tweaks to their moves that would do just that?

No.

Because that's not what friends do. "It blew me away, Kerri."

She jumps cheerfully. "Thank you. You'll have to come to the next home game to see it live. You know how we feed off the crowd."

I swallow. "Yes. Of course. That's...how it works."

Her smile fades and she taps my shoulder. "Come out with us tonight."

I want to ask her why. But instead, I purse my lips. "Rain check for next week? I'm kind of tired."

"I'm holding you to it. Next week."

She takes off with a finger pointed at me that she means business and I laugh, watching the door to make sure she—and everyone else—had gone.

Blowing out a breath, I stand and stare at an empty rink. The one I've been swearing I don't miss on a daily basis for the last two years. I imagine myself gliding across it and a spasm of dread hits my legs. Or maybe it's just the one.

It's never an issue when I come to see the games—which I do mostly in support of my dad. But I hardly ever come for practice. It's too tempting to throw on my skates and join them for warm up—which I've always been invited to.

The lights dim and I know that's Benny starting his routine sweep of the arena.

"Angel? That you?"

I neutralize my face before turning. "Yep. Sorry, I'm heading out soon, just...reminiscing is all." Benny is one of the few people I can be honest with and know he's not feeling sorry for me. Or judging. He's been working this arena since my dad's days on the ice.

He comes further down the ramp with his cart, staring at the freshly polished rink. "Pretty tempting, isn't it?"

"Don't start, Benny." I smirk at his unsubtle remark.

"Can't blame an old man for trying," he says as he pulls on a canvas bag from his tray. I recognize it immediately. It's the bag I handed my dad a few days after my fall, asking him—no—*telling him* to burn them.

I don't remember when, but he did eventually tell me my old skates are not a pile of ashes but safely hidden someplace safe.

I instantly knew it was his office.

Benny holds up the bag and I cross my arms. "What's that?"

He shrugs and dips his hand in, pulling the skates up by the laces.

"Cute," I say. "Yours?"

He grins. "A little small for me...but I think they'll fit you just fine."

My eyes snap to his and he winks and walks up the steps.

"Want the lights back on?" he offers without turning back.

I shake my head as I stare at my old skates. "I'm good. Hey, Benny?" He turns.

"Anyone but you around?"

"Nope. Just me. I'm uh...actually heading to the locker room next. Sure you don't want the lights back on?"

"No," I say instantly. "Keep 'em low."



Fifteen minutes later—and somehow not going into cardiac arrest by the very thought of getting back on the ice again—I'm standing at the edge, wearing my old skates. My right leg tingles as I step on and inhale a cool breath. It's tasteless, like ice, but bitter somehow. Swallowing it down, I close my eyes and step back to lean against the boards.

Get it the fuck together, Collins.

It becomes a little darker and a small smile grows on my lips. *Benny*.

The encouragement is heartening. The less I see, the more alone I'll feel.

Balancing like a beginner, I press my hand firmly against the edge of the board and push off. I glide smoothly toward the middle and another deep breath calms the rest of my nerves.

A hole in my heart fills like little particles slowly making their way back into place.

But I don't linger in the middle. My aim is to get from one end to the other. Not be center stage preparing for a flip jump.

My face is cold and flushed by the time I make it to the other side. I spend the next few minutes skating in a wide circle as my feet and body become one with the ice again. The familiarity returning.

The ice surprisingly welcoming.

The easiest figure skating jump is an axel. I'm positive that I can manage one now that I've warmed up. Finding my line, I glide to gain some momentum and lift my knee before hopping over and checking out.

I land on my feet.

Wow. Like riding a bike.

Picking up speed, I take off again. Lifting my knee as high as possible, I push off, snap and wobble before landing on my feet—just barely.

What the hell was that?

Shaking my head, I sniffle and slow my strides, Feeling defeat crawl through my veins.

I feel another presence but ignore it. Benny is the only one here—and he wouldn't judge me.

Skating for thirty seconds with my eyes closed, I focus on leveling my breaths. I focus on anything but the tingling in my leg and try the turn a second time—landing on my ass, releasing a groan.

For fuck's sake.

I didn't hit my leg but feel the sting there, a dull, distant ache, and put a hand on it.

It doesn't hurt. It's all in your head.

Someone zooms past me and my head snaps up. I jerk back, a yelp stuck in my throat before I can make him out through my watery eyes.

"A little rusty there, Angel?"

I glare at the last person I'd ever want to see me fall, then push myself up and stand, dusting ice shavings off my hands.

I want to ask him what the fuck he's doing here but Jace Knight technically has more of a right to be here than I do. "Practice is over, Jace," I call, my comeback skills abandoning me. I'm so mortified.

He skates backward, drawing eights as he glides in and out of the blue line. So evenly, so skillfully. There was a time I would have challenged him to a skate-off. But instead, I skate my way to the exit.

"Don't leave on my account."

I pivot to face him. "Why are you here?"

He takes a minute to respond, looking around the arena, and shrugs. "I like the alone time."

"But you weren't alone," I point out.

"Yeah, well I had a feeling you'd fall on your ass and just give up, so..."
He shrugs and twists back, then again as if to confirm my exit.

My chest burns. Because he's right.

But I don't have the energy to fight him. Not today.

He glances toward the exit with a raised brow, challenging me.

"Reverse psychology might work on your kid sister, Jace, but it won't on me."

"Cool. See ya."

I shake my head and turn back toward the exit, my skates on the edge as I grip the board for support.

"On second thought," Jace continues, drawing closer. "Seeing as how you need the practice more than I do, maybe *I* should be the one leaving."

I pause but don't turn back.

"Or...I work on my swing, while you work on your...twirls," he adds and I can hear the grin in his tone.

The comment makes my blood boil and I turn. "It's called an axel. And I was done anyway." I shake my head because it's not like he or anyone else for that matter would understand why I wanted to be alone.

"What's with you, Collins?"

I step off the ice, refusing to let him mess with me today.

He skids to a sharp stop a few feet from me. "You're usually on top of your game with telling me where to shove it."

I return to my seat and untie my skates. "I'm not in the mood tonight," I mutter.

He frowns but then his expression quickly softens—or maybe it's pity. Yes. It's probably pity.

I can't possibly imagine he'd realized what day it is. What happened

exactly two years ago tonight.

No one else did.

My throat clogs and my eyes sting as I slip on the left shoe and stand. What I've been avoiding all day is coming and I'll die before I let *him* see it.

Picking up only the bag I came with, I dart for the exit.

Jace is smart enough not to follow me. And why would he want to? It's a topic everyone pretends to have forgotten.

"Angel," I hear him call behind me.

I ignore him and disappear through the closest set of double doors. Leaving behind my old skates. With any luck, they'll get lost in the aisles at the next game and never be seen again.



It's just like the old days with Angel—only a lot more bitter. And that bitterness is starting to wear off on me.

Like I need that right now.

Shit.

I knew stepping back on the ice tonight was a mistake when I saw her on it.

It was like deja vu from my first day of rookie year.

Her golden hair flowing behind her shoulders as she flew across the ice. Her face flushed red from the cold. Her legs sturdy enough to be the base of a cheerleader pyramid—had she been a real cheerleader.

I watched her from the minute she stepped on. I came in from the tunnel and paused when I saw her gripping the boards for dear life for the first minute.

The hesitation and self-doubt didn't surprise me one bit but it was painful to watch.

Until she closed her eyes and breathed in the cool air, lifting her head slightly, I knew the exhilaration and confidence was setting back in. Some internal spark was lit when she took the plunge and tried a few simple spins. But it quickly flamed out the moment she fell on her ass.

My chest tightens when I think about that day again. The day when everyone said she'd never hit the ice again.

It was too humiliating. Coach knew it too. The next day, he came to practice a zombie, barely said two words to any of us and dismissed us early.

I pull a Gatorade out of the fridge, preparing for a late-night work out to clear my mind of Angel and whatever it was she was trying to do tonight.

My phone buzzes with a text.

Nick: Hey, want to come over? Cora cooked.

Not really.

My best friend and teammate, Nicolas Kane, captain of the Buffalo Blades, has been dating my sister for the better part of the year and they recently moved in together. They also kept their absurd relationship a secret from me when the season started last year.

And in case anyone's wondering, catching them in the locker room shower is the absolute worst way to find out.

I snapped that day and nearly lost the only person in the world I care about.

I practically raised Cora since our mom died when I was seventeen. Cora was only ten and our father—as good a man as he'd raised me to be—checked out emotionally and buried himself with work.

I've been there for my little sister from puberty to choosing the right university. It only made sense for her to live with me when I bought my house—in the same development Nick bought his.

So, no. I'm still not okay with whatever it is they claim this living situation to be.

And not that I want my kid sister's heart broken but Nick has screwed up once—it's only a matter of time before he does it again.

My phone dings again and I look down.

Nick: It's...well, I think it's lasagna, but it could also be scrambled eggs. Come over and we can give it the taste test.

Jace: You go first. If it doesn't kill you, I'll ask her for leftovers tomorrow. I'm beat now.

Nick: Serves you right for getting back on the ice again tonight after practice.

Fuck. He knows about that?

When I don't respond, he fills the silence.

Nick: Yeah, I know all about it.

Nick: Ok lies. I don't know all about it. But I'm not gonna say I'm not curious...

Jace: *Tell Cora I said goodnight.*

I turn my phone downward on the counter and pull the fridge handle to load up on carbs and protein. I'm not even hungry but I know I need to eat to

replenish what I lost in that double workout I got today.

Not that I stuck around much after Angel stormed off. Kind of a buzz kill when you singlehandedly crush the efforts of a fallen ice queen.

Ex ice girl Angel Collins has hated me since that first day I walked onto the ice as a rookie—and she kicked me off of it. Making it very clear that respect is earned, not expected.

"Hey," a female voice calls. It isn't soft...it isn't very welcoming. But hell, it's got my attention.

My eyes dart across the ice, to a group of girls skating around, laughing and cheering.

"Ladies," I call back with a curt nod. Oh yeah. I'm really going to like it here.

But one of them doesn't look very happy to see me. The tall one, blonde—beautiful. Not like, I'm blown away by the first girl out of college to talk to me—I get plenty of that off the ice. But like this girl is seriously striking. With pacific blue eyes, long toned legs and firm abs peeking between the two-piece blue and white Buffalo Blades cheerleader uniform, my mystery woman skids to a stop a good yard away.

"Lookin' sharp on those blades," I observe.

She crosses her arms. "Who you callin' a lady?" she asks with a hint of challenge. Two of her friends join behind, but rather than shooting daggers at me with their pretty eyes, they smile at me.

"Um...you—your friends..." It comes out as almost a question because how was that wrong?

"No one calls us ladies here. We're the Blades Ice Girls," she announces.

"AKA BB-Queens," a short brunette calls from behind with a flirty smile and I grin back.

Blondie nudges her but keeps her eyes on me. "That's—not official."

I chuckle and add, "And never will be if you have anything to say about it, right?"

She frowns. "What's that supposed to mean?"

I brush the topic away with my hand. "Forget it. I'm not that funny. You're the sweepers, right?"

The tall one's brow rises but I lose the other two completely as they skate away.

Aww, and those are the two that seemed to like me.

I refocus on the tall one—her expression doesn't change.

Instead, she skates over and places a hand on my arm. Her gaze wavering a tad when she feels my biceps but then looks back up at me. "I'm going to give you a break on that one, because well, you're new and likely won't survive one year with Coach Collins. But if you ever—ever refer to me or my girls as sweepers, I'll show you just how sharp my blades really are."

She turns and skates back to her friends.

"Why'd you call me?"

Her head snaps back. "Excuse me?"

"You called me when I hit the ice to warm up. Why?"

"Oh," she laughs and I hate that it's so fucking pretty. "To tell you that the rink is mine. We still have six minutes practice time."

I shrug. "So? Am I bothering you?" It's an honest question because the rink is big enough to fit the entire NHL team and hold an award ceremony. No one should mind one rookie warming up in the end here.

"Not me."

"Great, so you don't mind if I—"

She sighs and looks back at her friends who are still eyeing us—or rather me. "I'd rather you not—I'd like my girls to—focus."

"Ah. So I'm a distraction," I point out, barely posing it as a question.

"Yes. Now get lost."

Talk about getting a rug pulled from under you.

After I found out she's Coach's daughter—it made her an even bigger enemy. Not to mention, no longer attractive. Looking at Coach's daughter as anything more would be a death wish.

Seeing as how I've already made an enemy, and me being the competitive jackass I am with everything I do, I decide to start my warm up exactly ten minutes before each of their rehearsals.

I'm not a complete asshole so I stay in my own space. But it's not good enough for her highness, who let me be yesterday, but is back in my face on day three.

"Seriously, what are you trying to prove?"

"That I'm not bothering anyone but you, apparently," I say without a doubt in my mind that it's her I'm distracting. "Look, I like extra warm up time. Get over it."

She crosses her arms in front of her. Her eyes singe into mine.

I point at her and wink to try and loosen her up. "I've got a feeling we're going to be great friends."

She skates a little closer, trying to intimidate me and I almost laugh. "I'll say this one more time. Wait your turn."

She can't be more than nineteen, but I can already tell she's got Coach Collins' blood. She's fearless and bossy with a will strong enough to carry a team.

With lightning speed, I close the distance between us and she flinches. "You're an ice queen. Not queen of the ice. There's a difference."

We did three solid years of this. Until she quit the Buffalo Blades Ice Girls—at which point we took our battles off the ice. Anytime there was a team party or night out with mutual friends, our quips were in full effect.

And she's not the only Collins who didn't take to me.

Coach wasn't thrilled with my joining the team. Said I was a weak choice. That Brady or Snider would have been better picks. I was drafted a year after Nick and my agent fought hard to get me on so I could stay close to home.

Every damn season I had to prove myself, push harder than anyone else on the team. I was a good player when I started, and because I was one of the fastest in the league, I was cocky—one thing Royce Collins despises in his players.

Under his scrutiny and coaching, my play became just as good as my speed and two years ago, I was named alternate captain. Mostly because I'm quick in the head too. I don't just move with velocity; I know where I'm going and how fast I need to get there.

But after injuring my shoulder last season, I'm not as quick with my stickhandling. Physical therapy helped and I was cleared to play again, but I must have made a wrong move at some point, because that burning pain is back.

Signing up for another round of physical therapy would only prove I'm not fully recovered. And with this being my contract year, I don't want to be a

free agent with an injury.

I can do this.

With a little practice where I need it, I can work this shoulder loose again.

Just as long as I have someplace to do it.

I should be fine at the arena. Not that I don't want to encourage the queen of mean to get back where she clearly belongs, but I can't have anyone around when I practice.

My instincts tell me I won't get that lucky.

Angel might have had another fall tonight.

But I saw the look on her face.

She's coming back.



NGEL, ANGEL, ANGEL. Wake up, wake up, wake up," the annoying human alarm clock chirps.

I groan and turn to Rory. The room is dark, but I know better. My black out drapes cover the bright rays of sunshine from the windows. And they'll do nothing to deter this little firecracker.

"Rorrrryyy," I whine.

"Daddy said I can't wake you up until the coffee is strong enough to reach the upstairs. I smell it, do you?"

I work hard to get my senses working. My eyes are still closed, but there is a faint smell of coffee and the lovely sound of the machine's final drops. "Mmmmm."

I pop open an eye and my little sister smiles. "There you go. Now the other..."

I sit up abruptly, and she beams until I glare at her. "Off. With your head." She giggles and takes off. "She's up, you can pour."

"No. Don't pour..." My voice wavers and I fall back into bed, whispering into the pillow with a yawn. "It'll get cold."

I spend a few more minutes in bed, daydreaming about the days when I lived alone. Before Dad asked me to move in with him temporarily to help with Rory.

I feel bad for Dad. I do. It's hard being a single father—much less to a little girl he knows nothing about.

The "beautiful and regret-free"—as dad calls her—result of a short fling he had with a fan.

My parents had been long divorced by then but stayed civil. Well, mom would tell you they're still the best of friends, but Dad prefers the word "civil".

I, for one, had zero issue with their divorce. I didn't just make peace with it, I think I *recommended* it. They would fight like cats and dogs. "It's not good for me to grow up in such a hostile environment," I would tell them.

I was part joking, but the relief on their faces that I'd be okay with the divorce was comical.

I still remember when he called my mother and me over to break the news to us.

Rory was just a few weeks old and still unnamed. A child he knew about from the beginning and offered to fully support. He even offered to marry the woman just so the child could grow up with a family. But she wasn't having any of it. No husband. No kids. Not part of her plan. When she mentioned adoption, Dad raced over and picked up the baby. And within weeks, he had sole custody.

I came up with the name *Rory*, something close to Dad's name. He liked it.

That's all. He liked it. His eyes didn't get misty. He didn't hold her or rock her. He didn't put his big finger onto her palm to squeeze. He just...looked at her and called her Rory.

Now he yells the name quite often. Usually, when he's wiping off crayon marks from the hallways.

I pull open a drawer in my walk-in closet, looking for the comfiest clothes I can find. Since he still doesn't have a sitter that lasts more than three days, I'm watching Rory this weekend while the team is at their away game.

I invited my best friends Nicole and Cora over for a sleepover. Besides, Cora—who finally landed her crush of like ten years, Nick Kane of the Buffalo Blades will also be needing company this weekend.

I head downstairs and make my way to the kitchen, which no matter how long I've lived here, always seems like the longest freaking walk from the bedroom. Dad's house is huge. Too big for just him and Rory. Too many hiding places for a five year old—and a dad who's never in the mood to seek.

But Royce Collins is not a down-grading kind of guy. He starts big only to go bigger.

I reach the kitchen and glance at the clock. "Rory, I said never before eight o'clock."

She looks at the clock innocently, then shrugs.

"She can't tell time, Angel," Dad points out, filling a water bowl for his German Sheppard, Scooter.

I narrow my eyes at the not-so-innocent one. "Alright, kid. You, me, and a second grade math book tonight."

"I'm in Kindergarten."

"Excuses," I mutter before taking a sip of my coffee followed by a loud moan. "God that's good."

Dad chuckles and kisses the top of my head. "Thanks again. I've got my suitcase in the truck. Rory and I already had a discussion. She's going to be a good listener and not hide all over the house."

She bats her lashes at him, and I curse the devil child internally.

"I heard that." He gives me another quick peck. "I owe you."

"Yeah. You really do."

"What you got going on tonight?"

"The girls are coming over. Nicole and Cora."

I would have just said the girls, but I like to watch Dad's reaction to Nicole's name. It's subtle, but something is there. Although since she's popular in this town for all the wrong reasons, I think it's more sympathy than lust.

Unlike Nicole, who I'm pretty sure has a crush on the old guy.

I can't imagine why, but pretty sure she'll come to her senses soon. Now that she's out of rehab, we'll really start going out on the town and meeting eligible bachelors—*younger* eligible bachelors.

To me, he's old. To just about everyone else, he's a silver fox, with a deep Robert Downey Jr. voice, strength of Vin Deisel and—well I'm not going to get into all the other things I've heard about him over the years that have traumatized me indefinitely.



Hooking up while I'm at an away game has been my life for the past four years since Cora's been living with me. There was no way I was bringing home a girl when I was trying to set an example for my kid sister—raising a college girl wasn't easy.

Just ask my so-called best friend Nick—who practically helped me raise her—before he started sleeping with her.

Christ.

But even after she moved in with him, I haven't had the courage to bring a date to my place. I'm a high-profile athlete, I can't have random chicks at my house, knowing where I live.

So I kept up my MO of hooking up with girls I'd likely never see again at hotel rooms when traveling.

"Ooh noo," she coos, running a fingernail against my chest. "Thought you boys liked it in the morning." She shimmies down to my cock, and I groan.

Not from satisfaction. Not in the least. I groan from remembering her version of going down on a man last night.

Yeah. I'll pass.

"Oh, babe." I pull her up gently to my chest. "I've got to get to this meeting. Coach will kill me."

"I can wait here for you. How long is this meeting?"

"Yeah, usually long. Then we got to head to the airport."

She pouts.

"Just give them my room number downstairs and get yourself some coffee and breakfast." I kiss her lips. "I'm sure you worked up an appetite last night."

She hums. "You did too."

I pull myself out of bed and try not to toss her clothes at her.

My irritation is high for some reason. Probably my shoulder.

It could also be Nick dropping hints that he knows about my sneaking into the rink after practice. Which I've only been doing in the last month.

I'm going to have to tell him eventually, but that could cost me. He's my captain, not just my friend.

Does he have an obligation to tell Coach? How do I know I can trust him? Jesus, I can't think.

Emily—or Emma, stands and runs her hand along my chest again. I give her a feigned groan like I'm sad she has to go, which makes me feel like even more shit—and walk her out.

There's no meeting.

Running a hand through my hair, I try to snap out of my slump. Brush my teeth, throw on a pair of sweats, a clean t-shirt and head to the hotel gym.

"Hey, hot stuff," Jeff, our left winger, calls from the treadmill, barely out

of breath.

"Fuck off."

"What? You're the only one of us who brought someone back to the room last night."

Jesus, I thought I was a little more subtle than that. "Yeah, it's not like you didn't have your pick."

Garrison snorts. Garret Garrison is my least favorite on the team if I had to pick one. "She was the hottest piece of—"

A growl comes from behind and we all turn. Coach clears his throat as he walks past us to a machine.

"Morning, ladies," he mutters. "When you're all done talkin' about your hook-ups maybe you can work on your upper body strength." He glances at me, and a nerve pinches.

I hop on the leg press since I can't work my upper body in front of my teammates. The pain is too much this morning.

I know the weakling last night was me. No one else seems to notice. Because I barely blocked two shots before hitting the penalty box.

"Knight is the only one who got any last night, Coach."

I shoot Garrison a glare.

It's no wonder Nick can't stand the guy. My sister isn't a fan either. Then again, they both have good reason. Garrison sold them out to me last season.

Nick watches me from the weights then places them down gently before coming by to adjust the ones on my machine, spotting me. "What's going on, man?" The question is low and I consider it deceiving, like he intends to keep my secret.

"Are you asking as my captain?"

"I'm asking as your friend. Why do you keep pulling the captain shit on

me? The fuck's up with you?"

"Nothing." I avoid the urge to flex my shoulder. Nick would notice. Instead, I focus on Garrison. "Just thinking I'm starting to get why you don't like that guy. That's all."

Nick follows my glance and nods. Then takes a breath. "You know I never told you this, but remember when Cora snuck out to that party at Glass last year? And the day she planned on going skydiving?"

I glare at him.

"In both those instances, when you asked her where she was going, I was there. I knew she was lying to your face."

I shake my head because I have no response.

"Point is." He bends down. "I called her out and I'm callin' you out. You're lying. What's going on? What's with the late nights at the rink?"

There's no way I'm telling him the truth. But I know my best friend just as well as he thinks he knows me. And I know where his guilt lies.

"It's lonely at home."

His face falls.

"I'm just looking for something to do."

He sighs and runs his hand through his hair. "So come over. Or have *someone* over."

"No. Not the house. Never had dates over when Cora was there and there's no reason to start now. I don't need anyone telling me my house is too big for me to be living in it alone or any of that shit."

"Yeah. I get it." He stares out for a minute. "You know Cora said she thinks Kerri's got the hots for you. You should ask her out. She already knows where you live, you've had her over for parties. You know she's not crazy."

"I don't know she's not crazy."

He chuckles. "Alright. Well, I'mma go have a chat with Peterson. He was way off last night and I need to find out what's up."

I frown. "Peterson?"

"Yeah. He missed like 4 passes."

I didn't notice.

"Yeah. I know you're beatin' yourself over that miss in third period. Get over it, man."

That's Nick's way of telling me I did alright last night without so much as saying the words.

"Thanks."

After a shower, and a few minutes of just standing under the hot spray to soothe my shoulder, I throw on clean clothes and grab my duffle bag, heading out of the gym.

All the guys have just about cleared out but Coach is still here and he puts a hand to my chest like he's about to give me a pep talk.

And I'm not in the mood. "Can this wait until I've had my coffee?"

"No." He glances back to make sure the room is clear. "Look, who you hook up with is your own business, but be careful. It's been a habit and I don't want to see you in the news or social media for the wrong reasons. It's not safe."

"I'm not getting anyone knocked up, Coach."

He glares at me and I instantly feel like shit—that one might have hit home. "Sorry."

He shakes his head. "That's not what I meant. I mean your reputation. You're screwing around on every stop. You ever hear of taking it easy?"

"Giving me love advice, Coach?"

"Love? No. That's clearly not something you're lookin' for and that's fine. But just take it easy out there will ya?"

"Yeah, okay." I shrug and walk past him. The hell is his problem anyway? Who, what and where I screw around isn't any of his business.

And it never will be.



When we land in Buffalo hours later, my shoulder is feeling sore again and I debate on working out in my gym or the one at the arena. Because if I can dull the pain somehow, I want to get back on the ice.

I get in my car and the drive home seems like torture. Cora kept my spirits high, gave me a reason to go home, cook, put on a smile and be everything she needed me to be.

But she has Nick to do all that now.

I turn the car around and head to the arena.

"Hey, Bill," I greet the security guard.

"Hey, Knight, rough game this weekend, huh?" He stands from his swivel chair and comes around to me. The guy rarely stands for anyone. Except for maybe the few times I've seen the owners come through here.

"Hey, listen. My niece is in town and she's coming to a game this week. I wanted to surprise her with an autographed jersey of every player I can find

between now and then." He pulls the jersey out of a large paper bag. It's Coach's number from when he used to play.

I take a minute to admire it. Royce Collins was amazing in his time, unmeasurable. Besides being the longest running captain, he was the ideal player. TV ready grin, knock a man down without breaking a sweat, smooth talker, idolized by the league.

Hell, he was my idol back in the day—when the man smiled more.

Not the man he is now. Angry around everyone except for Rory. For her, he puts on a smile—so long as it's in her peripheral.

I take out my pen and sign on the side of the number. "There you go." I whip out my phone and scroll down to the group text with the team, swiping a quick message. "I just asked the other guys to stop by here before the game tomorrow." I wink. "Hope we don't disappoint."

"Oh thanks, Jace. You guys will rock—as always."

Yeah, and it costs me every night.

"I can't promise Coach's signature though."

"Oh that's okay, Just saw Ms. Collins a few minutes ago. She said she'd twist his arm—or threaten to forge it. Something about doin' it half her life when she was in school and people would pester her for one."

"Angel was here?" I ask.

"Probably still is. I didn't see her leave."

Fuck.

"Is she—allowed to be here when it's closed?"

He shrugs and I see him get defensive. "Are you?"

I shoot him a glare and turn. "I'll see you in a bit, Bill."

"Thanks for the autograph."

I'm in jeans and my jersey when I step in through the tunnel. Angel doesn't see me. But I watch her glide from one side to the other. I see familiar pivots for when figure skaters are about to jump or spin or something, but she stops herself each time, struggling, self-doubting.

Her moves aren't seamless like I remember. The only thing familiar about her on the ice is the color of her cheeks. That rosy blush. Everything else is tense, ridged…hesitant.

Something in my chest pulls and it only adds to my frustration.

On the one hand, I'm glad to see her back on the ice. On the other, it puts a damper on my own plans to be here in the evenings to work out the stiffness in my shoulder.

Just because she's Coach's daughter, she thinks she can just use our professional space for her twirls? I'd complain if Coach didn't have it in for me as it is.

The lights are dim, and I imagine that's how she likes it. Its why I dimmed them even further when I found her here the other night.

Afraid that if I surprise her, she'll fall again, I wait for her to turn to find me leaning against the wall.

She doesn't. In fact, if I didn't know any better, I'd say she's avoiding looking over here altogether. When I catch a glimpse of her face, I'm certain of it.

She's crying.

"Can you please leave?"

Hmm...let's see. A vulnerable beautiful woman alone in an arena with nobody but one security guard? I think I'll stay.

I slowly close the distance between us but skid to a stop about a yard away. The last time I got too close to Angel, I yelled at her for sneaking my underage sister into a night club and giving her beer.

It's damn right dangerous getting that close to her.

I'm not entirely sure how much of my frustration that night was because I couldn't just kiss her senseless.

When I think she's about to run off through the tunnel again to hide because she's been caught in such an emotional state, she surprises me by side swiping around me, flying through the ice like she owns it and—shit.

I see it happening before it does. Her leg lifts and she spins in a double, but it's too premature and hasty for her to land on her feet. I'm flying over before she could hit the ice but don't make it.

Angel lands on her side and sits up straight as if it's what she intended all along.

I'm breathless when I stop in front of her and offer a hand.

She acknowledges it and turns her face. "Fine. You can have it."

"Have what?" I'm not an idiot. I know what she means. But I want to hear her say it.

"I'm done here."

Why did I think that was going to make me feel better?

I reach a hand down to her again, but she shifts away.

"Will you fuck off?"

"I can't believe I'm going to say this but you're going to catch a cold, get the fuck up or I'm calling your mother."

This makes her laugh and even if it's a bitter laugh, I'm relieved to see the creases on the corners of her eyes when she looks up at me. "Why not my father?"

"He doesn't like me. And if he saw me here with you, he'd somehow blame me for making you cry."

"You're probably right." She looks off at the darkened stands of the arena, then at the blue leg warmer that covers her right leg from below the knee to the ankle. Standing, she brushes ice off her hands and behind. "It's not worth it."

She circles me and heads toward the tunnel. "Maybe you should try dressing warmer," I poke, because I just don't know when to stop when it comes to Angel.

"I'm not cold."

"Then why were you shivering?"

She turns. "I wasn't."

I nod. "Shaking? Trembling? Angel, you looked like one of those skaters at Rockefeller Center during Christmas time. Only thing left was for you to circle around holding the boards the entire time.

"Shut up, I'm not that bad."

I shrug. "If you say so."

"And why are you standing there, Jace?"

She skates back to me. Her confidence rising as she focuses and circles me multiple times.

"Are you spying on me? Did Dad send you? Are you two only pretending to not like each other but meanwhile you're working undercover for him?"

I want to tell her off but I'm enjoying watching her so calm and collected circling me. It's like she forgot she was on skates.

"You come in here thinking you can judge me and insult me? When all the while, there's a reason *you're* here. If it's not to spy on me, what is it, Jace?" "It's you," I blurt out.

Her head jerks in confusion.

"I forgot something the other day when I saw you here and just wanted to mess with you—as usual."

She cocks her head at me.

Yeah, I wouldn't believe it either. I start moving and she slowly follows. "What's the matter? Don't remember how this works?" she instigates, following me.

Twisting, I take her hand and yank her against me. She gasps and stumbles into my chest. "What are you doing?"

"Shutting you up." I wrap her arms around me and twist, gliding us fast across the ice. She knows how to do this—this skating in pairs thing. Probably better than I can.

"Jace, stop." She buries her head between my shoulder blades.

I glance back and tug her along as I pick up speed. "Just let go."

She grips my waist tighter. "I—I can't."

"Sure you can, I've seen you do it a hundred times."

"You've... seen me?"

"Yeah. I've seen you. Now let go."

"You first," her voice quivers.

"Not a chance." When we reach the other wall, I twist behind her and hold her waist from behind as I push us forward in the other direction.

"Jace—" she shrieks. "It's too fast."

"You're doing great."

"Please stop."

I twist her to face me and slow us down, gripping her tighter in case she loses balance. I forget how fast I am compared to others. Lifting her slightly off the ice, I slow us to a complete stop.

Her breathing is heavy against my neck. "Put... me... down."

"Promise not to punch me?"

She glares at me, making no such promise.

Setting her down, I hold one arm until I know she's good to stand on her own. Her eyes are watery, and I have the sense that I've made a mistake. I pushed too far. I was too fast. She wasn't ready.

Before I can apologize, Angel throws her arms around me and I lift her instinctively. Her face is in my neck and I hear a sniffle before a whisper. "Thank you."

Setting her down slowly, I watch her wipe away a tear. Her lips are pressed together and she's avoiding my eyes. "Let me help you, Angel," I say before I can stop myself.



T RELEASE MYSELF FROM his grip and step back. "What?" "Let. Me. Help. You," he repeats, slower.

Is he serious? "I don't need your help. I don't need your pity. Look just forget you ever saw me here."

"I can't. No one can, Angel. You're scared. You just need to get your confidence back. Let me help you."

"Despite what you're seeing here," I say, motioning to my face, "I'm not a pity case. I'm fine. I could do this all on my own. If you would just stop coming around like you—what you need extra practice or something?"

His jaw tightens. "So you're not quitting?"

"No. If you must know. But I want to do this alone."

He steps close again and I can't breathe. I hate that Jace found me here. I hate that I let him see this much as is. I hate that I'm drawn to his smell, his strength. I hate that I liked it when he lifted me. I liked it way too much to let it happen again.

He crunches his nose and I see his compassion fade instantly when he looks back down at me. "I couldn't give two shits if you quit or not, Angel. But if you're going to be here every night, I need to know."

"Why?"

He looks around the rink as if it's the answer.

"Because at the rate you're going you're going to hurt yourself."

"So what? You're not responsible for me."

He doesn't answer and I feel as though I'm overstepping. Because who am I to call him out on being on the ice when he's not supposed to be, when I'm doing the same thing?

Rolling his shoulder back, he winces and I wonder if I might have gained a few pounds since Alex used to lift me. My old dance partner didn't have nearly as much muscle on him as Jace does, but he never complained.

His eyes blaze as he circles me the way I did him moments ago. Except I don't move to watch him do it. I stand with my arms crossed in front of me. "You're right. I'm not here to pass out favors."

"I didn't think so. So what's the deal?" I ask when he stops in front of me. "Why are you...looking for extra ice time? Feeling a little...rusty there?" His right shoulder is slumped and my eyes linger there for a few seconds.

Shit. Did I do something to compromise his recovery?

It wasn't that long ago that Jace came back from an injury.

No. I couldn't have.

He knew what he was doing when he lifted me.

He catches me staring but doesn't call attention to it. Instead, he adjusts his shoulder and twists his neck. "Maybe I need your help too."

I put my hand on my chest, feigning shock. "You mean you're not offering to help me out of the goodness of your heart?"

Not finding the humor, he simply says, "No." His mind seems to be working. The same way it does when he's figuring out his next move on the ice. Dad says he knows when Jace is about to pull something from up his sleeve because his eyes are everywhere. Like he's calculating.

"Not that I'm considering it, but what could I possibly do for you? What do you need me to set you up with one of the Ice Girls?"

His eyes pop up. "Yes."

I blurt a laugh. "No seriously."

He doesn't laugh. He doesn't even smile. "I'll help you get your groove back out here. You and me—no one else needs to know. Any night you want as long as I'm in town." His eyes drift and his tongue sweeps across his bottom lip, like he's hesitating. "And you help me...with a girl...I like."

Could he have said that any more painfully?

My eyes narrow suspiciously. He clears his throat and adds, "I could use some pointers."

I snort. "How to get one into bed without flat out asking?"

His jaw tightens. "No. I'm good at that."

"Debatable. Okay, then what?"

"I don't need help to get someone into bed, thank you very much. I actually like this girl. And you happen to be one, when you want to be. Maybe you could...help me...in that department." He seems to swallow with difficulty.

I shake my head. "Well, who is it?"

"I'm not telling you."

"Oh, it's someone I know." *Now I'm intrigued*.

He lifts his head as if he's tired of this conversation. "Yeah, fine. It's someone you know."



Angel crosses her arms and her blue eyes narrow again.

Of course she doesn't believe me.

Of all the fucking things, Jace.

I could have told her I thought about joining the ice capades after my hockey career, that I have insomnia, that I might be able to learn something from her—yeah right. But no. I had to go for *love advice*?

I panicked. I flat out panicked. When her eyes drifted to my shoulder, I had no choice. I had to distract her.

What was I to do? Admit to needing private ice time? That I need to get comfortable enough to shoot without ripping my arm to shreds?

My mouth is dry and I feel close to losing control. Admitting to the last thing on earth I need help with is one thing, but if I do in fact help her on the ice, I need to continue deterring her from what she's already suspecting.

When her eyes lower, I know she's considering it. "You know you can't do this alone, Angel."

She swallows and looks around the rink, then down at her feet. "I would need to go—"

"Slow. I know," I assure her.

"And this stays between us?" She bites her lip and relief washes over me. And I don't know if it's because this is a sign that she doesn't suspect my pain, or a sign that she trusts me to help her.

"Like I'd tell anyone I'm asking you to help me get a girl."

A small grin spreads her face. "Right." She scrunches her nose. "Do we shake on it or something?"

I look down at her hand and turn. "Or something. I'll see you tomorrow. Ten o'clock."

"Tomorrow." I hear her murmur behind me.

I swing back and glance at her skates. "By the way, if you don't mind, can you hang those up in your dad's office yourself this time? I don't intend to always clean up after you."



HERE YOU HEADING?" DAD asks me the next day when I'm about to leave to meet Jace at the rink. It's been hours since the game and he sent me an 'all clear' message once the crowd has gone and the building was practically empty.

"Out with Nicole," I blurt out.

"Oh, where to?"

"Oh, you know, that old crack house on Fuller Street, then bar hopping; but only those places where they have tables big enough for us to dance on top of. Oh and of course, we're both getting insanely—"

"Alright, alright. I get it. You're too old for me to ask where you're going. Go. Have fun. Forget I asked. Jesus."

I jump up and kiss him on the cheek. "You're going to have nightmares now, aren't you?"

He shrugs it off. "No. You're so far from wrongdoing, it's not even funny."

I smile and rub his back. He's always been so trusting and supportive. I wish I could tell him what Jace and I are doing but I know better. Jace isn't exactly his favorite player on the team. He's fast and good. But he acts out and is a bit rebellious.

Although they have come a long way since Jace's first year on the team.

We hear the front door push open and Dad's eyes snap up.

"Angel? Royce? Helloooo?" my mother's voice comes from the front of the house.

Dad rolls his eyes. "Now I'll have nightmares."

I chuckle. "She won't be long. She's just picking up a dress she wanted to borrow."

"Didn't I give the woman enough money to buy Bloomingdales if she wanted to?" He turns back to flip the eggs in the pan. He'd just finished a workout in his gym downstairs and always has protein after, along with a green juice concoction he makes.

"Be nice," I whisper.

"There you are. Didn't you hear me calling?" Her eyes zoom in on Dad. "And why's the door unlocked? You know anyone could just walk in?"

He scans her like she's the intruder. Even though I know they care about each other—at least that's what they tell me. If I didn't know any better, I'd think Dad downright couldn't look at this woman and plays it off like they're old friends ragging on each other. "Yeah, I know. Better start locking it."

She cocks her head. "I'm serious, Royce. You have my daughter living here now—solely so she can take care of that—"

"Watch it, Clare," he warns.

And there's that clue I was talking about.

Mom's eyes flick to me and she smiles. "How is your little sister, Ang?

Can I go say hi?"

"It's ten o'clock," he snaps. "She's sleeping."

My eyes bulge. "It's ten?" Shit. "I've got to run."

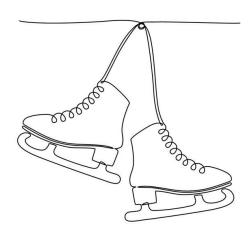
I start for the door and turn back. "Could you two...try not to kill each other? Mom, I left the dress on my bed for you."

Dad grunts and pours his eggs onto a plate.

"Yay, I can't wait to try it on." I leave before she tries to tell me her plans. Which I know she'd only do to make Dad jealous.

Angel: Lost track of time. On my way.

Jace: *Don't rush.* I can keep myself busy.



I'm only fifteen minutes late when I'm grabbing my skates from Dad's office, remembering what Jace said about hanging them back up for me when I silently wished they'd disappear the other night.

When I find Jace on the ice, it seems like he's been on for a while.

I can tell by his moves. His shots are too forceful now as opposed to carefully composed. His feet aren't as quick on the ice. He's tired. His face is flushed.

During practice, when Jace Knight has been swinging for a while, his shots are less tempered. They're more out of control. Like he's swinging just to swing—or his arm is giving out.

At the thought, I see him roll his shoulder back.

"Dumbass," I mumble.

He sees me at the entrance and throws his stick to the side. "'Bout time."

"You alright there?" I ask. It's not like me to worry about him—or any hockey player for that matter. No one forced them to choose the violent, aggressive game they play.

"Got a little carried away waitin' around, that's all."

"Well, I'm sorry to keep you waiting."

"Don't let it happen again."

My brows shoot up. "Okay, Yoda. Where do we start?"

He scans me. "What are you wearing?"

I glance down at the obvious. "My leggings and a sweater."

"Come on, you know you can't move in that. Go change into one of your frillies."

"I don't have any. And you're the one who told me to dress warmer."

"That's when I thought you were just here for fun. Before you insisted you were serious."

I cross my arms and stand while he scans me again, as if he could see under my sweater. "What's underneath that?"

I frown.

He rolls his eyes and skates closer. "You need to feel the cool air against your skin, Angel. You used to prance around here in a tube top."

"Why be cold if I don't have to be?"

"Yeah, you're right. Why not feel what you would feel in front of a live audience."

"Audience? Who said anything about that?"

"Isn't that why we're here?"

"No. I'm doing this to prove something to myself."

"And what's that?"

I blink, taken off-guard by his curiosity. "That I can."

He nods. "Okay. And what happens after you prove you can? Do you give yourself a gold star? Treat yourself to a venti Frappuccino?"

"Shut up."

"Oh hey, I know. Maybe buy yourself a new set of leg warmers, those are getting a little worn."

I glare at him but he doesn't flinch.

"What the hell is your point, Jace?"

He shakes his head and skates up to me. "Why am I here with you, Angel?"

"Excuse me?"

"Why am I, a professional athlete, a ridiculously skilled skater—seriously you should see the shit I could do on these things that others can't—doing here? What am I doing here?"

"I thought you wanted to help me," I snap, defensively.

"I do." His voice is strained. Like he doesn't want to admit it. Then it shifts and he backs up. "But not when you look like a fucking Eskimo. Take off the sweater, and those ridiculous leg warmers, or turn around and hang your skates back in daddy's office where they belong."

My throat clogs but I refuse to let him see me break. I tug on the hem of my tan knit sweater and pull it over my head, my hair falling around my bare shoulders and arms. Through the bangs that cover my eyes I see him scan me from the neck down. His mouth opens slightly and even though I have my leotard and stockings on—I feel naked.

His eyes are still on my body when I toss my sweater in his face. "The leg warmers stay on," I tell him, before skating to the center and into position.

"So who is she?" I ask after forty-five minutes of nothing but him directing and insulting me. Reminding me of the days—and nights—when Allan Frost, my old coach, used to treat me when I was struggling on the ice. The last name suited the old man well. He was a retired Olympic judge and I'm surprised anyone ever won a gold medal with that guy having any say in it.

After he made me cry for the third time, Dad fired him and found me a new coach, Paul Riggins, who I adored and practiced with for three years until my accident.

To this day, I visit and call Coach Riggins—although lately a lot less since he tries to rope me to skating for him again.

"Nice try. Let me see you do that one again," he instructs.

"Probe for information?"

"No. That ninety-degree thing you just did."

"Attitude?"

He frowns. "Why do they call it that?"

I shrug and lift my leg and arm again. "I didn't make it up." When he skates around me, watching me, I feel self-conscious and feel my right leg starting to give out. I set it down instantly.

"What happened?"

I shrug. "I got tired."

His eyes narrow on me. "You got tired?"

"Yes," I huff. "Figure skaters get tired."

He nods. "Oh okay." He skates to where his equipment and my sweater lie and picks up the thick material, tossing it back to me. "Have a good night, Angel."

Jace

Jace: You need to incorporate a workout into your schedule.

Angel: *I teach aerobics, dumbass.*

Jace: Cute. I mean a real workout. Also, you made me take one of those once and I wasn't impressed.

Angel: Neither was I.

Jace: A real workout, Angel. Every morning. Get those legs moving.

Angel: And for the record, I didn't make you do anything. You showed up.

I chuckle, remembering the reason I went to her class that day when Cora wasn't speaking to me. I'd snapped at Angel in front of a lot of people and until I made it right, my kid sister was giving me the cold shoulder.

Unfortunately, when I went to apologize, Angel was in the middle of class and told me to leave unless I was participating.

Class was rough—even for someone like me, who works out every day. So something told me it was rougher than usual. I could tell by the students' reactions. That session was definitely intended to put me in a state where I couldn't move.

Either way, after I apologized for yelling at her, Angel seemed almost angrier and reminded me she's not my sister and the next time, she wouldn't be so forgiving.

I remember thinking I'd have endured ten more of those sessions than to upset her like that again.



I WAKE UP ACHY and sore the next morning. Jace texted me last night telling me to build a workout into my daily routine.

Even in text form, he manages to insult me.

Isn't that considered some sort of cyber bullying? Whatever. It hurt my feelings, so it's bullying.

And I don't have to take it. Whipping out my phone, I shoot out a response.

Angel: Your a bully and a jerk.

Jace: It's *you're* genius. And what's your deal this morning?

I'm about to type out I'm sore and cranky but then that would solidify his notion that I need to work out more.

Damnit.

I delete the draft text and consider setting it down until another message pops up.

Jace: *Yeah. That's what I thought.*

Fuck. You.

Angel: Good luck at the game tonight. Based on what I witnessed last night, you'll need it.

Ooof.

I'm not surprised his texts stop at that point and pull myself out of bed.

I was too tired to shower yesterday after our session—if you could call it that, and instead, settle for a bubble bath this morning.

I run the hot water, drop in a bath bomb and take off my robe. The bath bomb makes my skin feel soft and silky. I run my hand along the damaged skin tissue along my calf, wincing as I do. It doesn't hurt. The pain is long gone, but every time I look at it, run my finger over the faint scar, I remember the fall.

The lavender and eucalyptus soothe my senses and I settle my leg back in the warm water, closing my eyes.

Take off those ridiculous leg warmers.

A tear streams down my cheek and I lower myself a little more in the tub, resting my neck on the small rubber pillow.

Jace Knight should be the least of the people who hurt me because I couldn't give two fucks about him. He's mean and aggressive. And here I am feeling guilty over my text. My comebacks used to be so much more on point. But now that he knows my weakness, it's hard to think, it's hard to try. It's hard not to be embarrassed for needing help.

Jace has thick skin. He could take anything thrown at him. A punch, a hard slam against the boards... rejection by a girl. Not that I'll admit this out loud,

but I'm pretty sure he's never been shot down before. Which is why this "win over some girl" sounds so outrageous.

Who shot down Jace Knight? Or better yet...who is he afraid to ask out?

What would be much more believable is if this girl was someone of the past that he's screwed and now wants to screw again.

No. No. It has to be more serious than that if he's considering working with me on winning her over.

I decide to gather my facts.

She's someone that both he and I know. I doubt it's Nicole. It has to be an Ice Girl. That's all I have. There are eight of us—I mean them.

I chill runs down my spine at the slip. I'm not an Ice Girl. Even when I was, it was just a side gig while I practiced my skill.

It was more for the practice to be on the ice in uniform in front of an audience than it was for the little it paid.

Why would I need that again?



There's a game tonight. Nicole and I don't go. Instead, we watch the game at my house and plan to meet up with Cora, and anyone else who shows up,

at Bridges after. Cora goes to nearly all the home games, cheering on her man—and probably her brother—at the top of her lungs.

Only tonight, there's an owner's event that the team, Dad and a few special guests are invited to, which means Cora will be attending with Nick. She makes us promise to wait for her at Bridges because everyone is predicting to bail early.

I take the opportunity to text the Ice Girls that I'll be at Bridges tonight and to come join me for a drink. I've slowly started rebuilding my friendship with them after ghosting them all for over a year after the accident. They were all so understanding and supportive, I felt guilty for wanting my space. To separate myself from them.

But tonight, I have my wing girl to back me up when I'll need it.

And with my job at the university, it's been harder to go out and make new friends.

"I'm glad you're here with me, Nic." The game ended nearly two hours ago and we're sitting at the bar.

"Girl, I get it. You need a buffer when you're meeting up with old friends." She lifts her club soda. "That's what your real friends are for." She winks.

"Thank you. I don't plan on leaving your side for too long tonight. I'll have a quick drink with the girls and then will be glued back here with you. They've just been asking me to come hang out with them forever...I'm not even sure why it's so hard—"

"Angel?"

My hesitant eyes shift to hers.

"You don't have to babysit me just because I came out with you."

Again, I feel like shit because of course, I let my mouth run away with me again. Nicole is a recovering alcoholic and drug addict—a life that her

mother unfortunately led her to.

People would tell you otherwise, like she made her own choices or she knew exactly what she was doing, but I disagree. Nicole and Nick's parents are all kinds of screwed up.

But while Nick got through by burying himself in sports, Nicole got mixed up with some bad friends under her mother's influence and it was all downhill from the time she turned seventeen to about a year and a half ago when Nick finally took her to a rehab facility.

A recent visit from her mother set her back socially for a little while, but she's back and Cora and I do everything we can when Nick isn't around to take care of her.

She's petite, but gorgeous, with dark hair and green eyes like her twin brother. Nicole is just as strong as she is beautiful. You'd never know she was suffering because her heart is so open and her smile is always so bright.

Also like her twin, she's intuitive and calls bullshit when she sees it. But her best feature is that she's forgiving and doesn't judge.

"I know. I'm sorry I get overly..."

"Protective?" she finishes kindly.

"I was going to say cautious of leaving you, but I like your word better." I pout and she hugs me.

"I don't blame you, Ang. I slipped last year and I know you feel responsible."

We were at a girl's night out with Nicole and I left her to take a call from Rory's babysitter and came back to find her with a drink in her hand. She was shaking and the drink went unsipped, but the fact that she ordered one was enough for me to know I needed to get her out of there.

"I'm just happy to see you," she tells me, lightening the mood again. "I

feel like your head's been somewhere else this past week, we've barely talked."

I smile at her. Feeling guilty that I haven't told her about getting back on the ice. I'm not ready for anyone to know.

Jace knowing is turning out to be borderline acceptable, considering he's pushing me the way I need him to. Even though I'd never admit it to him.

The girls are in giggles and laughs as they enter the sports bar.

Nicole's lips twist. "Jesus, who laughs like that? They're like hyenas."

"Did you make fun of me when I was among that crowd?"

Nicole's brow arches. "Honey, I don't even think I was sober long enough to *know* you were one of them."

I give her a sympathetic look and rub her back.

"I'm fine. If you can't make fun of yourself with close friends, what can you do?"

I don't answer and she sips her ginger ale, looking perfectly content with it. "I feel like it's going to be a long time before people in this town forget and I can feel normal again."

Up until recently, she's been living in Nick's house—and under his watch. But now, she's starting to spend some nights at her old apartment. And starting to feel normal again. And if the rest of the town stopped dropping subtle reminders—me included—she'd be just fine.

Nick thought her therapist was insane for suggesting she try living alone, but it's had a positive effect. She started feeling her independence again and even started looking for work.

"How's it going at the apartment?" I ask, reminding her that she's on the right track.

"Good." She nods affirmatively. "I threw a lot of stuff out. I'm still

rearranging some things, but I kind of like spending the night at Nick's. His neighborhood is just so quiet and calm. I think I need that."

"Sounds like you need to consider relocating."

"I need a job first. Can't live off my successful brother forever."

We turn at a familiar shriek from one of the Ice Girls; Candy. "Angel, oh my god, you're here. Okay, we are definitely doing shots."

Nicole laughs and claps her hands, nudging me. "That's your cue."

Despite promising the girls a drink with them tonight, I hesitate. But my best friend squeezes my arm and I remember another promise—one Cora and I made to her. To not deny ourselves a drink once in a while when we're out with her. This part of our friendship is important to her.

"I'm going to order a drink but really not into shots," I tell her. "I'll come by your booth."

Candy cheers and turns back. "You guys, Angel is in the house—we are getting wasted."

I shake my head and Nicole leans into me. "Is she new here?" Most people in this town are a lot more subtle about the topic of alcohol around Nicole.

We laugh and she stands. "Come on. I'll go over with you."

We listen to some of my old friends ramble about their recent routine going so well and I'm genuinely happy for them.

But after twenty minutes of the same topic, I tune them out and Nicole and I move back to our spot at the corner of the bar.

After a few minutes, other familiar faces start pouring in, including a few hockey players.

"I thought they were at the owners' event."

Nicole shrugs. "Guess it wasn't that eventful."

"No, it wasn't," a deep voice comes from behind us.

My Dad is in a suit and he doesn't look very happy, despite the Blades winning two-nothing tonight.

"Mr. Collins—um Royce. Hi."

My father gives my best friend a warm smile. "Hello, Nicole."

"Congrats on another win."

Dad hesitates. "Yeah. Let's just hope our luck doesn't run out. Guys are getting cocky out there."

"Doesn't sound familiar at all," I say pointedly.

"Hey, I was never cocky. I was confident and played my best in every game. I never *expected* to win."

"I know. I know. You played to win...I've heard the speech."

Dad winces. "And now I feel old. Thanks, sweetie. I think I'll have that drink now, Hank."

"Comin' right up, Coach."

Nicole bats her eyes. "Does anyone call you by your first name or do I only get that privilege?"

I grimace because it sounds like my friend is flirting. But I know it's innocent. Or probably just in her nature. There's a lot about Nicole I still don't know. Like what kind of men she's into.

A dimple deepens on my father's cheek, and he reaches into his wallet. "You're one of the few—" He sounds like he's about to add to that but clears his throat instead.

Shit—he was about to flirt back and caught himself.

Okay. Ew, Dad. She was just being nice.

"So, two nights in a row for you two, huh?"

Uh oh.

Nicole frowns slightly but doesn't look at my dad with confusion. An

impressive skill.

"What'd you guys end up doing last night?"

My friend's expression doesn't change. She glances at me then licks her lips as her eyes shift uncomfortably, so I know I need to say something fast.

"Um—we..." Damnit, why do I suddenly feel like I'm seventeen again and caught sneaking out of the house?

"The usual," Nicole answers. "Only this time, instead of Netflix and oodles of popcorn, we actually went to the movies."

"The movies?" Dad asks. "What did you see?"

"What was it again?" Nicole asks me.

"Transformers. Anyway, Dad, we were just talking about Nicole finding a new job."

"I said nothing about a new job. I just said I should probably look for a new place to live—someplace quieter."

Dad looks concerned. "I thought you were living with Nick?"

"I am, sort of. But he's with Cora now and I really need some independence. I've been spending a few nights at my old apartment downtown."

"Hey, maybe you could get a teaching job at the college. You're into photography, right?" I offer, relieved the subject of last night has dropped.

Nicole laughs. "Yeah right. Like someone would trust me with children. Good one, Angel."

"Here's your drink, Coach." Hank slides it over.

"Thanks, buddy." He reaches for it, but Nicole swipes it off the table before he does and holds it up to her face.

"Nicky," I call, but she ignores me. Then I realize she's holding it up to her nose, not her lips.

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"Hank," she calls. "You got any cloves?"
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"I...guess I can slice one up."

Nicole taps a fingernail on the bar waiting.

"Right um...here." He hands her a jar of cloves and the torch. Then starts to slice the orange.

"Mind if I do it?"

Hank shrugs, passing her the fruit and knife. "Be my guest. Just don't sue me if you burn or slice a finger."

"Nic, what are you doing?" I hiss, glancing at my Dad, who doesn't appear fazed at all—nope, the man looks rather intrigued.

Dropping in a clove, she moves to the fruit and proceeds to cut an impossibly thin and perfectly round slice of orange, then torches it like a pro. The thing is still in smokes when she drops it into his bourbon, making it cloudy.

"This'll give it that fall, smokey flavor, Hank." Nicole holds it up proudly, then glances behind her. "Care to give it a taste, Coach?"

With a soft grin, he takes the drink from her and takes a sip. He blinks and sucks his teeth, clearly impressed. "This is very good. I feel like I should tip *you*."

Nicole laughs it off and nudges my shoulder. "I've still got it."

God, I hope we're talking about her bartending skills.

"Yeah. Well, I guess there's always...that," I say, half dropping it because I know Nick is completely against his sister going back to bartending.

[&]quot;Yeah."

[&]quot;How 'bout a torch."

[&]quot;Uh, yeah, but—"

[&]quot;An orange?"

The room picks up a bit—which means that the players must have arrived. When I turn, sure enough, Nick, Cora, Jace and Ryan, the oldest player on the team, walk in, following a few others.

Cora ducks out of the way when the players all jump each other in celebration. "Next time, I'm skipping the suits event and coming str—wh—what'd I miss? Why are you staring at her like that?" Cora asks Nicole who's dead panning me and not giving in.

I inhale through my nose and refuse to fall under pressure. What I do on my own time is no one's business.

"What?" Cora presses when neither of us says anything.

"Oh, don't mind me, Cor, I'm just staring at Angel until she tells me why I just had to lie to her dad about what we were doing last night."

Cora turns to me slowly and I sigh. "I was at the gym. Dad keeps pressuring me to babysit Rory and I needed to get away. That's all. Nothing juicy going on in my life, I promise." I wince at that last word and after a brief battle in my head, I decide that technically, that *is* what's going on with Jace and me. The little deal we have is not juicy at all. It's…exercise.

"Okay..." Cora says, still confused.

"Anyway, Dad asked how our night was and I got caught off guard. You know Nicole is an expert liar so—"

I catch Nicole swallow in guilt and know she's unhappy. What is her deal? She never blinked twice before lying. It's literally her thing.

"Okay, well. Give me a heads up next time, will ya?" Nicole shrugs. "I might even meet you over there." She slides off the bar stool. "Which gym was it again?"

"Uh—the one on fifth, Gold Digger."

She nods. "The one that closes at eight?"

I lick my lips. Did I mention I'm a terrible liar?

Nicole doesn't wait for my response and turns. I call after her but she disappears toward the ladies room.

Cora shakes her head and hops onto Nicole's chair. "Sheesh, she's just as bad as her brother."

Despite my growing guilt this evening, I perk up for Cora's sake. "So, how are your new living arrangements?"

She leans over and pats my arm. "Don't worry, I'm not going to ask. What you do is your business. When you're ready, you'll tell us about your secret love affair." She presses her lips together before we both burst into laughter.

"I promise you there is no affair. But...it is a secret."

She holds up her hands. "No more secrets for me—thank you. I'll pass."

I look toward the bathroom door as Nicole steps out. "Wish *she* felt that way."

Cora grips my hand in reassurance. "She'll get over it. When you're ready to share, we're here for you."

Nick brings over some sort of colorful bluish cocktail for Cora and she beams. He greets me and fills us both in on a bet the team has over who's going to be hung over at tomorrow's practice. Then asks me how his sister is.

I give him the low down since Cora is going to anyway and his brows furrow. "Nicole loves to lie. It's in her nature. She's always said there should be an awards show for best liar—because she would win. I'm pretty sure it's all in your head, Angel."

The lovebirds eventually leave and Nicole doesn't return. I decide to give her time to cool off and in the meantime, watch the Ice Girls as they giggle and rehash tonight's "stellar" performance.

Let's be honest, ladies, you sweep ice between periods. You're not

dancers.

I wince and groan internally. Or so I thought, until Jace comes to sit next to me.

"Oh good. You're pissed. What else is new?"

I barely shoot him a glare, my eyes locked on the girls.

Which one? I wonder again. Which of them does he like? As I assess each blonde, brunette and one redhead in different views, I can't picture him with any of them. By no means is Jace too good for them—it's just that I don't see it.

"Stop staring at them like that—she's not here," he assures me.

"She's not?"

"No. It's not one of them."

For a second, I wonder if he's telling the truth, but when I scan them again, I decide it makes sense. "You know, you have to tell me who it is for this to work."

"Why?"

"Because. I need to make sure you're executing correctly."

"What am I executing?"

"Um...flirting without degrading. Smiling, without being all creepy."

"You think my smile is creepy?" He feigns a stab of pain in his chest, but then gives me a freaking killer smile. One that if I hadn't known him to be a pompous ass, would have had panty-melting effects on me. I bite down hard on the inside of my cheek to make sure that *doesn't* happen.

"I think your smiles are cocky and presumptuous."

And then, he adds flavor to the smile—kind of like what Nicole just did to Dad's drink. Where she took something that was perfectly fine and made it... even more delectable.

Jace drops the smile to a grin and parts his lips. His green eyes scan my face like he's seeing me for the first time and then glances away, licking his lips. Then spreading them in a wider grin like he can't help himself.

Holy shit. "Stop it."

He laughs. "I'm sorry." But his grin holds wide as I shake my head.

"No, you're not." A smile creeps up my lips and I hate that he did this to me.

"Yeah, okay. You're right about the presumptuous thing. I'll dial it down, I promise." He clears his throat and neutralizes his features.

"Well don't look dead either," I mutter.

"Do you mind, I'm getting into character."

I drop my head into my hand, laughing. "Oh my God, what have I signed up for?"

There's some noise at the door and I see Kerri enter, joining the others at their booth. Jace glances over and then away just as quick.

Too quick, and overly careless.

That's got to be her.

"It's Kerri."

"Who?" He seems completely lost as he takes a sip of his beer.

I nod my head toward the other side, where Kerri is greeting several players along with her team.

"What? She's like twelve."

"She's a year younger than me. She's just super petite. Also, you can't look at her for more than two seconds at a time, which means, you like her."

"That's because I don't want to get arrested," he jokes again.

Kerri does have a little bit of a baby face. But she's gorgeous and sweet and always cheerful. It would counteract his grumpiness nicely.

"She's perfect," I say out loud. A hint of something that might be mistaken for jealousy creeps up my chest. But not because of Jace. But because of everything that Kerri, or someone like her, has. Untainted dreams, petite figure, a high spirited nature. And now being secretly crushed on by someone like Jace Knight—who doesn't seem like he cares about anything but hockey, protein shakes, and how quickly he could charm someone into a one-night stand.

"You think? Why's that?" Instead of looking at Kerri when he asks, he's focused on me.

"She's simple and down to earth. You'd have to work a little hard to get her, but once I help work that miracle, you two will be the hottest new thing in town."

He cocks his head. "Angel. Look at her. I'd break her."

I bite my lip at the image he's painting. The kind that makes me wonder what Jace is like in bed. And that's not a place my mind should ever travel. "Deny it all you want, Knight. Your secret's out."



Before the night is over, I head over to where I see Nicole sitting by the bar on the other side, giving Hank a few other tips. Dad is nearby and I decide to grab them both and come clean. I have no clue as to what I'll say about where I was, but hoping the "none of your business" bit pans out.

Just as I come near, Nicole backs up and bumps into Dad. Her soda splashes over her sleeve and she yelps.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Nicole says, barely looking up.

Dad grips her arm to steady her. "Nope, my fault. Here let me get that."

Hank hands them a handful of paper towels and Dad wipes down her soiled sleeve. She thanks him but keeps her eyes on her sleeve.

"So did you like it?" he asks casually, still holding the back of her hand as he dabs.

"Hmm?"

"The movie. Transformers."

"Oh. Yeah. It was terrific."

He nods and releases her arm gently. My brows furrow when he leans in and I struggle to hear what he's saying.

Why do I care so much? Because I know my father. And he's totally on to me. He's too calm and isn't dropping the subject. Which is always bad news when I've done something wrong—like lie to his face.

I step behind them just in time to hear him say, "It also doesn't release until next week."

Shit. Heat floods through me and I stand frozen, speechless behind them.

Say something, Angel...

Nicole finally looks up, her cheeks flushed, and I feel like the worst friend ever. Nicole's been through enough. She doesn't need my added drama.

Dad quickly offers her a small smile.

"Um—did we say Transformers? I meant—"

He puts his hand on her arm. "You're a good friend, Nicole. Angel's lucky to have you."

I see my friend swallow. "Is—is that sarcasm? Because I'm pretty sure I've never been considered a good influence or friend—"

"I mean it, Nic. Thanks for looking out for her."

She releases a breath and I feel like she might apologize, but then thinks better of it and nods. "You're welcome."

I want to melt and die. What the hell is happening over there? What am I going to tell my dad tonight? Because let's face it—he's saving all the lecturing for me.

I *hate* Dad's lectures. But if I tell him about the time I'm spending at the rink—he'd get all worried and offer to call Riggins or worse—sit and watch me like I'm fifteen again.

No, I can't tell him. I can't tell anyone. Not until I'm ready.

If I'll *ever* be ready.

With that thought I go back to Jace at the bar. Ironically, since he's the only one in the room who knows what I've been up to. He's sort of my—confidant.

I shiver.

"What did you do? You look guilty." He points out the moment I sit back in my seat.

"I'm sorry about what I said this morning—via text."

He nods. "Thank you. Now moving on. What did you do?"

"I told Dad I was with Nicole last night and he caught me lying."

He whistles. "That's a tough one. So tell him you were with me." He shrugs.

I laugh out loud and am a little surprised when he doesn't.

"Alright, wise ass, you got any better ideas?"

"Tons," I lie again.

"Let's hear 'em."

"I could tell him I hooked up with a crack dealer. Or ooh, I could tell him I went out with Mom and her new boyfriend. Or—"

"Those are better than telling him you were with me?"

"Yes."

He turns to where my father is now standing with Hank and one of the other players—he seems in a shockingly good mood considering I just lied to him. "You're probably right," Jace agrees.

Kerri finally spots me and walks over to us, shining her bright smile and pulling me in for a hug. "Ang, I'm so glad you're here. Except I hear you've been glued to this seat all night. Come chill with us."

That's because you're all doing shots and I'm here with a sober friend.

Who is now eyeing me and Jace suspiciously in between her conversation with Cora and Nick across the room.

That girl has a radar of a state trooper.

I raise a brow and glance at Jace. "I have a better idea." I hop off my stool. "Why don't you save my seat while I go mingle for a minute."

Jace tenses and I think his head shakes as he takes a sip of his beer. Maybe he's not ready to talk to her?

"By the way, you looked amazing out there today. That number was so—you." I nudge the hockey player's attention back to us.

"Yeah. It was great," Jace adds.

"You saw our dance?" The question is directed at him and I wince...shit. The players don't stay on the ice during intermission.

"Yep...all the way from the locker room." If I didn't know any better, I'd say he just rolled his eyes internally. But why? He should be smitten that she's so excited that he watched her dance.

Kerri frowns but lets it go. "Well, I was watching you—and you were incredible tonight. No one can get one past you."

Good guess, considering that's literally his one job.

But Jace's interest is piqued. He sits up, picking up Kerri's hand and using it as a microphone. "Well, John, I don't want to brag, but yes, yes I believe it was my outstanding shielding tonight that brought this one home. But you know I've got a great team and a lovely set of Ice Girls cheering us on, and wouldn't be here tonight without them."

Kerri blushes and sets her hand down. "You're so funny."

Jace gives her a knowing grin and swivels back to face the bar.

Oh, my end of the deal is going to be a piece of cake.



HIS IS GOING TO be harder than I thought.

Angel is dead set on setting me up with Kerri.

Kerri is the type of girl who makes her life all about the short term gig of being an Ice Girl. Which isn't very smart, in my opinion. Add a little bit of fairy dust, and Tinkerbell is high on everyone's list of *annoying*.

She doesn't bother me though. She always seemed to counteract Angel's grumpy, fake smile attitude I always found so irritating.

Why did I find it irritating? Because I never liked Angel and the fact that her moods always seemed to match mine didn't help in my reasoning for not liking her.

I'd have liked it better if she were more like Kerri; Pretty, energetic, full of team spirit—and kept her comments to herself.

Angel is none of those things—including pretty. Angel is a knockout. And the fact that she's got a mouth on her is sexy as hell.

How Angel ended up on a cheer squad is beyond me.

Angel is no fucking cheerleader. In fact, I'm almost positive, Coach hired her just to make sure his grumpiness is spread evenly on and off the ice.

Yep. Now that I think about it, that's got to be it. It makes sense. Coach doesn't like me—Angel can't stand me, so everything's covered.

I spend a total of ten minutes talking to Kerri after Angel abandons us. I'm not even sure what happened in these eight minutes. I know I offered her a drink... but that was more on autopilot for me. I thanked her for making my night with that comment she made earlier and the rest of that time—I wondered the best way to get Angel to come back here and sit where Kerri was. Not on top of her—although that might be interesting—but instead of her.

Finally, I tell Kerri I don't want to keep her from her friends and lightly suggest we talk another time... when seven other Ice Girls aren't staring at us.

This makes her blush and she gives me her phone number.

I'm not surprised Angel doesn't make it more than a few minutes with her old friends before she strides over to the bar.

"You know your idea of playing hard to get might backfire," she mutters.

"What?" I ask genuinely.

"She might have believed you didn't want to take her away from her friends, but there are about five of us who know better and gave her the 'oh honey' look."

"Again, what?"

"She told us what you said."

"She did? You girls do that?"

"Oh yeah. Word for word on what guys say so that we can all interpret it. And most of the time, it's not what the girl thinks. It's worse." "Are you still speaking English?"

She grunts and talks into the air. "And here I thought I got the better end of the deal."

I decide to stare at her until she comes back down to Earth.

"Can I get a beer, Hank?" Angel settles in the stool next to me and I feel better already. Like the stars of the night are realigning. She could talk nonsense all she wants as long as she stays right here.

Hank hands her what I'm having since she didn't specify—it's also the house special.

"Good, now maybe you'll lighten up," I tell her.

"You know she was giving you a compliment earlier."

"I know. But it's amazing you recognize one when you see it."

"A compliment? I get them quite often," she says casually.

"Yeah well, guys will do that to—"

"To what?"

"Never mind."

"To what? Get in my pants?"

I shrug and raise a brow. She doesn't seem like the type to fall for a few words of charm, but nonetheless, I said it.

"I'll have you know, I haven't—" Her eyes go wide and she blinks before throwing her head back for a sip.

"Haven't what?"

She doesn't answer. Her eyes are glued to the rim of her glass.

"What were you going to say?"

"Forget it. We're talking about your sex life, not mine." I see her wince and a grin grows on my face.

"I didn't realize we were talking about sex, Angel."

"We're not."

"Well, I wasn't, but apparently..." I wiggle my finger at her.

She doesn't say anything.

"When was the last time you had sex, Angel?" I hold up my hands. "I only ask because...it would explain a lot."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

My grin deepens and I catch her glimpse at my dimples. I know it when I see it. All girls focus on my dimples when they really see me smile—which isn't often so it might come as a shock. "It's in the body language. Your frustration. The way you purposely avoid looking at me."

"What do you have to do with it?"

"I have a tendency to turn girls on. Hank, scotch please."

She scoffs. "With what?"

I don't answer the silly question. Not verbally, at least. Instead, I shift in my seat, releasing a throaty breath as I reach for the new drink Hank poured and take a sip. I let the taste of the amber liquid sit on my tongue and swish it around in my mouth, flexing my jaw. I swallow it down and lick my bottom lip before letting my eyes lazily shift back to her. Not her face. I start with where her elbow rests on the edge of the bar and then sweep my eyes slowly upward until they reach her lips and flex my jaw again like I'm fighting the urge to kiss her as I look away.

"That's it? You don't even look me in the eye?"

"Were you waiting for me to?"

"Is this a trick question? Seriously, is that all you got? Not surprised." She shrugs. "It's not easy to use words to grab a girl's attention."

"Why bother?"

"Because Kerri is worth more than a gentle sweep of green eyes."

I don't know what I like more about her statement, the fact that she specifically calls out the color of my eyes, acknowledging that she watched me carefully, or the fact that her breathing is slightly off, like her heart rate picked up a tad.

I nod and turn my focus to where Kerri is sitting. It's hard, because I'm not interested.

"Fine. Enlighten me." I find myself asking, curious what she thinks girls are into these days.

"Pay attention."

"That's it?"

"It doesn't take much."

I laugh out loud. "Oh, I'm sure it does. For certain things, to which both parties have a mutual understanding, you're right. It doesn't take much. But I'm sure there's more than 'paying attention' if you want a...um..."

"A relationship, Knight. You know, like the one Cora and Nick have?"

My eyes shoot to my sister and my best friend. He's got his arms wrapped around her and whispering something in her ear. At least that's what I hope he's doing.

Why are they always touching each other?

"Could you try and not look so disgusted?"

I ignore her—I'm careful not to tell her that's not what I want. Because isn't that our deal? Isn't that exactly what I told her I wanted—and she assumed was with Kerri?

Forfeiting, I say, "Fine. Yes, if I wanted...that."

"It all starts with paying attention and how you handle the things you learn about her."

"So if I know she's into me, do I just ask her out right now?"

Angel shakes her head. "Flirt with her in front of her friends, but don't ask her out in front of them. That kind of vulnerability should only be shared in private."

"It's vulnerable to ask people out?"

"Yes."

"Still not sure what makes you the expert. You're the one in a dry spell."

She nearly chokes on her beer. "Dry spell?"

Oops. I did not mean to let that one slip. I release a breath and go with it. "It means when someone hasn't..."

"I know what it means." She grabs her purse off the table and waves to Nicole who wraps up her conversation as Angel turns back to me. "And you're wrong."

I watch her storm out of here angrier than I've seen Angel in years. And that's saying a lot.

Looks like I hit a nerve.



The same old stubborn Nicole and insists she'll only forgive me if I tell her what I was really up to last night.

Just as I park my car in the driveway, my phone buzzes with a text.

Nicole: You do realize you now owe me two things.

Angel: Coffee and a donut?

Nicole: I love you. I'm sorry I abandoned you for a while tonight. I was thrown off guard with the lie—and getting caught isn't my strong suit.

Angel: Dad's no ordinary man.

Nicole: No, he's not.

I decide I'm too tired to make sense of what Nicole just texted and step into the house. Rory is asleep on the couch.

The kitchen light is on and I figure it's better to face the man now than wait until morning.

He's pouring himself a cup of tea and glances back at me when I step in, giving him a tentative grin.

Holding back a smile, he shakes his head and drops a sugar cube into the steaming cup. "Did you have a good night?"

My shoulders drop and I moan. "No."

"Shocking. Considering you were stuck talking to Knight after Nicky abandoned you." He takes a slow sip.

Nicky?

"At least someone talked to me." I toss my bag on the counter.

"You used to love hanging out with the girls."

"They're—they just speak a different language than I do now."

He releases a breath through his nose and sets his tea down. "They always spoke a different language."

Coming to me, he wraps both arms around me and pulls me into a bear hug. It's weird because Dad rarely shows affection so I'm wondering if this is part of his lecture. Like a weird way to start—its new for him.

"Dad, what are you doing?"

"You look like you need one of these tonight."

"Could you not pity me and just yell at me?"

He backs up and glowers like I'd just insulted him. "Why would I yell at you?"

"Because that's what you do when I lie."

"Angel, do you remember the last time you lied to me?"

I frown. "No."

"Yeah, neither do I...it was a long time ago. I think you were in high

school."

"What's your point?"

He leans in and whispers. "This is healthy. You doing something on your own that no one has any business knowing about—it's good, Ang."

"Lying...is good?"

"When it comes to you? In these past few months? Yes. I don't believe you were with Nicole last night, but if this is the start of something that makes you happy—then lie away."

I pull back and narrow my eyes at him. "I hate you."

He grins. "Feeling really guilty for not telling me what it is, aren't you?"

"Not anymore." I swipe my bag from the counter.

"That's the spirit." He returns to his tea and winks at me. "Night, sweetheart."



After my shower, I climb into bed feeling more confused and emotionally drained than I have in months. I apply scar cream along my calf as part of my routine. I want to say it's helped. But somedays it's still hard to look at. It's

healed tremendously, but I still see it the way it was for the first few days after I slid across the ice and hit the boards so hard, I almost broke them.

I open my dresser and reach for the pink and gray matching pj's and freeze. Turning to the abandoned white silk camisole and other sexy lingerie I had no business buying. Pathetically, I pick it up and slip it over my body, looking myself over in the mirror.

I haven't had sex in over two and a half years.

Jace's last words really got to me tonight. Partially because when he was showing me his pitiful moves earlier, I almost came on the spot.

When he swept his tongue so deliciously across his mouth, tasting the hard liquor. The way his biceps and jaw tightened as if he were trying to fight some intense urge to devour me.

I've always known Jace to be hot, but he's not *my* kind of hot. He's arrogant and hotheaded. But whatever he did tonight, which I'm still enormously confused and mildly embarrassed about—had me in shivers.

The jackass.

Seriously, can he not tell I'm in a sensitive place in my life right now? I climb into bed and stare at the ceiling.

Dry spell.

Who says that?

Jace Knight, that's who. And I hate that I wanted his hands on me tonight. That I fell for his short-lived charm.

I hate that it's his face I picture when my hand slips under my panties.

I hate that I'm reliving the subtle movements of his chiseled jaw, bulging muscles of his arm, the slow sweep of his eyes, the hint of satisfaction—and it makes me twist in anticipation. My fingers dive deeper between my folds, reaching my clit and rubbing in circular motions, squirming, and arching. All

the while, I can't force Jace's face out of my mind, picturing his tongue doing the flicking of the sensitive nub, pulling on it with those lips—good God.

I suck in a sharp breath and start to quiver with a silent scream as my orgasm draws out. I haven't come this hard in—probably ever and it's a sad realization.

I'm so sated and ready to finally drift off. Given the night I'd had, I know it will be the most peaceful sleep I'd had in a while.



Two days later, and a total of five times masturbating to Jace's face in my head, I'm all sorts of messed up. Because I don't like it.

Not one bit.

The intensity to which I come every time—yes, that I like, very much in fact. It's not the same when I put him out of my mind. When I try to imagine, say Chris Hemsworth—nothing. Or my insanely good-looking old dance partner, Alex, I'm even more turned off. Mostly because I've been there in real life and not impressed.

What the hell did Jace do to me?

Does he know he's done it?

I'm so paranoid, I can't think. I also avoided going to the rink after the team's practice last night. I suppose I could have given Jace a heads up but I

need to stay far away from whatever heat he's radiating my way. Whatever power he'd planted in me when he did that thing that made my mouth go dry.

I thought I did a stellar job playing it off like that didn't do shit for me—considering he seemed disappointed.

"Ms. Collins?"

I pop my head up. "Yeah."

"It's already five minutes past class—"

I check my watch. "Oh. I'm sorry. Alright that's it for today. Thanks, everyone. Higgins," I call to the guy on the bench. "Next week, I'm going to need that doctor's note."

He gives me a thumbs up and is out the door, along with the rest of the class in less than thirty seconds.

I pick up the few mats left on the floor, rolling them up one by one before placing them on the cart.

"You avoiding me, Collins?"

My head snaps to the obnoxious sound from the entrance. Jace is storming into the room as the doors shut behind him. He's in sweatpants and a matching grey hoodie.

"It's one thing to not answer my texts, but standing me up last night?"

"I had to watch Rory," I lie, avoiding him and rolling the last mat, setting it in the cart.

"You didn't think to tell me you weren't planning on coming?"

"What's the problem?" I glance over. "You had a night free. Maybe you could have used it to call Kerri."

I feel him glare at me and now I'm nervous if that came out a little bitter.

No—no it sounded totally supportive…didn't it?

After watching me carefully align all the mats evenly on the cart for no

apparent reason, he shifts. And from the corner of my eye, I see him smirk. "You got an issue with my asking Kerri for her number?"

This time, I look up at him. "Not at all."

"Good." He checks his watch. "You got twenty minutes?"

"I have an hour until my next class, but—"

"We only need twenty." He grabs a pink mat from the cart and lays it on the floor.

"What are you doing?"

He holds out his arms. "You missed our session last night. You owe me a workout."

"I didn't realize we had a schedule, Coach."

His face is blank and he points down.

"This is bullshit," I say.

"So is your so-called comeback to the ice. Now get on the mat."

My mouth drops but Jace has said worse, so I'm not surprised—nor do I have the energy to argue. Rolling back my shoulders, I step on the mat and place my hands on my hips. "Like you know how to—"

Before I can finish, his large hand is on my spine while the other one comes around to my chest. "Back," he tells me. And because I feel his support, I bend backward into a bridge position. He lets go and steps back, watching me.

"So what are you waiting for? The three-day rule?" I ask.

"I don't know what that is," he admits as he kicks my feet further apart.

"Are you nervous that you won't know how to swoon her on a first date?" My voice strains and he puts a hand on my back to support me as I bring myself to a standing position, slightly out of breath.

Jesus, I'm winded already?

I push him away when he helps me with the forward bend and do it myself.

"I'm not nervous." He winks. "I know exactly what to do." He motions me to lay flat and bends his knees down in front of me, holding my feet flat. "You need to work your upper body. Give me ten."

That's it?

"Well, you need to up your game, because it's going to take a lot more than a good orgasm for something serious with Kerri."

He cocks his head. "A good orgasm?"

I pause and feel my cheeks heat, then continue the pushups, counting out loud.

"Who have you been talking to?" he asks over my counting.

"No one," I breathe, feeling the strain in my thighs as I hit eight.

"Oh, then you're just...assuming?"

"Nine...ten." I sit up and release a heavy breath.

He laughs and bends on one knee to take a good look at me. "Why are you so red? What are you hiding?"

Frustrated, and afraid he might come to his own conclusions, I give him something. "I'm just saying, you can't assume you'll get the girl just by flexing your jaw and sweeping your eyes over her as if you like what you see, but not enough to linger. That kind of attention—the wrong kind—is how toxic relationships start. So, get it together."

When my eyes meet his again, I know I've said too much.

I've said something that gave me away, I'm sure of it. Because the way Jace's lips spread as he scans me, silently tells me he's on to me.

My cheeks are burning by the time I stand, pulling away from him. My instinct is to wrap up this mat and roll the cart into the next room, closing the door behind me and screaming.

But that would only confirm his suspicions.

So I lean forward into a back scale position, where one leg is in the air behind me as I reach forward. He doesn't say anything when he stands and gives me space. He removes his sweatshirt, revealing a black sleeveless cotton shirt and a strong set of muscles. I ignore him when he strolls over and holds my leg in position. I force my eyes to focus on a spot on the far wall and avoid breathing him in.

"How long can you hold this?" His voice is soft and his breath against my ear. Good God, it's like he's doing this on purpose.

"Another few seconds." I muster in one breath before I start to shake.

He places both hands under me for balance. "Good. Release," he instructs, setting it down when he knows I can't hold it anymore. Then helps me when I lift the other leg.

"I can do it. You can let go." But my voice gives away that I can't. Not now. Not when I'm trembling everywhere.

"So how many times?" he asks casually.

"How many times what?"

He runs a hand up my leg where it starts to give out and my breath hitches. "I'm just curious."

I want to squirm. Why does he have this effect on me suddenly? I need to get this man out of my head.

He's *helping* me, just like my old Coach, just like my old dance partner. Technically, he's not doing anything inappropriate, so why do I feel like I'm being...tormented?

I drop my leg and he backs up. His expression blank when he looks up at me.

"What are you doing?" I ask, my voice hoarse.

His lips twitch and he steps close to whisper in my ear. "Just giving you more to think about when you're in bed tonight."

My eyes blaze with anger and I neutralize them before they flick back to him. "Fuck you."

He smiles brightly, as if I'd just confirmed something for him. "Don't skip out on me tomorrow night, Collins. Oh, and it looks like you found an unconventional way to work out those stiff muscles. Keep it up." And then he winks at me. The asshole winks.

I give it a few minutes, staring into space, waiting to wake up from what I am sure is a nightmare. But when it doesn't happen, I want to crawl into a ball and die.

How the fuck did I manage to give myself away?



CAN'T HELP MY grin when I'm home tonight, in my gym. It's a mess. Since Cora never bothered coming down here, I never bothered to keep it tidy.

Nick tells me Cora doesn't use his gym either—but he's not worried about how much exercise she gets.

He's lucky he told me this on the phone—otherwise he'd have shown up to the game with a black eye.

I was totally joking when I pressed that Angel might have masturbated to thoughts of me—something I would have never believed unless you showed me a goddamn video, but when her face lit like Rudolf's nose in the midnight sky, I was shocked to know I hit it on the nose.

God, I wanted to touch her, but I was careful to keep my hands where they belonged, and away from further up her thigh. She was so stiff and tight all over.

When my dick started trying to poke its way out of my pants, I knew it was time to get the hell out of there. We weren't done, but I'm sure she didn't mind my getting as far away from her as possible.

So rigid.

Was she always this uptight?

After her accident, she stepped out of the limelight and hid behind everything. Moving into her dad's house, getting a job as a teacher, and barely coming out with old friends.

Some might believe she thinks she's too good for everyone in the room. It's what *I* used to think.

But now, I've got another theory.

This stiff-necked ballerina needs to be properly unbound—and I'm just the guy for the job.



I'm back on the ice alone again tonight, spending some time working my shoulder. Mimicking the physical therapist routine only with a stick in hand and a lot faster and stronger than recommended. I'm swinging like my life depends on it. It's painful—but not enough to stop.

It's why I'm annoyed that Angel gave up so quickly. I know her pain is gone. Long gone. She let humiliation get the best of her and never looked back.

Until last week.

Of course, I'd fuck it up by flirting with her when I'm supposed to be into someone else.

She wanted my help. That was what I promised.

Not to make her squirm. Sure, it was fun and I couldn't help myself. But I need to remember who I'm dealing with here.

Angel Collins.

Coach's daughter.

Ice Queen.

More importantly, I need to get my head back on straight. Keep my focus on getting more ice time. Not having fantasies of Angel touching herself.

Coach was right about me—I lose focus on what's important and throw myself off. And it doesn't just affect me, it affects everyone around me.

It's the second night in a row that she's not here and I feel like shit.

The fuck was I thinking? Did I seriously consider sleeping with her to loosen her up?

I need to start thinking with my head and not my dick.

I shoot three more until my arm gives out and I drop my stick.

Taking off my gloves I skate across the rink to grab my stuff and freeze when I find Angel at the edge, watching me.

Immediately, I wonder just how long she's been standing here. What she might have seen. Did I rub my shoulder at all? No. Out of precaution, I don't touch it outside my home. And never on the ice—whether I think I'm alone or not.

"I was about to give up on you," I say.

She ignores me and starts to warm up on the ice.

"Don't let me stop you." Her movements are slow and I know she'll never push herself if I leave. "Collins."

She turns, directing her eyes at me, lifting her head as if to prove I don't affect her. She's not ducking with blushed cheeks. She's moved passed the embarrassment and the anger. Yep, she's in 'fuck you' mode.

Good. That'll do just fine.

"If it's alright with you, I'd like to stay and help."

Her brows knit. "No thanks."

"Collins, look, I'm sorry—"

Her lips tighten and she tries what I think is called a swan, or maybe that's ballet.

"Angel," I call louder and she snaps her head back angrily.

"What?"

Okay, maybe she's not past the anger.

"I...apologize. For earlier. I was out of line."

She crosses her arms.

My vocals are saying one thing, but there's a little voice inside me that's having an entirely different conversation.

You want me—and you hate yourself for it.

"And inappropriate," she adds.

I glide closer. "Tremendously."

Tremendously *accurate*.

"And also way off base," she adds as if reading my mind.

I give a curt nod. "Completely, I know that now."

Liar, liar, pants on fire.

"Good."

She starts to skate away, her head high and movements fluid. She pushes off with her feet, warming up. This time, she didn't come covered up. She's

in a tight long sleeve bodysuit and a skirt that comes down mid-thigh.

And leg warmers. They're black to match the rest of her attire.

I point to them as she passes me. "Is that a fashion statement now?"

"Are you going to stand there and mock my dress code or help me balance?"

I grin and reach for her waist. "Why can't I do both?"

"It's part of the dress code."

"How long are you going to hide your scars?"

"I don't have any scars."

"Prove it." I lift her as she spreads her arms. "I'm no expert, but shouldn't your back be straighter?"

"Not straight. Curved," she breathes and arches.

"Ah, that looks..." *Sexy*. "Right." With her pelvis so close to my face, I'm tempted to breathe her in. See if I pick up any pheromones.

Snap. The fuck. Out of it.

"Thanks." She breathes again and I'm trying to think of a workout that she can try to help with these positions and moves. Her body is still stiff. But not as much as it was three nights ago.

I shake my head—trying desperately not to imagine Angel touching herself. And it's fucking hard. Because I *want* to picture it. I *like* knowing that in a way…I got her off.

She said it was good.

I want to know how good.

"What are you thinking?" she asks, legs releasing and her feet back on the ice.

If my name ever left your lips when your fingers were in your pussy.

Damnit.

"That you're getting better," I say honestly. Okay, it's not what I was thinking, but it's the first thing that comes to mind, because she is getting better.

There's a small smile of pride when she looks at me and it makes me happy to know I did that. "You think so?"

"Yeah. You've loosened up, you have more confidence."

She looks like she wants to say something then decides against it. There's a familiar pinch in my shoulder blade and I clench my teeth, flexing my neck. A low groan coming from my throat.

"What's next?" I ask, meeting her gaze again. But her eyes aren't on mine anymore. She looks just over my shoulder, then away.

"I think this is good for tonight."

"Are you sure? We barely started."

She nods. "I skipped dinner. Dad's been weird so I told him I wasn't hungry. But kind of famished now."

I shrug. "Well then let's feed you."



Thirty minutes later, we're sitting at a diner just outside of town. It's almost midnight and we both look it at this point. Angel's golden hair is tied up in a messy bun. She has tiny flakes of mascara under her eyes and if she

weren't so tired, the florescent lights in this place would have likely made her self-conscious.

"What are you thinking?" she asks, dipping her French fry in tarter sauce.

"That you're nosy, because it's the second time you asked me this. And that you're disgusting. You know you're supposed to eat those with ketchup."

"Says who?"

"The French."

She laughs, her head falling back and her bun coming a little looser than before. "You're going to make me choke." She chews and takes a sip of her ice water.

Smiling, I steal a fry and try the sauce, tasting the two least likely things to go together. "Okay. I see your point."

Her eyes widen. "Right?"

After a few moments of silently eating our food, I get to the point. "Angel."

She looks up.

"The scrapes against your leg have healed."

"Yeah."

"So why the funky looking socks?"

"I like them."

"You're branding yourself."

"I'm what?"

"You're making your injury who you are now. A forever reminder of what you've been through."

She nods. "Oh. Like my very own scarlet letter?"

"Yes. You do understand."

"You think you're the first person with this analogy?"

"Technically it was yours."

"Look, I like them. I'm not hiding anything."

"Fine. Show me."

She looks up from her plate and drops a fry. Then to my surprise, she scoots over all the way to the wall in the booth, giving me room to join her.

I hold her gaze for a moment before coming around.

Stretching her covered leg out, Angel places her foot on my thigh. "I'll show you mine if you show me yours."

"You want to see my calves?" I shrug. "Won't be the first time a girl's—"

"Your shoulder."

"What?"

She holds my gaze. "You had an injury last season."

I swallow and curse internally. "Yeah."

Her eyes move to my shoulder. "Show me."

"I don't have a scar."

"Neither do I. Not a deep one anyway." Her eyes drop to the ankle that rests on my thigh.

When I put my hand on it, she doesn't flinch. She waits and sucks in a breath when I tug on the thick fabric, pulling it down.

A faint line—hardly noticeable if you weren't looking for it—appears just on the outside of her lower leg. Almost from knee to ankle. I trace my thumb over it before looking back at her.

Angel isn't looking at it. She's focused on a spot on the table and doesn't meet my eyes until I cover it back up. When she looks back at me, I want to tell her she's beautiful.

But that's not who we are.

"It doesn't bother me." She sets her leg down and scoots over to me. "My

turn." The side of her leg presses against mine and she reaches over to touch my shoulder.

I want to push her off me. She's invading my space uninvited, and I want to tell her to back off. No, I *need* to tell her to back off. What I *want* is for her to keep coming until she's straddling me. She can have her hands on both my shoulders then and I'll take care of the rest.

Her fingers brush against the tenderness. "You're not doing this right, Jace," she whispers.

"Doing what?"

"Pushing yourself. That's why you're there every night. Your swings aren't what they used to be and you're training yourself to be better."

I take her hand off me and move back to my side of the booth.

"That's not how this works, Jace. You need a professional."

"I can't, Angel."

"Why not?"

I take a breath. "I was prescribed six weeks of physical therapy. That's it. If I needed more, I'd have been..." I glance around us, seeing no one but uninterested old folks. "Out for the season. I can't have that right now, Angel."

"So you're just... playing with the pain?" She sounds so hurt for me that it tugs on my chest.

"I'm working through it."

"You could make it worse."

It can't get any worse.

"I haven't been able to find someone who would do it—under the radar."

Angel straightens. Her worried expression wiped. "I know someone who can help. He's my old coach. He'll know what to do."

"Angel, I don't think—"

"He won't tell anyone." Her hand flinches on the table, like she's about to touch mine, but catches herself. "And neither will I."



OACH RIGGINS—OR RIGGS AS I used to call him—is at the youth center skating rink. It's been a week since Jace promised he'd call the man for help and I'm seeking out my own confirmation.

After my last class on Friday afternoon, I stop in to say hello.

"Angel." Riggs gives me a big bear hug. "Heard you're teaching at the college. Dance?"

"Aerobics."

"Oh, does it pay well?"

"Pennies."

"Welcome to my world. What can I do for you, my love? Did you bring your skates?" he asks but doesn't seem like he means it. Like he knows my answer.

I chuckle lightly. "No."

He nods and turns back to a few of his students on the ice.

"I wanted to see if my friend called?"

"Jace Knight?" he whispers. "Yeah. When you told me that someone will be calling me to help and confidentiality is important, I didn't think you meant the star defensemen of the Buffalo Blades." His European accent is strong, but I've always loved it.

"So?"

"Yes, yes. He called, stopped by, gave me an autograph...you know, for my daughter."

"Okay, okay but did he tell you anything?" In case Jace changed his mind, I didn't want to tell Riggs why my friend would be calling him for help with "Yes. Your friend needs help."

I groan defeatedly. I knew it. He means *professional* help. "You can't do it, can you?"

He frowns. "Angelica."

"That's not—forget it." Riggs decided to give me a common name from his country since he didn't quite take to mine. "So, you can help him?" I don't know why I'm so desperate for someone to help Jace. But I can't watch him suffer. And he's helped me so much in the past two weeks, I feel like I owe him something more than just helping with love advice.

"I think so. It's not good. He needs more therapy, stopping too soon could be bad—very, very bad."

"He's afraid to ask for it."

He looks out onto the ice. "I understand. A lot at stake. It's okay, I will help."

"Okay, but he might need more than that holistic cra—I mean, that stuff you tried with me."

"It always helped, Angelica. You are just too stubborn to believe in it."

I'll never know how he brought down the swelling on my foot when I

sprained it by wrapping it in raw egg, but I didn't ask questions. I had a competition to win that weekend. And that was all that mattered.

"Thanks. And you can keep this on the DL?"

"Yes yes. I already told him I say nothing to no one. It's not my place, I just help him."

I nod. "Good. Thank you."

"When you coming back on the ice?" He glances at my leg warmers.

"One day, I promise."

"You know, I can close shop for an afternoon and you can practice here alone."

"You'd do that?"

"For you."

"No. You'd lose money. Plus the youth hockey team will probably have something to say about it."

"Eh."

"Thanks again, Riggs. I promise, one day soon, I'll let you take me for a spin on the ice again." I wink and turn to leave.

"I only do triples, Angelica," he calls after me.

I give him a thumbs up. "Triples it is."



It's Friday night and I'm at the rink alone. Even Benny has made himself scarce after dimming the lights for me. I've settled on the fact that Jace isn't coming tonight.

After our late night impromptu dinner last week, they've had three games at home and two on the road. I came once when he was away, but it wasn't the same.

I almost miss the banter. I miss his strong arms supporting me even when I don't feel like I need it.

I've been wondering all week if I overstepped by calling him out on his shoulder pain. He's clearly sensitive about people knowing.

But he called Riggins, so it's a good sign he's looking for help. Which came as a bigger relief to me than I'd have thought.

Angel: Finally realized I'm a lost cause?

I roll my eyes but it's too late to take it back. When did I start doubting my texts? Why do I even care? Three gray dots jump around on the screen.

Jace: Thought you could use a night to yourself at the rink.

Angel: And here I thought you were home icing that shoulder you overworked today in second period when you slammed twenty-nine into the boards.

Jace: You watching me, Collins?

I roll my eyes and my breath catches when I look around at the dark, empty arena. A chill runs through me and I realize it's probably best to go.

Angel: later...turns out it's a little spooky here at night alone—going to head out.

My phone rings instantly with his name.

I don't say anything but the second I put the phone to my ear, he starts.

"Where's Benny?"

I look up and around even though I know he's given me some privacy here and probably is out cleaning the halls.

"I don't know—doing his job somewhere?"

I keep my breathing steady as I skate toward the exit, trying not to look around the dark arena.

"Where are you going?"

"Heading back in through the tunnel."

"Don't hang up. Stay on the phone."

"Are you worried about me, Knight?"

"Of course. You were expecting me tonight. If your body turns up somewhere in the building, I'd feel responsible. I don't need that on my conscience."

I laugh. "Ah. Well, what if I wrote a preemptive note exonerating you as a possible suspect?"

"That would make me the *prime* suspect. Where are you now?"

"I'm walking down the halls."

"What door are you passing?"

"Men's bathroom. Lower level."

"Walk faster."

I've been placing my skates back in Dad's office every time instead of taking them with me. They hang on his wall—next to his old ones. Where

they've hung for almost two years.

I've been careful to hang them back up the same way each time but with everything Dad's got on his mind, I doubt he'd notice if I put them right on top of his desk.

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"Where are you now?"
"Dad's office."
"Coach doesn't let anyone in his office."
"I'm not anyone."
"Less talking, more moving, Collins."
"Okay...let's see I've got my bag. I should probably put my top back on ___."
"What?"
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I laugh. "I'm kidding." I don't know why I'm making these jokes with him, but he seems to be up for it, and I don't mind the entertainment. Or the distraction on the long walk to the parking lot.

"Okay, I'm in my car now. Jeez, now I know what Cora went through."

"My sister is alive and healthy, thanks to me."

"Can I go now or are you sticking around for the drive too?"

"I'll let you go. I'll see you after the game at Bridges tomorrow."

"Uhh..." I was planning on going, but he doesn't need to know that.

"That wasn't a question. I might need your help."

"Thought you can manage just fine," I tease.

"I can. But I need someone to dump my arrogance and offensive comments on before I turn on the charm."

"Lucky me."



THE THERAPY RIGGINS GUIDES me through is helping. But like he said—it won't happen overnight. The new daily routine he designed for me is aggressive but fits my schedule. Every morning, night and once before each game. The 'once before each game' is a little bit of a challenge. Unless I somehow make the guys believe I've picked up a new superstition routine—they're going to know something is up when I'm stretching, mobilizing, icing and then heating the same shoulder I hurt last season.

So naturally, I skip the pre-game routine—which Riggins insists is most important, but it's out of my control. I put on the athletic tape around my shoulder before my uniform and get on the ice.

I also took a hard pass when Riggins offered to come over with herbs I've never heard of, roast them in a frying pan and hold the smoking pan over my head to heal all my aches and pains.

And any bad omens I may have lurking around.

He also keeps telling me this is all temporary relief. I need more. Electric therapy, for one, and rest.

But I don't want to rest. I'm sure if I push past the pain, I'll barely feel it anymore.

I did bare minimum at tonight's game. There was nothing aggressive about the way I played tonight. Tonight's win was all Nick. We just helped him get to it. He's focused now. He's not dropping his gloves for a fight and landing himself in the penalty box at every game.

But we take turns, I guess. There was a time last season when he wasn't doing so great and the rest of us had to step up.

It's Saturday night and we're at the bar with most of the guys on the team and the Ice Girls. This time, Angel is sitting with her old friends at their usual booth. Angel and Kerri seem quite cozy, chatting it up. There's laughing and I'm silently praising her for sticking it out.

"What are you smiling about?" Garrison asks, nudging me with his beer arm.

I was smiling?

"Noticed you been going back to the hotel solo after the last few travel games. Losin' your touch, Romeo?"

I give him the side eye. "You keepin' tabs?"

He shrugs and others join in our so-called conversation. Garrison makes another unsolicited comment at Ryan, and I use the opportunity to walk away.

"Hey, sis," I greet my kid sister, checking out what she's drinking.

"You turned twenty-one like a month ago, you think you're a pro now with these fancy drinks?"

"Wanna try?" She holds up the bright blue drink to me. "Hank just added it to his menu."

"I'll pass. You see Coach?" I ask Nick.

I might be paranoid, but I'm eager to talk to him and feel him out outside the locker room to see if he noticed anything off about my game. I don't want to give anything away when it comes to my shoulder.

Nick glances around. "I don't know if he's coming tonight. Might be home with Rory."

There's a beat where I consider feeling Nick out for anything he might have noticed but decide against it for now.

I take a seat at the bar and order my usual before glancing at the full booth behind me.

After last night, I decided I never want Angel going to the rink alone at night anymore. Not that I don't believe she'd be one hundred percent safe—it's guarded and locked down—but I never want her to feel afraid.

This kind of protectiveness has always been reserved for Cora. I basically blew it with Angel the first day I met her when I was being a cocky asshole—and over the years she'd made me believe that I dodged a bullet by not hitting on her.

But after spending time with her, it's almost like the last five years of hating each other never happened.

When she comes up to me within one solid hour of not acknowledging me, I grin and am about to say something as sassy as her. But then her tall, gorgeous frame steps aside and Kerri, the bouncy brunette, comes into view.

"Oh. Hey," I say, trying not to sound disappointed.

"Hi." Kerri beams. "You were amazing tonight."

I didn't do anything.

Apparently, I'm not the only one who knows it because Angel's brows knit at the comment.

"Thanks," I say simply. "What are you ladies drinking?"

Angel suspiciously motions back to her booth. "I've got my beer at the table, but Kerri here could use a refill." She wiggles her brows and sneaks away.

What just happened?

"So, Kerri. What are you having?"

"What do you recommend?"

I smirk. "Bourbon. Neat."

"Throw an ice cube in mine," she says, taking a seat next to me.

I order her what I'm having. Half amused. I've been out with the Ice Girls long enough to know what they typically drink. Correction, I know the beer drinkers, the wine sippers, and the bay breeze downers. Kerri has never touched anything close to a bourbon. So this should be fun.

One hour and a blurred conversation later, Kerri steps away to the ladies room. All I noticed was that she took down that drink like a champ. The other forty minutes of the conversation, I was distracted by every single time Angel glanced at us.

After the first time I caught her looking over, I was done with the girl sitting beside me. My focus was one hundred percent on when the tall blonde who I thought hated me for years was going to turn again. And I'm surprised that I was satisfied all twelve times.

When I finally met her gaze, her cheeks heated and she didn't turn again. In fact, she seemed very much annoyed at being caught...much like the other day at the gymnasium.

I'm almost positive I won't hear from Angel for the rest of the night until she casually walks over to the bar when I'm alone.

"You should ask her out," Angel mumbles carefully while her eyes focus on the selection of liquors on the top shelf, like she's undercover. "How do you know I haven't?"

She rolls her eyes. "Call it a hunch."

"If I wanted to ask her out, I—"

Her head snaps to me. "What do you mean if you wanted to?"

I stare at her. Wondering how my diversion on Kerri hasn't hit her yet. But I'm not entirely sure I'm ready to tell her it was made up. Since it still baffles me how I got there in the first place weeks ago.

I inhale. "You want me to ask her out?"

She licks her bottom lip. "Why wouldn't I?"

Her response bothers me. "Yeah. Okay. I'll ask her out."

She nods, satisfied. "Tonight."

Why does that hit me in the gut? "Tonight."

I watch Kerri come back from the ladies room and consider what I just promised Angel I'd do. It doesn't seem fair. It doesn't seem right.

For any of us. Least of all Kerri.

But Angel's words are in my head and I've had two servings of hard liquor. I'm so screwed up in my head over the last five minutes, that I almost say the wrong name when she returns.

"Kerri...I had a nice time with you tonight. Didn't know you could drink like that."

"Me either. Can I be honest?"

"Please."

"I'm not really into hard liquor."

"Could have fooled me."

"I think I'm going to switch to just wine for now." She waves over to the bartender, and I put up a hand to stop him, then lean over to Kerri.

"I think you've had enough. Why don't we just get you water for now?" I

offer.

"Good idea." She sounds relieved and I feel like shit for not insisting she have her usual.

"Kerri," I say. "If you're not into something, you don't have to pretend to be. I happen to like your unique qualities."

She smiles and I feel like a complete and utter hypocrite when I say, "What are you doing tomorrow night?"

"I'm off," she answers quickly.

"Me too. Dinner?"

Her smile is bright. I smile back, but mine's a little bitter. Because I'm only doing this to satisfy a stupid deal I made. But who knows, maybe I'll like Kerri and forget about the hook that Angel has had on me since the minute I laid eyes on her five years ago.

Angel's focus is nowhere near us—she's realized her mistake all night and moved on. But I'm not fooled. I've come to learn all her body's responses the last few weeks. And right now, she's stiff as a board and annoyed at herself.

Good.

Guilt tugging at me, I stop Kerri outside before she hops into the Uber. "Kerri. I should probably tell you—about dinner, I'm not—"

She holds up her hand with a smile. "Looking to get married, I know, me neither. I like you and I'm not expecting anything to come out of this...date. I'm not new here, Knight." She winks and for the first time all night, sitting beside her, I give her a genuine smile and kiss her cheek.



The next day, I pick up Kerri a few minutes early—which is rare for me, but I guess I just want to get this date over with and get back home.

Villamina is one of the nicest restaurants in town and quite popular among the team so it was an easy choice.

I open the door of the restaurant and let Kerri in first. I don't need to give them my name when I walk in. With a single nod, the manager takes two menus and leads us past the waiting crowd.

As we're seated, my phone buzzes. Expecting it to be Cora asking if I'd eaten yet and if she could bring over her latest attempt at a baked ziti, I check it. My brows jump when I see the last person I expected to hear from tonight —but the only one I'll be thinking of when I'm alone later. Because let's be honest; I'm having dinner with the woman, but she's not coming home with me.

Angel: *How's it going?*

Jace: Why do you ask?

Angel: To make sure you don't screw up.

Jace: I never do.

Angel: You have—you just don't stick around long enough to know it.

Jace: *Are you here to be mean?*

I can't help but be a little offended at her lack of confidence. "I'm sorry," I apologize to Kerri and set my phone down. Until it buzzes again.

Kerri motions toward the phone on the table. "Please, go ahead. I'll um—just scan the menu."

Angel: Where are you?

Jace: *Villamina's. We just got seated.*

Angel: *Villamina's?? Did you have a reservation?*

I almost laugh out loud and type back no.

Angel: Right. Of course. Ooh I hear they have the best lobster mac and cheese. Try it for me. Tell me if it's amazing.

Jace: *I need to put my phone away.*

Angel: Right. I have an idea. Put your Bluetooth in and call me.

Jace: You're serious?

Angel: You wanted my help to win her over. I'm just doing my end of the deal. Either you take it, or I'll assume our sessions have been pity trainings and I'll throw my skates at you.

My brows jump and I consider this. It's a complete invasion of privacy for the girl sitting across the table. Tremendously insulting to my ego and yet somehow I'm equally intrigued to hear what little miss perfect will say I'm doing wrong.

Fine.

This should be interesting.

I make a mental note to shut the thing off with one tap against my ear should Kerri start saying anything that's...let's just say meant for my ears only.

Which I truly hope she doesn't.

But even if she does...Angel did say they give each other word for word details on their dates.

I subtly hit the green button on my phone next to Angel's name and set it aside. When she answers, I hear shuffling in my ear, but no words.

The waiter comes by with our drinks and I thank him quietly before scanning the menu.

This is wrong.

This is so wrong.

"So, what do you think of the season so far?"

Kerri sets her menu down, but it's a different voice in my ear that responds.

"Are you interviewing her or on a date? Ask her what she's into when she's not skating."

Good point.

"You know what, I've had enough of hockey. What are you into when you're not skating?

"I read."

I nod. "Cool."

"Ask her what."

"What do you read?"

"Umm... like CIA, secret agent protector romance novels."

"Really? That's cool, why do you like those?"

"I like the thrill without watching blood splatter on screen."

Huh. I could dig that, I suppose.

"Ask her when she reads...who's her favorite auth—"

"Are these sexy books?" I ask, ignoring Angel's interruption.

"Seriously?" I hear, and bite back a laugh.

She blushes. "Yes."

I nod and set my menu down.

"Umm, what do you read?" Kerri asks, diverting away from my gaze.

"My schedule, sports news, and expiration dates on milk cartons."

I hear a sigh in my ear. "You're making fun of her hobby, not cool."

"How's that?" I ask, defensively.

"Huh?"

I blink and look up slightly lost. Kerri...that was definitely from Kerri.

"Umm. How's that I've never seen you read?"

"I'm a little embarrassed to bring them around."

"Why?"

"They're dirty."

"How would we know?"

"You'd know. And there are certain scenes I need to read... in private."

I lean in. "Tell me about those," I ask, if only to rile up the girl in my ear who growls out something under her breath.

"Umm, let's talk about you," Kerri suggests, pushing her hair behind her

ear.

"Are you happy, now? You've made her uncomfortable."

It amazes me how I can be having the same conversion with two women who share similar hobbies and yet have complete opposite effects on them.

"I have not," I insist. In fact, I'm almost positive I've turned her on. *Yeah okay. Maybe Angel has a point.* I quickly switch tracks. "Had a chance to read, and I feel like I should. What else do you like?"

"Sledding."

"That sounds fun, I'd totally do that with you," I say, meaning it. "I'm a big child when it comes to sledding," I add, taking a bite of a bread stick.

It's quiet in my ear. Ooh...no comments from the peanut gallery...hmm.

"Yeah," Kerri says. "I use tops of garbage cans."

"Doesn't everyone?"

She blushes again.

"So when do you go...I'm assuming you do this with a group of people, not just randomly hop on a lid when you're taking out the trash in the winter while no one's looking.

Kerri laughs and takes a sip of her wine, shaking her head. "Have you been spying on me?"

I chuckle and clink our wine classes together.

"Okay, cool. You've got this." Angel hangs up before I can say anything.

I blink, trying to make sense of what just happened. Why my stomach sinks the moment the line goes dead. When nothing but confusion swirls in my head, I rationalize. I do the gentlemanly thing and decide it's for the best that she hung up.

Because that little stunt wasn't ideal for anyone involved.

"I'm glad you asked me out," Kerri says. "To tell you the truth, I thought

you were into Angel."

"Collins?" I ask carefully.

"Yeah. I feel like lately your banter has sexual tension written all over it."

"It does not." I wave her off with a grin.

Our banter has *always* had sexual tension written all over it.



THINKING ABOUT JACE ON a date with Kerri—or on a date at all—puts a gigantic damper on my evening. Not that I actively scribble into a notebook about my plans to pleasure myself with thoughts of Jace, but when the urge comes, it becomes frustratingly impossible to picture literally anyone else.

Not when it's Jace's carved-to-perfection body, gruff voice and intense green eyes I want all over me.

His rough tone demanding that I come all over his mouth. His firm hand gripping the front of my neck.

Gah...The fuck is wrong with me?

This is *Jace*. Someone I didn't know what to feel about when I met him years ago. Just that he was irritatingly gorgeous, but I wasn't foolish enough to get googly-eyed over him. I was only nineteen. I didn't know how to respond when one of the players on the team made me feel so...out of sorts.

What if it wasn't that he irritated me? What if he was just... turning me on and I didn't know how to deal with it and mistook it for...hatred and

revulsion?

No. Impossible.

The girls are right. I just need to get laid. Then maybe I'll forget all about these stupid fantasies.

Oh yeah. That was the main topic of our conversation the other day at Bridges—the part about my moodiness being directly related to how dry I might be. Which is why walking over to Jace to find out how his night was going seemed way more appealing.

Texting him tonight to spy on his date was a terrible idea. The worst. And the fact that Jace went along with it? Well, either he's desperate for advice or is as big an idiot as I am.

When it sounded like they were hitting it off, I knew it was time to hang up. My job was done.

I wonder if this counts as being even and I've successfully completed my end of the deal. It damn well should. There's no way they would have clicked if I wasn't in his ear telling him all the right things to say and ask.

Kerri should appoint me maid of honor at their wedding.

The thought instantly makes me laugh. Jace isn't committing to her, or anyone for that matter.

Reaching over my nightstand, I shut off the light, cuddle up with my pillow and let sleep take its course. It should be any minute now, I've not only been working out every muscle in my body more lately. I'm also seriously emotionally drained. Between keeping secrets from people I care about and being hot and bothered for someone I virtually despise, I'm feeling all out of sorts.

If I don't slow it down, I'll end up going back to weekly visits with my therapist—instead of just once a month.

Try explaining that one to my dad.



On Sunday morning, I'm exhausted from lack of sleep. Thoughts of Kerri and Jace in bed together kept me up, because of course he took her back to his place. He's probably making her breakfast in bed right now. Fueling themselves up for round fourteen.

Christ, like anyone could ever go that much.

I need a distraction. After a quick shower, I throw on my signature fall outfit; dark leggings and a long knit sweater. Then run down to find my little sister, whose usually in the den by the kitchen, watching television.

"Rory, let's go to the park today."

She's in an outfit that scarily resembles mine, leggings, and a pink sweater. "Daddy promised to take me to the lake to skate."

"Oh." I step into the kitchen and reach for the mug Dad prepared for me.

He looks at me from behind the kitchen island, sipping his coffee. "Maybe Angel will come with us," he calls back to his younger daughter.

"No thanks, I don't skate," I gently remind him.

Dad clears his throat. "Your recently used skates would tell otherwise, sweetheart."

I look up at him and he scrunches his nose in guilt. "Sorry, was I supposed to pretend not to notice?"

When I swallow, he looks away. Dad doesn't like to make me—or women in general—feel uncomfortable. "Why do you insist on hanging them back in my office, anyway?"

When I don't answer, he slices a piece of banana bread and passes it to me on a paper plate. Dad loves to bake, but dishes aren't his thing, so I silently take note that I'll be scrubbing a baking dish he's left unsoaked later.

"You're not doing it alone are you? Is Riggins helping you?"

Okay...so he hasn't been talking to Benny—who's likely the only other human in the know about Jace and me using the rink at night. "No."

"Angel..."

"Dad—stay out of it, please."

"Angel, why didn't you tell me? I could help you. I could coach you."

"I have help." I stick a large piece of banana bread in my mouth, hoping he'll take the hint that I'm done talking.

"From who?"

I shrug. "A friend."

He nods and seems relieved. "Oh. Okay. Well, the girls were always supportive of you coming back so I can see the enthusiasm."

He's assuming it's one of the Ice Girls and I don't correct him. One fact that he'll never know because men don't notice these things, is that the Ice Girls are *not* supportive of my coming back. They might act like they are through their cheers and pearly white veneers, but I picked up a strong sense of relief when I quit.

Dad watches me carefully. "What brought this on? No one is pressuring you, right?"

"Nicole," I blurt out.

"Nicole?"

"Yeah. Funny story actually," I start with a soft chuckle. "So, she found out about Cora and Nick first and promised that she'd tell me a secret if I gave her one day on the ice."

"That wasn't very nice."

I shrug. "Cora was sitting right there—she practically had her permission."

He nods tentatively, trying hard to follow along my non sequence of events. "So, you promised her a day on the ice, and..."

"And...I guess I used it as my excuse to get back out there," I tell him, hoping the subject is dropped before I spill any more unnecessary information.

He releases a breath, but there's apprehension behind it. "Angel, that is terrific but don't push yourself."

"I'm not, Ja—I'm taking it slow and I have help from someone who really knows what they're doing."

He grunts. "I'll try not to be jealous."

I almost laugh. "This person is good, but nothing on you." Dad was one of the best in his time. When he does get back on the ice, he impresses the hell out of everyone. He's in his mid-forties and skates better than half the twenty-year-olds on the team.

But I'm also biased.

My compliment does nothing for him, so I know I've upset him by not saying anything sooner. I purse my lips and walk around to where he's seated on the bar stool. He's a fairly large man so I still need to lift off my tip toes

when I whisper in his ear. "Can't have Rory hear me say this. I'm teaching the girl to be a defiant little creature, but... I'm sorry."

He laughs. "Don't worry, she's not paying attention. You can say it louder."

I give him a hug. "Nice try."



It's been a week of away games and I haven't been hearing from Jace much except to check on me via texts to confirm I've been working out my muscles—both properly and *improperly*. I wanted to crush my phone when I read that message.

I let Nicole talk me into attending the after party in the executive suite on Saturday night. While she wears a cute purple minidress, I opt for jeans and a white blouse. When Nicole makes me turn back for something a little more festive and colorful, I grab a frilly orange scarf and walk out the door. She doesn't seem at all appeared.

It's one week since Jace and Kerri's date and considering the Ice Girls don't travel with the team, I'm assuming the new love birds are planning to make up for lost time and will quietly disappear at some point during the evening.

When little miss intuitive asks me what's wrong in the elevator ride up to the suite, I brush her off. "It's nothing. Long work week."

Nicole frowns. "You teach four classes a week. They're each an hour long."

I look down to meet her scrutinizing eyes and cave. "I'm lying."

The elevator doors open and she steps out with a smirk in my direction. "I know, babe. Take your time. I'm here for you."

Following her out, I bend down a notch to her level. "Why do you have to be like that?"

She eyes the crowd and glances at me, pressing a hand to her chest. "I know, so rude, I don't know how you put up with me."

I shake my head and actively consider why I haven't told Nicole or Cora yet. They're my closest friends and the only ones I trust. Cora wouldn't be an issue. She'd jump for joy and plan ice skating sessions together.

Nicole is different. Telling Nicole comes with an expectation of answering a lot of questions. Ones you're not ready to admit. One's you've never considered. And yet she's the only one I really *want* to tell. I just need to be careful not to leave any room for open queries. Because she will find one.

"So, remember when I promised some ice time with you?"

Her eyes light. "Yes."

"I might be ready for that soon," I admit.

"Really?"

"Yes, and that's all I'm saying. No questions."

"I don't have any." She gives it literally one beat. "When?"

"Soon."

"Like this week's Buffalo Blades free-skate fundraiser?"

"That's this week?" The free skate is an annual event the executive team hosts to entertain important guests. The entire team and the Ice Girls are required to attend. The girls are encouraged to help everyone get on the ice—especially the children, since it's a family event.

"It's Monday. That's all those girlfriends of yours talked about last week at the bar."

"Yeah, they're big fans."

Nicole happily claps. "Oh, I'm excited. Okay. No more questions, I mean you left me open for so many, but I'll just keep them to myself. I don't want to appear ungrateful." She winks.

"I appreciate it."

When cheering starts at the other side of the room, I know Jace has entered. His quick feet were on point in the defensive zone tonight, blocking goals from going anywhere near the net. He's a big part of tonight's celebration—along with Ryan, who scored the winning goal.

Jace is a little late to the party and I expect someone to be walking in with him, since I hadn't seen Kerri with the others, but she's not.

"Nick bought me skates ages ago...I wonder if they'll still fit."

"They'll fit," I tell Nicole, pulling my focus away from the star of the night.

But it's too late. Nicole follows my gaze and finds Jace. I can see the wheels turning in that little head of hers when she narrows her eyes and slightly cocks her head. "Such a striking pair of siblings, aren't they?"

"Who?"

"Cora and Jace. They got some good genes. Cora is beautiful, with that Selena Gomez thing going that will make her look twenty-five when she's forty. And Jace... well...he's too hot for his own good." She peels her eyes off him and raises a brow at me. "Someone ought to knock some sense into the poor boy, don't you think?"

"I have no idea what you mean." I almost want to ask her if she's been drinking.

"No? Hmm... never mind then." Her eyes follow the waitstaff carrying hors d'oeuvres and mutters something about grabbing a wiener.

I watch Jace smile for photos and shake hands, thanking people. I imagine that his physical therapy has been going well and make a mental note to check with Riggins on him.

When I see Kerri at the far end of the bar, I squint suspiciously and have a new theory. Perhaps getting laid has put a spring in his step.

Either way, at the very least, I should think I'm owed the biggest thanks of the night.

He spots me before he's done greeting half the room, and heads straight toward me. "Hey, stranger," he says, calling subtle attention to the fact we haven't spoken much in the past week.

I smirk and hold out my imaginary microphone. "Mr. Knight, to what do you owe your success?"

"Um... ten years of playing."

"Mmhmm..." I purse my lips.

"Why don't you just say what you mean, Angel?"

"I mean, maybe some other recent activity has got you feeling—confident." My eyes drift and he follows where they lead, finding Kerri.

His smirk fades and he licks his lips. "You think I was at the top of my game tonight because I got laid?"

"Is it so outrageous to think so?"

"Thanks, Collins."

"What is the big deal? Does your shoulder hurt?"

He blinks away, muttering his response. "Not as much as my ego."

"Why? Kerri is a beautiful girl. She should be an ego booster."

"I don't need one," he says tightly, still looking anywhere but at me—like he's searching for an escape.

"Okay, Mr. Cocky. What's your deal tonight?"

"You are, Collins."

I see Dad's head snap toward us, eying our heated exchange and know it's best to let Jace make that escape he's looking for.

"Your girl's getting lonely." I point with my chin over to Kerri—who doesn't look lonely at all. She's flirting with the bartender.

"I don't have a girl. But if I didn't know any better, I'd say you sound pretty jealous."

"Jealousy isn't my color."

"Oh, but I think it'll look great on you."

I look up at him and smirk. "It's too bad you'll never see it."

"Knight." A short, bearded man comes up to Jace. "Great game, buddy. Come on, they need more photos and then Scott's buyin' a round."

Jace's jaw tightens, and he sighs.

"You can't say no to that," I remind him, which seems to please the little man I assume is his agent.

Jace on the other hand, seems annoyed at being whisked away.

An hour later, I'm only one margarita in and barely socializing the way I should be. I don't remember if my high spirits in my skating days were fake

or if I was just a happier individual, but being around all these people is suddenly giving me major anxiety.

Me. Someone who used to thrive on attention. The bigger the audience, the better my performance. But right now, I just want to dodge everyone trying to make small talk, go home, and try not to think about how long Jace and Kerri have been out on the balcony.

Thirty minutes.

They disappeared through those fancy French doors over thirty minutes ago. I try not to react, even if it's in my own head, when Kerri walks back in —alone and unhappy.

Her eyes sweep over me and something that resembles anger flashes her eyes and she storms off in the other direction.

Before I can make sense of what that was, Nicole creeps up beside me.

"You into Jace or something?" she asks.

"What? No. Why?"

She doesn't look up at me, and I feel like I tower over her petite five-foot frame. Nicole might not have the long legs fit for a supermodel, but she is by far the most gorgeous woman in town. Long dark hair, big gray eyes, full lips, and a sharp personality.

"Because you've been glancing over at him more than usual tonight."

"He's been getting under my skin lately." I don't bother to deny it.

She raises that perfect brow I'm beginning to hate. "Why rise to the occasion?"

She makes a good point and I sigh, surrendering. "He's been... helping me," I say quietly.

"With what?"

"On the ice. He's been training me. A few times a week, usually when

there's no game."

Nicole watches me. And it's one of the longest moments of my life when she doesn't say anything. "He *is* a good skater." Her lips reach for the little straw in her drink.

"He's alright."

"And you're getting along?"

"Nope."

She grins. "Because from where I stand, it looks like for the first time, you two are getting along just fine."

I frown down at her and she gives me a knowing smirk before walking off. "I saw him go out on the balcony a little while ago," she calls back.

Yeah. The balcony.

I...suppose I could ask him what happened with Kerri.

I find him at the far corner of the wraparound balcony. It's out of window view and secluded from the rest of the outdoor crowd.

Approaching him feels weird because he clearly doesn't want to be found. Not to mention when I saw him over an hour ago, he seemed super peeved and insulted. Reconsidering, I'm about to go back inside but he calls out, still facing the city in the distance. "Looking for someone?"

"No," I say on instinct.

He glances back at me. "Or satisfied to find me alone here?"

"I'm not sure what that's supposed to mean." I put my hand along the railing a few feet from him.

"Come on, Angel. Admit it, my spending time with Kerri isn't sitting as well with you as you'd like it."

"I'm happy you two are getting along."

"Is that why you hung up when our date kicked off?"

"I hung up because you were doing just fine, you didn't need my help."

"I agree."

I tilt my head at his egotistical comment. "You think so?"

He scans me temptingly and scoffs. "No one helped me with you."

"You're delusional."

He closes the distance between us. Pulling so close to me, I can taste his faint cologne. But no alcohol on his breath, which is surprising.

"How many times, Angel?"

"How many have you had tonight, Jace?"

"Zero. Your turn. And don't act dumb. It doesn't suit you."

My jaw clenches and I turn to leave, but he catches my arm.

"Tell you what. Give me a number and I'll drop it. Look me in the eye and tell me... how many times you," he glances down below my belly button "thought about me."

I swallow.

"Come on, baby," he breathes against my neck. "I already know you did. I just want to hear it."

"Fuck off."

"You don't have to tell me what I was doing to you... I don't need details, just a number."

"Will you keep your voice down?" I hiss. Why is this the first thing that comes to mind? Why am I not wringing his hand off me and walking away?

Or at the very least, deny, deny, deny.

I lick my lips and look back at him. "Five."

The widest grin I have ever seen crosses his lips. "One more question, Collins."

"That's all you get."

He leans in and whispers close to my lips. His lashes sweep my cheek to watch my reaction. "Did you scream my name when you made yourself come?"

"No."

A nod as he backs up. "You will."



Por The First Time in months, I slept like a baby. The pain in my shoulder has dwindled down dramatically. Of course it's just my luck that the first day I wake up with zero pain is the day I'm off. No game, no practice. I'm just off.

The routine Riggins has me follow, which includes no meds, is working miracles—but I know it's temporary.

I debate on taking a shower before heading downstairs but I need to take advantage before the shooting pain returns and get in a solid workout.

I scrub my face clean and look in the mirror.

Did I seriously ask Angel if she screamed my name when she touched herself?

Sober, no less?

The fuck?

Before she stormed off, Angel muttered something about me fucking with her head. But I'm pretty sure it's the other way around. She's fucking with mine. And when she's off this high of whatever it is we're doing...when I'm no longer keeping her secret and she doesn't need me—I'm as good as toast.

I finally had to end things with Kerri last night. It's not something I do often—and I'm not even sure I did it right. But I thanked her for the date last week, apologized for leading her on and told her I think it's best we stay friends.

It's gone too far and not fair to anyone. Including Angel, who keeps using it as an excuse.

I'm in nothing but my gym shorts when I reach the kitchen, knowing I'm heading straight to my workout room after a well-balanced meal.

The coffee is already brewed, set to a specific Sunday morning timer. A luxury Cora seemed to appreciate the most out of the million and one things I did for her.

A loud banging on my front door makes me drop one of the three eggs I'd just pulled out of the fridge.

I curse under my breath and step over it, setting the rest in a bowl on the counter.

Running a frustrated hand through my hair, I pull the door open.

Angel is standing on the other side, looking like someone just ran a truck through her rose bushes. Yep, she's ready to lash out at me for my stupid mouth last night. I had this coming and am mildly ready for it when she opens her mouth.

But whatever she was going to say, falls short when her eyes drop to my bare chest. She attempts to speak but swiftly folds her arms and turns away. "I'll wait until you put a shirt on." I nod. "See you at two o'clock, then." I step back to close the door, but she pushes it open.

"Fine." She pulls her hand back and rubs her palms together from the cool weather. "If you're going to be so stubborn, then we'll talk out here."

Rolling my eyes, I leave the door open for her as I stride back to my kitchen, fully expecting her to follow, which she does. "I'm having a quick breakfast, then working out...then having more breakfast."

"That makes no sense," she says, coming up behind me into my kitchen.

"You need something?" I ask, clearing up raw egg and hoping it'll divert my need to touch her.

"What you said to me last night—all the provoking? It needs to stop."

I stand and huff out a breath. "Okay. I'm sorry. You're right."

"Really?"

"Yes. Now take your sweater off."

"Jace."

"What you got under there, a bra? T-shirt? You can work out in that."

She glances around confused. "I'm not working out."

"You need to."

She jerks. "Fuck you."

"Angel, you haven't been working your muscles correctly in two years. You need to get your strength back. And you need to eat. A lot more than you do now."

"I eat plenty."

"Not enough to build muscle, sit down."

Offended, she pushes up her sleeve. "I've got muscles."

I eye her arm. It's slender and smooth. Putting my hand on her forearm, I try not to notice just how silky her skin is or how merely touching her seems

to send unidentifiable energy through my veins. "This used to be muscle. But it needs strengthening, tightening."

She rolls her eyes, but I know she's considering it. "Can you put a shirt on?"

"Hey, you came here unannounced. This is my Sunday you're crashing. Have you had breakfast?"

"I have coffee going cold in the car."

I pour her a fresh hot cup and hand it to her along with a banana.

She frowns. "Thanks."

I grab another few eggs and break them into the frying pan, letting them cook for a minute before flipping onto a plate. Then whip out two forks and two spoons.

"What are the spoons for?"

"Peanut butter." I put a jar of it between us on the counter and sit next to her.

"Eggs, banana and peanut butter," she observes, dipping her teaspoon into the jar. "Dad loves peanut butter."

"Should we invite him over?"

"Funny," she says with a mouthful. When I watch her take a bite of the banana, I need to look away and jump off the stool before I get a hard-on watching her eat that thing.

Yeah, I didn't think that one through.

My gym is my favorite room in the house. It's a large open space nearly as big as my living room. The far wall is all mirrored—I had asked for one mirror when I worked on the design of this place, but the guy who worked on

it said that made no sense and would throw off the Fung Shui or whatever. So now there are four panels of mirror across the entire wall. I have four machines spread across the room, a free standing punching bag, weights, mats and yoga balls Cora made me buy but never used.

There's also a sound system separate from the house—that way when I want to listen to my workout music and Cora wants to rock out to Shania Twain, we're not biting each other's heads off.

I pick up the remote and flip through the station, seeing Angel walk in behind me as she sips what's left of her coffee and checks out the space.

"Not bad. Dad's is bigger."

"That man also has an entire hockey & coaching career on me, so I don't doubt that."

"What's that?" She points to the screen.

"Audio. I usually listen to Shinedown. Do you have a preference?"

She takes the remote from me and I notice she's still in her sweater. The leggings would do just fine, but she won't make it very long in cashmere. Something I'm not stupid enough to ask her to take off again.

"Ooh, how about this one?" Angel points the remote toward the screen until a selection pops up.

"That's Cora's playlist."

She smiles. "Perfect."

Shania Twain's 'Man, I Feel Like A Woman' starts to blast through the room and I turn, shaking my head and hiding my grin.

I choose my weights, taking note of Riggins advice of starting light. When I turn around, Angel has her sweater off. She's on a yoga mat, her legs stretched out into a split, her back straight. Then she stands and bends back into a bridge. Holding the position, she inches her hands and feet closer

together. Her loose ivory camisole falls to her neck as she holds, revealing a white silk bra.

Jesus Christ.

It's intoxicating, watching this woman. Her eyes are closed as she breathes in and out. Her blonde wavy hair spread out wildly on the mat. When her eyes open, she finds me watching her and lets herself fall flat on the mat.

"That was...impressive."

"What, no comment that I'm not doing the right routine to get in shape?" She turns her head away from me, but not before I catch a glimpse of insecurity.

Before I can figure out what I'm doing, I'm in front of her. pulling her up to her feet. I press her against the wall and cage her between my arms. She gasps and shifts so I place my knee between her legs to hold her still until she stops.

"Angel. You are beautiful." I don't whisper when I tell her this. My tone is solid and sharp. "Whatever scars you think you have are merely impressions of the warrior I've always known you to be."

She blinks up at me and frowns.

"I *never* said that you're out of shape and if you took it that way, let me make one thing clear." My hands fall to her hips, and I grip them tightly. "You are perfect. You are strong. But if you want to be able to hold your own on the ice, if you want to be fast and fearless, you need to work on your *physical* strength."

Her breathing is dense and I'm an inch from her lips. I force my eyes back to hers. "Am I clear now? Just your strength, Angel. I can't have you falling again. I don't want you getting hurt."

She swallows and nods. "All the better to punch you with."

"That's the spirit." I release her and adjust her shirt. Then step aside. "Elliptical."

Her cheeks are flushed that hot pink again, but without another word, she walks over to the machine as I watch her from behind.

Yep. Bad idea.

The absolute worst.

Angel

Jace made us a hearty breakfast after our workout. He didn't join me for it though. He ordered me to sit and clean my plate while he hopped in the shower in the gym behind the kitchen.

I can hear the water running from where I sit. Watching him workout, with his bare chest, broad shoulders, and impeccable abs was enough to end a girl.

I can't survive all this sexual tension.

I've had enough fantasies about Jace Knight. I'm not looking for more material to get me all worked up.

But when he stood so close, his knee between my thighs, telling me I was beautiful, strong...perfect. I was more than just delirious with heat, I let Jace tug on an organ higher than my pelvic area.

Finally, when I couldn't look at him anymore, I lied and told him I was hungry. Which wasn't altogether a lie—whether it was for food is an entirely different story.

When I hear him step out of the gym, his clean scent filling the room, I'm almost afraid to turn.

Does he have nothing but a towel on right now? Should I turn around? No. Just sip your coffee and play aloof.

Yeah. Because that worked so well for me last time.

When I turn, I'm stunned to find him in a white bathrobe.

The cool aloof chick that I am, I apparently scan him head to toe because he grins and says, "Well it was either this or a towel and since my being topless offends you, I went with the robe."

I giggle. "I'm surprised you have one of those."

"So am I. Apparently, my designer thought it would be fitting to have a couple of these in the shower and sauna."

"Sauna?"

"Yeah. What Dad doesn't have one of those?"

"No. I mean, we have an outdoor hot tub, but nope—no sauna."

I take a sip of the lemon water he made me. "So is it two o'clock yet?"

He laughs. "Ten thirty. But just for you, I'll go put a shirt on."

He returns a few minutes later in sweats and a T-shirt. He hands me a white t-shirt that matches his. "Thought you'd be more comfortable in this."

I glance down and remember I'm still in my camisole. "Thanks." I take the shirt and stare down at it. The sheer thought of wearing his clothes isn't helping me stay dry between my legs. Opting out, I carefully set the shirt on the counter and reach for my sweater instead. "What makes you think I'm sticking around?"

He shrugs. "The arena is empty today. How about we try those spins? I'll work with you."

I glance at his shoulder.

"I'm fine, Collins. Last night was the first night in months I didn't feel a sliver of pain."

"Really? So which one of Riggins tricks are you trying? The egg yolk? The herbs?" I sniff the air in the room. "No herbs here recently."

When the doorbell rings, I jump.

He laughs. "Hang on. It's either my dad or the newlyweds from down the street."

Shit. Does he mean Nick and Cora? I'm suddenly very self-conscious, sitting here in Jace's kitchen with breakfast and my sweater off. I tackle the thing, looking for the opening to pull it over my head.

"Hey Cor," he greets his kid sister and then grunts when the next person walks in. "You."

Too late.

I sprint out of my chair and throw my sweater down on the seat, opting for looking casual over disheveled.

Cora's eyes widen and a grin as wide and devilish as her brother's spreads her face. "Well heelllooo, Angel." She glances back at her brother and boyfriend, who enter the room. Nick scratches his head and scrunches his nose while Jace scans the sweater on the seat and presses his lips together.

"Hey," I say as casually as I can muster.

"Whatchya doin'?" Cora asks.

"Wipe that smile off your face, it's not what you think...it will *never* be what you think," I tell her.

"She can't help herself," Nick says with eye language I don't understand toward his live-in girlfriend. He glances at Jace and then gives me a warm smile. "Hey, Angel."

"Nicolas, can you please take your girlfriend off the ledge here before she

starts planning double dates?" Jace nags, coming around the other side and pouring another coffee.

"Cor, this is clearly a booty call. No one is going on any dates," Nick mutters.

She slaps his stomach. "Ew."

"Did you two need something?" Jace barks somewhere behind me.

Cora ignores her brother and leans in to me. "Wanna tell me in private? We can go up to my old room."

"Cora," Nick warns.

"Enough of the interrogation." Jace steps up to the counter where we're all standing. "Angel came over here to set me straight on some things after last night's party. I took our innocent banter...let's say...too far and she came to throw hot coffee in my face."

Nick scans Jace and presses his lips together. "You look pretty clean to me."

"Don't be a smart ass. Anyway, I apologized for being a jerk last night and offered her fresh coffee and breakfast."

Cora crosses her arms and glares at her brother. "What did you do?"

"Hmm?"

"Last night?"

He glances at me. "I made a pass at your friend and she told me where to stick it."

"Coach's daughter? Really?" I hear Nick whisper.

Jace glares at his best friend...at least I think they're still best friends. Hard to tell these days. "My kid sister? Really?"

Nick steps back. "I withdraw the question."

Cora shakes her head with an eye roll. "Anyway, we were going to go ice

skating at the lake." Cora glances at me. "But we can do something else if you want to hang out with us."

My face falls. "Oh no, no—that sounds like fun. You guys should go—"

"Why would you change your plans if Angel hangs out with us?" Jace asks, sounding defensive.

Cora glares at her brother. "Because she doesn't skate anymore." Her eyes shift back to mine. "Right?"

"You're right. I don't. But just curious, why are you guys skating on your day off?"

Nick sighs. "The annual free-skate fundraiser is tomorrow night, and Cora thinks she's going to make a fool of herself as the captain's girlfriend who keeps falling on her ass."

I raise a brow at my friend. "You know, if you didn't quit our free sessions, you'd be a pro now."

"So come with us and show me. Pleeease."

"Uh, yeah. Why not. But only to make sure you don't land on your ass tomorrow. And also..." I glance at Jace. "I'll be there with you."

Cora gasps. "You will? At the fundraiser?"

I nod.

"In skates?"

"Yes, silly. It's kind of a requirement."

Cora's eyes glisten and she hugs me so tight, it warms my heart. Her enthusiasm, her encouragement and her unconditional friendship only reinforces my spur of the moment decision to go. Because no matter how tomorrow goes, it's worth it for this.

I pull away. "But I can't stay late tonight. I have to watch Rory. Dad's at some pre-fundraiser event and the sitter has to take off by seven."

Jace grabs his keys and nods at Nick. "We'll follow you."



T'S JUST PAST SIX and we're back in Jace's driveway. He parks his Maserati next to my car, which is now covered in fall-colored leaves. It reminds me that I've spent nearly the entire day with him. A day that would easily lead to a late evening had we agreed to go to Nick and Cora's place for dinner.

Fortunately, I had an excuse to turn down a very persuasive Cora. I need to race home to watch a child I'm not the least bit responsible for bringing into this world.

I dig out my car keys before reaching for the handle to step out of Jace's car.

"You did alright today, Collins."

I release the handle and swing my head back. "I think the words you're looking for are *thank you*. I was out there with your sister while you and Nick were on the bench laughing at TikTok videos."

"Yeah...we weren't laughing at the videos. Cora was...well let's just say I don't want credit for that."

I slap his chest. "That's mean. She did just fine. And then when we went to the mall, you disappeared on us again."

He shrugs. "You asked for Starbucks. It was a long line."

"Says the guy who doesn't need a reservation at Villamina's."

"Cut in line for coffee? That's suicide, Angel." He reaches over and hooks a finger over the freshly sprayed streak of my hair. "Besides, looks like you both found something to do."

While at the mall, Cora convinced me to get a vibrant streak in my hair to kickoff my comeback to the ice. She and Nicole both have one and I've always teased them for it. But the idea seemed rather appealing to me at the moment.

I hesitated at first but then asked if they had electric blue. I have never seen Cora so giddy.

He releases the strands and I bite back the urge to ask him if he likes it.

"Well, tell Nick I'll send him my bill. Cora's sweet, but with all the pressure she's put herself under, she was a handful today."

"Try raising her," he tells me, which kind of does something to the air around us and it goes quiet in the car.

"Thanks for letting me tag along today."

"Same time tomorrow?"

"What, back here in your gym? No thank you. I need to save that energy for the ice."

"You telling me you never worked out when you were skating?"

"No."

"That's why you're not as fast as me."

I scoff and mutter under my breath. "No one is as fast as you."

"D-Did you just give me a compliment?"

"I stated a fact. It's in a magazine, somewhere."

"So you read about me?"

"I'll go now."

"Wait." Stepping out of the car, he comes around to the passenger door and opens it.

Knitting my brows, I stare up at him from the seat. "What—what was that?"

"Something called chivalry—now get out."

I roll my eyes and step out. "Save it for your next date with Kerri." I pry, without really prying. I don't know what happened between them on the balcony last night but the fact that he's not sharing is bugging me.

He rolls his shoulders back and winces.

"What is it?"

"Nothing a few Motrin's won't fix."

"You can't keep taking pain killers. It only numbs it. Not healing it."

"I'm too tired for the routine tonight. So unless you have any better ideas."

"I do. Got any eggs?"

"Um—no."

"Yes you do. You live on eggs. All I need is one."

"It's a waste of food."

"Somehow I doubt you'll starve." I march to his front door and wait for him to unlock it, which he does with an exasperated breath.

Once we're inside, I make a b-line for the kitchen, pulling at a bowl in the dish drying rack and an egg from the fridge.

Ten minutes later, I'm soaking gauze into an egg mixture until it's fully absorbed. Jace is sitting on the dining room chair eyeing the bowl suspiciously as I apply the dripping cotton over his bare shoulder.

He still smells like coconut and birchwood, even though it's been hours since his shower. Other than our time on the ice together, I don't think we've ever been this close without backing away.

I remind myself to breathe as I wrap the dry bandage under the arm in an infinity loop over his shoulder. His breath is so still. So calm. Like I don't affect him one bit. In fact, he looks very much bored.

I don't know why I notice or why it bothers me. Maybe because of how much our proximity has affected me.

"Egg yolk doesn't smell...until it starts to rot, but you'll survive," I say, feeling like I need to say something in case my heartbeat is loud enough for him to hear.

"Good thing I don't have a hot date tonight."

I scoff and avoid bringing up Kerri again.

I wouldn't dare think that maybe he's had a change of heart. That maybe he's no longer interested, because why would he be? Kerri is a breath of fresh air. She's always smiling, is rarely offended, and is one of life's biggest cheerleaders.

But if I somehow managed to change his mind—to make him look another way instead of hers, then I need to change it back. Because wouldn't that make me some kind of a "man-stealer"?

Which would be an interesting low for me because in the last two years, I managed to dodge every unattached guy who asked me out only to end up with someone who's interested in someone else?

"Any big plans for your second date with Kerri?"

He hums in response, barely acknowledging the question, then glances at his shoulder. "You done?"

"Yeah. You're all set. Just let that sit for the night and take it off in the

morning. It's supposed to reduce inflammation naturally and relieve the pain —without meds."

He shakes his head and stands, moving to his den.

I follow him instead of leaving, like I should, because I'm wildly confused about what's got him so ticked off.

"Isn't this what we agreed to, Jace? Helping each other? Honestly, if it weren't for your help, I would never have even considered going tomorrow. I'm just trying to hold up my end of the deal and help you get the girl."

"Fine," he snaps. "What do I do? Tell me what to do to win the girl."

I blink. "Umm—"

"Can't be that hard, Angel. Don't most women want the same thing?"

"Not nec—"

He steps closer. "If you had to guess, what does a girl like Kerri—beautiful, talented, confident, killer smile—want? What can I give her that she can't get somewhere else?"

I raise a brow and say the first thing that comes naturally to me. "Listen to her. You know, when she talks, take notes—not literal notes, but take note of what she's into, what she hates, what scares her, things she might be afraid to admit. Read between the lines. Girls love that kind of thing. And then when she least expects it, surprise her by showing her you remember that she… hates loud places or likes cinnamon in her coffee. Or that the smell of French vanilla makes her sick."

He watches me and seems intrigued. "I thought women hated surprises."

"They like thoughtful surprises. Not like season tickets to something she has zero interest in. More like sweet subtle surprises. Nothing too big."

He rubs his chin. "Then she won't like what I have to offer her in the bedr

I slap his arm. Jace chuckles, his eyes flashing with satisfaction when he sees me almost crack.

It makes me burst slightly before I gather my composure. "Okay. Can we be serious now?"

"No cock-knock jokes, got it. What else is on the must-do list."

"Be real. Be yourself but the real you, not the guy you put out in the outside world. Let her in on something no one else knows. When you're with her, don't be a hotheaded jock and only talk sports like cursing other teams for crushing your ass."

He holds up a hand to stop me. "Other teams don't crush our ass. We might not win every game, but we do bring it when it counts—"

"Have you been listening to anything I said?"

"Come on, I want to show you something." He pulls me up and leads me to the living room.

"Love how well we're nailing the listening bit, Jace, really," I mutter as I follow him, feeling absolutely ignored.

I'm half expecting him to take me to a hidden trophy wall, but instead, he points to a large mural above the mantle. I've seen it in passing but never focused on it since no one ever hangs out in the living room in his house. It's always the den or the kitchen.

The painting is a mixture of bright and dark colors. It seems like a large version of a child's painting.

"This is Cora," Jace says with a smile, pointing to a single little daisy sticking out of the grass. "This is me." He points to a big tree next to the flower. Its branches and leaves stretch out over the lonely daisy on the grass. Far behind them is a small house surrounded by clouds. The clouds in the distance grow from sky blue below the tree to dark gray above.

He reaches for a book on the mantle and flips the cover open. A folded piece of paper is tucked inside and he holds it out to me. "This is the original."

Opening it, I examine the miniature version of the mural on the wall. "Cora did this?"

"When she was eleven. It's when she started drawing and painting to work through...things."

Looking back up at the wall, I muse. "Did you paint this together?"

He's staring at the flower on the mural and nods. "Yeah. When she moved in here before her senior year of college. She suggested I get some paintings to liven the place up and I suggested this one—the one she gave me a long time ago. I guess I always kept it because it was a reminder that if nothing else, even if Dad and I couldn't give Cora everything a growing young woman needed, she felt safe because I was there."

"Jace. This is beautiful."

He grins as his eyes shift to mine. "I know." He leans in and whispers. "See, I can be real."

I shake my head and slap his chest. "Wow. That's—really something. You know what? I think I solved my little problem."

"Oh did you?" His eyes sparkle with amusement.

"Yep. This is completely unattractive."

"So you admit you were attracted to me."

"Only for like thirty-five seconds."

"Oh, baby, I can make you go much longer than that."

I gasp as his words trigger a memory. "Oh my God, Jace. What time is it?" "It's almost eight."

"Oh shit. The sitter." I race to the other room and grab my phone. "My

phone died. She must have been calling."

Jace grabs my keys. "Come on, I'll drive and you can use my phone to call her from the car."

Melanie, the weekend sitter, is waiting by the door when I race in. I had called the house from Jace's phone on the way over, so she's expecting me.

"Melanie, I am so sorry. We lost track of time," I tell her, hanging up my jacket in the foyer.

She seems like she's about to whine about how I've messed up her night, but when she sees Jace behind me, she stops. "Oh, um...that's—that's okay," she says, barely looking at me anymore. "You're Jace Knight." Her grin is wickedly wide as she walks around me.

He glances at me and takes her hand. "Hi. Melanie? Listen, thank you so much, I really appreciate you staying a little later—I needed help with something, and Angel was kind enough to offer it."

"Oh, it was no problem at all. Rory is a sweetheart."

Jace hands her a few bills on top of what Dad already paid her and walks her out.

I'm watching Rory on the couch and sigh. "She didn't even put her in bed."

Jace walks around me and bends, sliding his arms under her. "Well here, let's get her upstairs." Lifting my little sister, he carries her up, following me to her bedroom.

I step in to turn on her night light as he settles her in bed. Rory shifts and opens her eyes. "Angel?" Her eyes light when she sees the person beside me. "Jace." Sitting up, she wraps her little arms around his forearm.

"Hey, kid." A wholehearted smile spreads his face. "Did you have a good time with Melanie?"

"She seemed annoyed half the night. And she's supposed to be here again tomorrow. Can you tell Dad I'm just not that into her?"

"Oh," I start. "Are you breaking up with your babysitter?"

"It's nothing personal." Her lispy statement makes me laugh.

"Well, honey, we're not going to be able to find you another one before tomorrow. Dad and I have someplace to be." I hadn't told Dad that I'd be going tomorrow, but considering he already booked Melanie, he was expecting me to.

"Fine. But if she starts to suck her teeth and check the clock again, she's out."

"You're a tough crowd," Jace says.

Rory shrugs and slides back under the covers. You'd never know it by looking at the beautiful little blonde-haired creature, but she's like the devil in a onesie.

I look over Jace's shoulder as we head back down the stairs. He's calling himself an Uber since we came here in my car.

"Thanks. You didn't have to drive me here," I finally tell him when we reach the foyer.

"No way I was letting you drive. You were in a hurry and had no form of communication. It's alright. I've called for a car, it's around the corner."

I nod sheepishly and walk him to the door. He stops and turns, taking my hand in his. "Are you sure about tomorrow? A lot of people."

"Are you trying to make me nervous?"

"No. I'm just making sure you're not pushing yourself before you're ready."

"You mean the way you did with your injury?"

He sighs and steps closer. "Come get me if you're feeling any kind of pressure or doubt, okay?"

"I'll be alright."

He starts to slip his hand from mine, and then stops, hanging on to my fingertips as he pulls me slightly. I'm against his chest when he leans down and kisses my cheek, sending goosebumps along my arms. "Get some rest."

I follow him out. "Jace."

He turns and I grab onto the door frame to keep myself from touching him again. "Instead of...coming to find you if I need to, maybe..." I bite my lip.

"I'll find you, Angel. And when I do, I won't be leaving your side."

Relief washes over me and I don't even care what anyone will think seeing us together side by side on the ice tomorrow. Because right now, physically and mentally, he's the only one I feel safe with. "Promise?"

"I promise."



I 'VE BEEN TEXTING ANGEL since the morning but she hasn't been very responsive. I know she's got a lot on her mind—and since Coach probably has his hands full with tonight's event—she's probably tasked with keeping Rory entertained until her sitter shows up.

I run a hand through my hair as I step out of the shower, checking my phone again for any indication from Angel that she's changed her mind.

Nothing.

Reading through our earlier texts, I decide she's either terrible at texting or having second thoughts.

Jace: *Morning. Sleep OK?*

Angel: Yes.

Jace: How's Coach feeling this morning? Should we be worried?

Angel: Seems fine.

Jace: *Seeing you later?*

Angel: Yep.

The last text was four hours ago and I'm about to leave for the arena.

Should I offer to pick her up?

No. She's fine. If I keep badgering her, it will only negate everything I've been telling her; that she's strong and ready for this.

She might not be ready to compete in the Olympics—for that, she'll need to call Riggins—but she's ready to get on the ice in front of a hundred or so people.

I'm in jeans and my jersey with my skates hung over my shoulder. I step onto the blue and white logo carpeted area, which surrounds the entire permitter of the rink. There are two rows of tables along each of the narrow sides of the ice with the usual vendors, each decorated with the Blades logo balloons. On the short ends are benches, for those needing a break from skating. The idea is to keep everyone on the ice, whether they're skating or not.

There are four full tables of team merchandise. One table of hot cocoa and Oreo cookies—which will sell out faster than any merch. And the Ice Girls table with applications for private lessons; primarily designed for children.

I scan the growing crowd for Coach. He'll be easier to spot than Angel. Since he *needs* to be here tonight and is double her size.

Turns out Angel isn't as hard to spot as I thought. To me, she stands out like the main attraction at the other end of the rink. She's bent down by the benches, helping Nicole tie her skates. I slowly walk over, watching as she

wills her best friend, who's wobbling and shaking her head, to stand on her skates.

They both laugh over something and stop abruptly when one of the Ice Girls, who finishes tying her laces at a nearby bench, says something to them.

From where I stand, Nicole's large eyes glance at Angel sympathetically before turning a threatening glare toward the Ice Girl who I might recall as Maggie—but could be wrong.

Angel shakes her head dismissively and guides Nicole to where Nick and Cora are standing.

The hell was that about?

"Hey," I say when I reach her. My stomach waving the moment she meets my eyes and smiles. "You didn't bail."

She inhales and I see either anticipation or a slew of nerves when she takes my hand and moves us out of earshot from our friends. "Sorry about my texts. My mind was everywhere today and I—"

"You don't have to explain."

She releases a breath and glances back at Maggie nervously. "Thanks. I, uh…guess I'll go grab my skates." She looks around at the other players, who are all over the place. "Is there anything you all need to be doing tonight, like smoothing the guests or the owners' friends?"

I shake my head. "Nah. If they had us do that at these things, we'd all mysteriously come down with the flu."

She laughs but seems relieved. "Okay good."

I lightly grasp her hand. "I'm all yours."

She presses her lips together to hide her smile. "I'll go get my skates. But first...an Oreo cookie." She winks. "Be right back."

My chest tightens as I pick up on a weird energy when she walks away and

just to confirm I'm imagining it, I follow and stay close behind her.

Angel

The music is loud and I'm feeling somewhat overwhelmed and exhilarated at the same time. Jace finding me within minutes of my arrival, released the doubt and hesitation building in me the minute I sucked in the air in here.

Maggie's passive comment about losing a bet on whether I'd show up tonight didn't help my nerves one bit. It was surprising but likely not meant to upset or hurt me. Just girls being girls. No harm done, moving on.

I'm walking along the carpeted area through the row of tables, past the merch and toward the hockey puck shaped cookies. "Just one please," I say to the gentleman.

"Oh, Angel," Lily, one of the Ice Girls, calls from the next table. "Look at that, you made it."

I grin and take a bite of my cookie. "Of course, this is where the free cookies are at."

"Ugh, enjoy them. The rest of us need to keep it slim out there, you know?"

My grin—as fake as it was to begin with—fades and I shove the rest of the cookie into a napkin. "Yeah well, I guess I don't have to worry about that anymore."

Chloe, who's sitting next to her, scans me. "And you clearly haven't."

Lily backhands her friend. "She looks great. You look great, Angel. And

who cares, right?"

I suck in a sharp breath and release it slowly through my nose, blinking away the sting in my eyes. That's when I notice Jace at the merch table next to us, seemingly engrossed in a conversation with a vendor.

I'm relieved that he doesn't hear any of this and try to think of some indifferent parting words to my old friends so I can make my escape—seemingly unscathed.

Kerri skates up to me, stopping between me and the Ice Girls' table. "Oh yay, you're here."

"She's just here for cookies," Chloe says with a wink toward me.

Kerri frowns. "What?"

Chloe shrugs and I toss the napkin with the crumbled cookie into the trash filled with empty hot cocoa cups.

"What's going on?" Kerri asks her teammates. "Why are you being mean?" Her voice grows a little louder and I'm conscious of Jace behind us.

Lily's eyes grow innocently wide. "It's not like I offered her to sign up for our skating lessons—that would be mean."

"Shut up," she tells them, but there's a smile behind it so she's not fooling anyone with her defense.

I'm in shock. I have no idea why my friends have turned on me suddenly. Did I miss something?

Kerri steps off the ice and onto the blue carpet, where I stand and rubs my arm sympathetically. "I'll come sit with you in a little while, okay hun?"

"Sit?" I ask, confused.

"Well, yeah. What were you going to do?"

I look around the ice as if the answer is obvious.

"Oh, sweetie. I don't know if today is a good—well it would be terrible

if...I wouldn't want you to be upset if it turns out you're not ready, you know? And hey, if you want, I'd be more than willing to help you get back on, but maybe you might want something a little more...private." She looks around the arena and I follow her eyes at the growing crowd.

It's not like when Jace and I are here alone. It's thunderously loud. Just like the last time I performed. Visions of that night flash before my eyes. Suddenly, I'm back on that rink, laying on my side in pain. I can almost hear the audience go silent in my head. My music stopping dead. My heart pounds against my chest and I know Kerri is right.

I'm not ready for this.

Not by a long shot.

I mumble something to her and walk off, careful to stay on the carpeted area before hitting the mat and disappearing through the tunnel. I didn't see Jace on my way across the rink and figure he's too busy to worry about me tonight.

And I don't need his pity.

I don't need anyone. I just need to get the hell out of here.

I head straight for Dad's office but not for my skates. I'm here for his car keys. I find them and grab my bag with a plan to text him that I'll pick him up later.

He'll understand.

Yanking the door open, I barely make it past the threshold before bumping into a hard chest.

I already know it's not Dad when I look up into Jace's piercing green eyes.

"Going somewhere?" His voice isn't as patient and gentle as it was earlier. He's angry.

I open my mouth and try to speak but shake my head instead.

"Get back inside." He moves in on me, practically pushing me backwards.

My hands shake when Dad's keys fall to the floor along with my bag. My lip is trembling, my whole body is burning and I feel completely out of control.

"Angel, look at me."

I shake my head and my knees give out, but I don't make it to the floor. Jace grabs hold of me and presses me against the wall.

"J-Jace. Let me go. I can't do it. I won't go out there. I don't belong there anymore. This was a mistake. It was stup—"

Soft lips press hard against mine, taking away any breath I had left. His fingers lace through my hair and he holds my face where he needs it. His kiss is hungry, urgent, desperate and I've yet to respond to it.

A whimper escapes me when I realize how badly I've wanted this. And just how good it would feel if I just let go.

Before I have the chance to, he steps back, his breathing hard, and he wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. "Calm. The fuck. Down."

"Let me go, Jace." I say the words but know that if he does, I might pathetically sink against the wall he has me against. I feel so weak. So defeated.

His gravelly voice is in my ear. "Make me."

I blink. "What?"

"Fight back, Angel."

I shake my head and press against his chest with my palms.

"Harder."

I groan and squeeze my eyes shut, pressing again but I've got nothing. I don't have the strength he tried to convince me I do.

He holds me up. "Tell me again, Angel. How many times, hmm? How

many times did your sweet little cunt get wet for me?"

I growl and grip his jersey, pulling him against my lips, kissing him with equal hunger. Our tongues collide and my arms wrap around his neck. I push into him, losing myself in his heat, his touch, his desire for me.

His hand dips under my shirt, pulling down the lacey covering of my breast. Finding one hard nipple, he dips his head, pulling it into his mouth. I gasp as he tugs my hair back and moves across my chest to the other and bites.

"Jace," I whine.

"Be quiet. I'm not done with you."

"You better not be."

"Only two things will stop me, Angel. You telling me to, and that door opening. And even then, I'm not so sure I would."

Panic heightens my voice. "Is it locked?"

"Where's the fun in that?" He tugs on the waistband of my leggings.

"Oh God," I moan when his fingers trace down the middle of my panties and press on my pelvis. Flicking the soaked thing to the side, he rakes two fingers against my wet core, making me gasp again.

"So beautifully wet."

"Jace," I cry. It's almost pleading, and I feel no shame.

He swipes at it again. "What, baby?"

"More."

He slides two fingers inside me easily, releasing a groan. This time from him. My face is against his chest as he finds my clit and strokes.

"Jace."

His lips are against my ear. "Louder."

"God, you son of a bitch," I breathe.

He plunges harder, pushing me against the wall and practically lifting me off my feet. "You need a lesson on dirty-talk, baby, but for now, you're going to give me what you have had me dreaming about for weeks. I'm going to devour watching you come for me."

"You're impossible." I clench as his fingers move with purpose, making me thrust against his hand. It's too intense. It's too much and I scream so loud he covers my mouth with his.

This kiss is softer, still almost, as both his arms wrap around me, holding me as I come down from my orgasm.

I expect him to crack jokes. To ask me if it was as good as when I fantasized about this.

But he doesn't. Not yet at least. For now, he holds me in his arms, stroking the back of my head and I instantly feel the difference. It's so profound. I'm calm. I've returned to earth. I don't know what the hell I allowed to happen to me out there, but he pulled me out of it.

I hadn't realized Jace was holding me up the whole time until he sets my feet back on the floor. I feel mildly embarrassed for my panic attack and for basically begging him to finger fuck me in my dad's office, that I barely look at him.

And even though I no longer feel like I'm going to fall, I bury my head in his chest for support. "I'm sorry," I say quietly.

He lifts my chin. "Don't ever be sorry." He brushes my hair from my face. "Be stubborn, make mistakes, lose control, but don't ever be sorry. Not to me. Not to anyone."

I nod, and even though I'm looking at him, my focus is off.

"Angel. Not to anyone."

I release my hold on him and he steps back, giving me breathing room. I

straighten out my sweater and leggings. "How do I look?"

He scans me once and tilts his head. "Sit."

I move to my Dad's desk chair and sit. Jace grips the armrest on both sides and leans down. "I think you look beautiful. But if you're trying to look like you did earlier..." He stands and moves behind me, pulling my hair behind my shoulders and smoothing out the waves before placing the blue strands to the right side of my head. "That should do it." Moving back in front of me, he licks the tip of his thumb and sweeps it across my brow.

He takes my skates off the hook and slides them on my feet, tying them around my ankles like a pro and looks up at me. "Ready?"

"Yes."

Jace holds my hand like I'm a flight risk as we step onto the ice. The air is warmer than it was before and I wonder if it's because the arena is filled with more guests or if I'm still hot over what Jace and I just did in Dad's office. I'm also very aware of his hand on mine as we step on the ice. His heat radiates, sending waves of warmth through my veins.

He tugs on my fingers gently to get my focus back on him. "Is this okay? If I hold your hand?"

I raise a brow. "Oh for this you'll ask permission?" I tease, squeezing it tighter for reassurance.

He grins. "Good. Because I wasn't letting go."

We skate side by side with an occasional twist and pivoting to skate backward. We stop to talk to Ryan and his wife for a few minutes. Ryan's been on the team longer than Jace has, so we go way back, but he doesn't even question that Jace and I are skating together—or call attention to the fact that I'm on the ice.

The older ones are typically a lot more subtle about these things.

Jace cracks jokes about nearly every guest we pass and before I know it, I'm laughing like we're the only two people on the ice.

I try to avoid the glares I'm getting from the Ice Girls, but my brain automatically goes in search of the slightest clue of what this could be about.

I wonder if it has anything to do with why Kerri brushed past me angrily the other night at the after party. Is this a good time to ask Jace what they talked about?

When we pass two of them glaring at us, Jace tugs my hand. "Eyes on me, baby."

I blink away and focus on him. His expression is blank and he's not looking at me. I try to pick up on his mood as I watch him beside me. "I don't know what's going on Angel"—he turns to me— "but stay with me, alright?"

I know what he means by that and I give him a single nod.

To our left, I see Dad talking to a vendor at one of the Blades' merch tables. The guy wears a suit, rather than a t-shirt like the other merch table reps so I assume he's the owner.

Dad spots me on the ice and his eyes instantly light up. I skate up to him with Jace following behind. The little grin the man's allowed himself in public fades when he sees Jace behind me.

"Find your old skates?"

Feeling flushed, I answer quickly. "Yes. Right where I left them."

It may only be a special talent Jace holds, but I'm afraid I'm easily readable when feeling shameful—so I quickly turn away from my Dad and stretch a hand to the man behind the table. "Hello."

"Phil Stanley." He takes my hand with coarse fingers.

"Phil, this is my daughter, Angel."

"Ah, you'll have to forgive me, but I don't see the resemblance." The man

kisses my hand.

I jerk it back. "I'm mostly my mother."

"And you remember Jace Knight, our defenseman." Dad's expression is blank and tone neutral, but I'm a pro at reading the man. There's a question in his every move and he intends on asking it later.

"Of course, I know Jace. Fastest player in the league. Good to meet you in person."

"Phil." Jace nods and shakes his hand. "Is this the new line?"

"Yes, it is. You'll see the blue is deeper and a little more pronounced compared to the old version."

"I happen to like the old version," Jace comments.

"And the white looks cooler," I point out. The man is clearly proud of the new line and trying to get support from the players.

"We call that diamond white. It has a little shimmer to it too."

Nick and Cora skate up to the table. Nick's balance is strangely off and it's not until he grips the table for support and jerks forward as if someone bumped him from behind, that I realize why.

Nicole releases the back of her brother's jersey and comes around them, winded and flushed.

"What's the matter, Nicole," Jace asks. "Your brother's hands full, he can't help you out?"

Nick holds up his palms defensively. "I offered."

"I'm not really a hand-holder," Nicole admits, stepping onto the carpeted area and gripping the edge of the table. "That's better," she breathes.

"Well, hello," Phil hums, turning to Nicole with sinister admiration. "Phil Stanley." He stretches a hand, but Nicole leaves him hanging.

"Hey. Cool swag."

"We call it merch. But everything purchased tonight goes to the fundraiser. And Royce, we printed a special edition of your number." He holds up a jersey that says *Collins* and the number seventeen.

Dad doesn't seem impressed. He turns the price tag. "One hundred dollars? The others are fifty."

"You're a legend. And there is a limited amount made."

Dad shakes his head.

"I'll take one of those," Nicole chirps.

"Here you go, pretty lady. Special discount for you."

Nicole waves a hand. "Oh, no worries. My brother can pay full price. Nick, pay the man."

"Really? You don't want one with your *own* last name on it?" Nick reaches for the one with *Kane* printed on the back.

Nicole holds up Coach's jersey to her chest. "You know I have expensive taste, bro. Plus I already have one for every year you've played."

Nick rolls his eyes and pays the man for two jerseys, putting the one with his name over Cora's head.

"I have expensive taste too, why do I get the cheaper one?" she grumbles, sliding her arms through.

"Let's go." He sighs and takes Cora's hand before skating off.

Dad wraps up his conversation with Phil and follows Nicole as she slowly pushes off and skates with her arms out. Her feet start to spread further apart and I wince.

Dad puts his hands under her arms from behind and pulls her upright then quickly lets go, moving beside her. I hear him say something about sticking close for insurance purposes and she laughs. The rest fades out.

I swear, if it wasn't for Nicole's damsel in distress distraction, Dad's eyes

would still be glued to me and Jace.

"Ready?" Jace asks, taking my hand in his again.

"Hey, Jace, if you're looking for Kerri, she should be back any minute. She's taking Ryan's daughter out for a spin on the ice," Lily purrs.

"Thanks," he acknowledges flatly. "I'll definitely say hi when I see her."

"Come on." He tugs my hand.

I swallow when his eyes meet mine. "Jace. I feel like everyone is looking at us," I finally say. But there's only one group I'm referring to.

"Ignore them. Just pretend we're alone."

We skate side by side until he moves in front of me and skates backwards, daring me to catch him. I know he's trying to distract me but it's impossible not to be hurt and confused about what's going on with my friends.

Even when he looks away and waves to someone, he's still focused on me. Ready for whatever I need.

Catching both my hands, he pulls me in a wide turn until I face him. The moment my free hand reaches his chest, I feel the sneers from around us.

"Nice footwork, Angel," Lily swings by and commends.

"Let me know if you need another hand, girl, I got you." That one was from Maggie again, who zooms past us.

That was such a slap in the face. It makes me want to pull my hand away from Jace, but he seems to have tightened his grip.

I turn to him but he's no longer focused on me and doesn't seem fazed by what's going on around us.

I know he heard that. I'm not crazy.

"Hey, Angel," he calls, my hand still in his.

"What?" I snap.

He chuckles. "I was standing in this very spot when I skated onto the ice

on my first day. You remember that?"

I laugh, but it's small. "I might remember saying a few words."

"I could recite them to you. Word for word."

"You could?" A bigger smile touches my lips, but it's short lived.

"You're doing great, sweetie. Don't pay attention to anyone—everyone looking at you now is just jealous." She winks.

My heart rate picks up and I do the one thing I promised I wouldn't do—scan my surroundings in the middle of the ice.

So many people.

"Jace...um..."

He's in front of me before I can blink. "You told me not to call you a lady, remember that?" He laughs. "Oh, and something having about six more minutes. You know, till this day—anytime I have six minutes left for anything, I think of you. I— Angel, Angel."

They *are* all looking at me. Not just the Ice Girls, but everyone. Their faces. So blurry...but I know they're there. Watching me. Waiting for me to fall.

"Angel," Jace calls me again and I blink, finding his eyes again.

"Jace, I have to get—"

"Fight back. I know it feels like they're staring but they're not. They're noticing two unlikely individuals skating as if they actually like each other. I am the best damn skater in the room and I'd tell you if you're better off sitting this one out." He keeps his voice low but hardens his tone. "Angel. Look at me. I need you to do something for me."

He has my attention. "What?"

"I'm going to wait right here, but I need you to skate to the other side of

the rink. Casually go say hi to Nicole sitting on the bench over there and then ask her to come back with you. Show her how."

"By myself?"

"By yourself." He glances around. "Just for a minute. I've seen you skate all over this rink when no one was here watching you. Just pretend you're alone."

I nod. "I don't know what's gotten into me."

He whispers into my ear. "I'll take care of it. Now move."

Sucking in a breath, I skate over to Nicole, who's watching me behind the hot cocoa in her hands. Her long black sweater sleeves stick out from under the huge jersey. Before I stop in front of her, I circle in place, force a smile and put my hands up. "Ta-da."

Nicole laughs. "Nice."

I reach for her hand. "Didn't you hear? Bench time is only five minutes, tops. Come on out here."

Nicole stands and eyes me suspiciously. "Are you going to be able to lift me when I fall?"

"I won't need to. You fall and twelve hockey players and their brothers will be lining up to help you up. Oh and that guy Phil."

Nicole takes my hand, giving it a squeeze. "You okay?"

I shake my head. "No. But, help me pretend I am?"

"I'm the queen of pretending to be okay."

I glance at her with a scowl.

She chuckles. "Sorry, that turned dark real quick. Let's just skate."

Nicole by my side is helping tremendously. I don't feel any eyes on me now. I get a few glances from the Ice Girls but they turn away. Nicole has had a bad rep in this town for years. And branded to be associated with some

known criminals. But even though that life is behind her, she's still widely feared in this town.

I'm beginning to think I've been hanging out with the wrong crowd all night. Nicole is definitely the safer option.

We finally reach Jace and he smiles at my friend. "And you said you don't hold hands."

"Angel's the exception. But you know all about that don't you, Romeo?" I glare at her and she puts her hands up.

"Angel." I cringe when I hear my mother's high pitch call.

"Oh no. My mother's here." I turn and find her standing with my father, who looks both unhappy and bored. They're a few feet away, by the boards, and I sigh.

Jace gives me a knowing glance and then turns to Nicole. "Come on, nosy, let's take you for a spin."

Nicole holds up her hands. "No, no, no. I promise no more jokes. I don't know anything, I swear."

Jace laughs. "Too late." He winks and squeezes my hand quickly. "I'll be here when you're done."

I mouth a thank you before I skate over to my parents. I watch Dad as my mother pulls me in for a hug. He's glaring at Jace halfway across the ice with Nicole like the guy's been on his shitlist all night.



HAT THE HELL IS going on? Something is seriously up with the Ice Girls. They're treating Angel like she's an amateur. Or worse, like she's still scarred by what happened to her and throwing it in her face.

Bit by bit, they're tearing down the courage she's built in the past few weeks to get back out here and I'll be damned if they break her completely.

I hate acting like I don't hear it because I want to be there for her, but I need to find out what's going on and the only way to do that is to play dumb and find the source.

"What's going on?" Nicole asks, gliding a little faster to keep up with me. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know. But I'm picking up weird vibes around here. I just can't quite put my finger on it." She looks around like she's annoyed she can't figure it out.

I feel her losing her focus on skating so I grip her hand tighter. "Why don't I get you another hot chocolate and get you back on the bench."

"Sounds good. I might be taking these things off soon anyway."

A few minutes later, I settle Nicole back on the bench with a warm beverage and help until her skates.

Kerri waves to me when I return to the spot I left Angel and impressively skids to a stop when she reaches me. "Hey, stranger," she greets breathlessly.

"Nice move. Get a few more signups for lessons?"

"We sure did." She sneaks a glance toward Angel, who's still engrossed in a conversation with her parents.

I heard Kerri defend Angel earlier and decide she's a safe bet to find out what's going on. "Have you noticed anything strange going on? The girls seem a little...hostile toward Angel."

"Oh no." Kerri puts a hand over her eye. "I think I got something in my eye. Can you help me to the bench over there?"

"Yeah." I take her hand and guide her to the nearest bench and take a seat beside her.

Kerri is blinking away with one hand around her eye and the other on my bicep. "Tell her not to fret about it. They're just being a little defensive of me."

"Of you?"

"I'm the lead Ice Girl now. I choreograph all our dances and plan routines. If Angel comes back, she'll take the lead. It just seems a little unfair to them." She blinks innocently.

It makes sense. I know from Cora that girls can get pretty catty, but it still seems completely unreasonable.

Not to mention hurtful.

"Crap, I can't seem to get it. Can you see if I have anything in there?" She shifts in her seat which makes me turn to her.

I hold the tip of her chin and scan both eyes. "Kerri, I don't think you need

to worry about Angel. She's not interested. So...it's all you." I lean in and blow in her eye and she blinks a few times, then focuses on something over my shoulder. When a slow smile forms her face, I assume I got the culprit and pull back.

"And if you can give your friends the message and tell them to back off, I would appreciate it."

"Uh, yeah..." Her eyes move to the center of the rink and I follow her gaze, finding Angel trapped between four Ice Girls, skating around her.

I'm on my feet before I can try to make out what the hell that's about. From the short distance, I hear mock praise for Angel's efforts on the ice.

I zoom past the crowd until I reach her. When she sees me, something between anger and hurt is on her face but I ignore it. I don't stop.

Instead, I grab hold of her waist and push us forward, away from the cruel crowd. It doesn't take her long to catch up with my pace and skate backward with my support.

"Let go of me." Tears start to stream down her face.

"Get a grip and keep up," I grit before spinning her into a forward position.

She puts her hands on her stomach. "I need to get off the ice."

"Not now."

"I don't have to prove anything to anyone."

I pull her close as we glide across the ice and lean into her ear. "Then I'll do it for you, Angel. Take a breath. This isn't about you. It's about me."

I'd almost bought Kerri's sob story of being a lead until she tricked me before I could witness what was happening to Angel.

That was about me.

I'm almost positive.

"You're a liar. Get off me or I'll scream."

I'm not afraid of her threats and doubt that she would scream given her fear of unnecessary attention. But it's her tone and the hurt in her voice that makes me pull my arms off her slowly.

As soon as she's free, she moves to a bench and takes off her skates at lightning speed before racing off.

I watch until she disappears through the crowd, debating on following her, but a deep voice pulls my focus.

"Knight." Coach is standing on the carpeted area of the rink by the tunnel. By the look on his face, I know he saw his daughter blaze out of here after being in my arms. "A word?"

"Coach...it's not a good time."

He strolls over to me. "I know my daughter. She needs to be alone for a minute. Wanna tell me what that was about?"

"I'm just helping her out. I didn't want her out there alone."

A combination of scrutiny and gratefulness, if such an expression is possible, crosses his features. "Why is it any of your business?" he finally asks.

"She's a friend."

"Since when?"

I exhale a breath and hold in a comment I know will get me in trouble.

Coach looks around and lowers his voice. "Are you the one helping her?" "Yes."

He sucks in a breath and puts his hands on his waist the way he does when he's about to tell us how we screwed up a game.

I don't have time for this but know it's necessary if I have any chance of going after Angel.

"I found her here one night and offered my help."

He turns to me with a scowl. "What were you doing here?"

I don't answer and he steps closer. "Jace. I don't have time for guessing games. I'd like to know why one of my players was back on the ice when no one else was."

"I saw her come back here on my way out and followed her."

His jaw tightens and his gaze is wary.

"There's no reason for her to be alone here that late. I just wanted to make sure she was okay."

My response seems to satisfy him but he's still assessing me like I'm the one she needs protection against. "Unless you're sending me to the principal's office, Coach, I'm going to go see if she's alright."

"Watch your mouth. See you at practice tomorrow."

"What no comment about staying away from her?"

He scoffs and looks in the direction Angel ran off. "From the looks of it, you just took care of that. But if not, I know you know better than to mess around with my daughter."

Royce Collins is a strong and intimidating man. When he makes subtle threats like that, you don't take it lightly.

So I'm not sure what possesses me to respond the way I do before I take off. "We're not messing around."

It's after nine and I'm ringing Angel's doorbell like there isn't a five-yearold likely asleep in the house. Just adding to the list of reasons Coach is going to nail me at practice tomorrow.

His car isn't in the driveway, which isn't surprising since the event doesn't end until ten and he needs to stay for the owners' closing numbers speech for the fundraiser.

When she finally answers, I almost forget what I came here for. She's in a crop top with matching shorts. Her hair is up in a messy bun and it reminds me of the time we sat at the diner—a time she was a lot happier than she is now.

Maybe the words 'a lot happier' is extreme for someone like Angel. But she was not looking at me with venom in her eyes.

When she starts getting restless waiting for me to speak, I hold up my hands. "Angel, wait. Talk to me. What's going on? Why did you run off?"

She crosses her arms and looks away. But the door isn't being shut in my face, so I press my luck and move toward her.

"I'm sorry I stepped away, I—"

"I'm not upset that you stepped away."

"Then what is it?" I fight the urge to run my hand down her cheek when she looks down. "Is it about what happened earlier? Did I take it too far?"

A tear falls and she swipes it away. "I shouldn't have let you talk me into it. I should have just left. I don't even know why you would bother with me when you're still into Kerri."

I close the small distance between us. "I'm not into Kerri. Why would you think that?"

"I heard you." She pushes against me. "I heard you say that you're not interested in me. That it's all her."

I'm wracking my brain, trying to remember what she might have heard me say because it most certainly wasn't *that*. "Angel."

"And then it looked like you kissed her."

I laugh but I don't find any of this funny. I laugh because I'm relieved that this is what she's angry about. I step in uninvited and close the door behind me. It's dark and the only light comes from the kitchen at the far end of the house. Gripping her by the waist, I move her against the wall by the door, confident enough to cage her between my arms and make her look at me.

"I didn't kiss her. I don't want her. I never wanted her. You assumed I did. Yes, I took her out. But that's all it was. I took her to dinner because I thought I could forget about you, since you basically kept digging my grave and throwing me in it."

She blinks up at me, confusion on her face.

"You're the only one I've wanted for years, Angel."

"But you said—"

"What you heard me telling Kerri is that you're not interested in being an Ice Girl again. Can't you see, they're all threatened by you?"

I exhale a breath. I don't tell her that I'm pretty sure the hostility she faced today was about me because I'd sound like an egotistical jackass. Basically validating everything Angel has been saying about me for the past five years.

"I swear that's all it was, Angel."

She looks up at me slightly bashful and I poke her waist, releasing a breathy laugh that eases me. "How did we get here? I thought you hated me."

"I've never hated you, Angel." I slip my hands under her jaw and lift her face to mine. "You were a thorn in my side and I found you highly irritating, but I never hated you." I wince and jerk my shoulder.

"What is it?"

"Uh... I might have skipped Riggin's routine today."

"This is all my fault. I stressed you out tonight."

"Tonight?" I laugh.

"I'm so—" she cuts off remembering my rule. "Can I help?"

"I'll be alright." I pull away from her and open the door, stepping out

quietly. "I'll go home and ice it."

"Jace." Her anxious voice makes me turn.

"Can I come with you?"

Thirty minutes later, we're at my house and she's preparing some sort of herb mixture she expects me to drink or breathe in or something. I have no clue because I wasn't paying attention when Riggins suggested such a ritual, but I don't stop her because she looks too damn cute moving around my kitchen barefoot, her hair still in a bun. It's looser now and she's swapped out her shorts for sweatpants.

I don't miss the fact that this might be the perfect time to tell her about what Coach said to me before I left the arena. But she's been through enough tonight to worry about her dad.

"What is it?" I ask when she brings it over to me.

"It's a couple of different things." She places the bowl beside me on the table and smirks down at me. "While you're feeling soft over me, I'm going to town."

"That doesn't sound fair."

She laughs. "So the ginger tea is for you to drink. I added some turmeric. That will help with any inflammation and relieve joint pain, but not enough to help you sleep through the night pain-free." She pulls out a little bottle. "The real secret is this. This gel is made from essential oils and flowers that will prevent inflammation from coming back in the middle of the night and causing pain. I just heated some up and am going to rub it in." She gathers some in the palm of her hand. "Take off your shirt."

I look up at her from my seat. "You didn't say please."

She bends down. "Neither did you and I still let you have your way with me."

I grin and remove my shirt. "All yours."

She inhales as she scans my torso and then moves behind me. A moment later, I feel the warmth on my shoulder. It's instantly soothing. The smell is strong, like something that might linger for days. But it's the silky strokes against the tenderness that makes me feel like the luckiest man alive.

"This is strong stuff," I cough.

"It's just as powerful as it smells," she says, moving her hands and adding pressure when she reaches the spot that hurts most.

I groan and she flinches. Then starts up again slower but still putting the pressure where I want it the least. I suffer through a few more minutes of this until the pain starts to subside and I'm basically numb in that area.

"You sure you're doing this right?"

"No," she says. "I'm doing what feels right."

I frown and glance up at her.

"Riggins' trick. Take your basic knowledge of muscle and joint pain remedies, including key ingredients and practices, and apply them to each situation." She shrugs. "It works for my dad. Peppermint is a natural headache remedy ingredient. So I take a few drops of the essential oil, dilute it in olive oil and tell him to rub it into his temples. Then I put the rest in a spray bottle filled with water and spray the house."

"And that works?"

"Sometimes."

"Well if you're making this up as you go along, then by all means."

"Finish that tea and then I want you to hang this in your shower." She hands me a little mesh bag.

"What is it?"

"Aromatherapy."

I stand. "More? I already smell like the waiting room of a day spa."

"A hot shower and then I'll wrap your shoulder before I leave."

I'm relieved to hear this isn't the end of our night. "And then what, you'll tuck me in?"

She puts her hands on her waist. "Then I'm going to leave you with instructions for the morning."

I leave her in my kitchen, making extra little bags of the most random ingredients and head upstairs to shower.

I don't know what she did, but I'm completely pain-free when I step out of my shower. I roll my shoulders back and feel nothing but the ability to do it ten more times without feeling a damn thing.

No pain killers. No acupuncture. No bench time.

Sounds good to me.

When I step out into my bedroom in my boxers, Angel is standing by my dresser, pulling at drawers. "A million t-shirts and you still walk around half naked."

I chuckle and walk to my bed.

"What's so funny?"

"Of course you'd be the first girl I have in my bedroom."

"What like this week?"

"No. I mean at all. I don't bring girls here." I sit on the edge of my bed and she starts to tend to my shoulder with more oils and a long cloth.

"I added lavender to this one. It will help you sleep."

I watch her without a care in the world as to how I might look right now. A love sick puppy, a grump...I don't know and I don't care. I just want to watch her.

She glances at me. "So why not here?"

I shrug. "Makes things complicated. Plus, Cora was here and I was trying to lead by example."

"Lot of good that did you." She laughs a little too hard.

I shake my head. "Yeah, jokes on me."

"So where do you take them? You know—besides their dad's office."

I look up at her and she blushes. "I don't sleep with too many women in town. It's... usually away games."

This seems to upset her and she swallows. "Right. Because you don't plan on seeing them again."

I take her hand to stop her, but she still doesn't look at me. "Angel."

"So that night with Kerri, after dinner..."

"I walked her to her front door. Then came back here and...thought of you."

She narrows her eyes. "Really?" But there's no flattery in her tone, it's more scrutiny.

"Well, I thought of you thinking of me to be exact."

She punches my other arm and I grab her waist pulling her on top of me. She exhales a laugh as I settle her onto a pillow beside me.

We're still for a moment until she lifts her nose breathing me in and starts to cough dramatically.

"I know." I smile smugly. "I'm intoxicating."

She fans her nose. "That's one way to put it."

"Well, I feel better than I have in six months."

"You were a trooper today," she tells me.

I snuggle closer and twine our fingers together. "So were you."

"Sorry I ran out on you. After everything you did for me today, the last few weeks, I should have known you wouldn't—"

"Abandon you and make a pass at Kerri? No. I don't know what happened tonight. But I hope you won't let them get to you. Angel. You need to fight back. Show them they have every right to be afraid."

She puts her hand on my chest, then runs it up to my wrapped shoulder and down my arm.

"Promise me you'll do that. When I'm not around. When you're feeling like everyone's against you or waiting for you to fall."

She opens her mouth but doesn't say what's on the tip of her tongue.

"What? Say it."

"Promise me you'll take care of yourself, Jace. When I'm not around."

"It's easier when you are." I brush her hair back and she smiles faintly, her eyes growing heavy.

"It's been a long night. You should go to bed. I can see myself out."

I don't know if she remembers that I drove her here from Coach's house. My grin stretches when her eyes close completely and I stroke her hair. "We'll head back in a minute," I whisper, without the slightest intention of doing so.

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"Jace..." she mumbles, her eyes still closed.
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"Hmm?"

"This is dangerous."

"What is?"

"Closing our eyes."

"What are you afraid of?"

She yawns. "Falling..."

I let her doze off and take a few minutes watching her. Something I realize I can do all night if I weren't so sleepy myself.



I 'M WARM. NOT LIKE kick off the blankets warm but comfortably warm. The bed feels different. Firmer and bigger maybe? My eyes flutter open. It's dark. The room, the sheets and covers are all darker.

Wait—I'm not home. I'm still in Jace's bedroom, tucked beside him on his bed.

"Jace," I breathe groggily. He doesn't move and I jump to a sitting position, shaking him. "Jace. Wake up."

He groans and shifts. "Hey."

His morning voice sends a wave to my stomach. "We fell asleep." Jumping from his bed, I pull apart his blackout curtains. The sun hasn't come up yet, but the sky is turning a soft pale blue. "It's dawn. Shit. Dad's going to kill me."

"I didn't know you had a curfew," he chides, sitting up slightly and leaning against his headboard.

"I don't. But I don't want to answer any questions either. And I *always* tell him when I'm not coming home." Checking my phone, I don't see any missed calls or texts from him. Which terrifies me.

"I have to go." I pick up my bag. "I'm leaving the supplies I brought last night. If you need any help with them, let me know." I don't know why I sound like a nurse doing house calls, but I don't know what to make of what's happening between Jace and me in the last twelve hours and can't stop to think about it now.

"Wait." He pushes out of bed. "I drove you here. Give me a minute and I'll take you."

I release a breath and cover my face with one hand. "You must think I'm a nut job."

He walks over to me and kisses my lips softly like it's a thing we do now. "I've always known you're a nut job." He moves to his dresser, removing the cloth from around his shoulder and tossing it aside before pulling a shirt over his head.

"Can I make you breakfast?" There's a slight wariness in his voice and his brows twitch, like he's speaking a foreign language.

My stomach grows tight, and I shake my head. "I can't eat this early. And I'm a little nauseous."

Without another word, he walks me downstairs and helps me with my jacket before grabbing his keys. "Call me later? We should probably...talk."

My heart thuds in my chest and I swallow it down.

"Talk. Right, okay. I'll call you later." I don't know why, but I give it half a beat, waiting for something from him. I don't know if it's to kiss me or to give me any indication of what he wants to talk about—but when he pulls the door open, I remember who he is. I remember what Jace Knight is all about when it comes to women and quietly follow him out.

It's a short drive to my house and the sun is still on its way when he pulls up.

He sighs like he's hesitant about something. I hate over analyzing, but I'm so aware of his every move that it's making me crazy.

"Let me know how it goes." He squeezes my hand. "Call me later?"

With a nod, I step out of his car and search for my keys as I approach the front door. I realize coming home at dawn was probably the worst idea. It's almost like saying, I know I screwed up but hoping you don't notice.

This is ridiculous. I'm twenty-four. If I want to stay out late, I damn-well could.

It's dark when I step in and close the door lightly behind me. Tiptoeing to the nearest closet, I take off my boots and walk down the hall toward the kitchen. The counter lights under the cabinets are always on and they illuminate the pathway for me when I step in for a bottle of water. Dad's coffee machine has already started so I'm not surprised by the aroma in the kitchen.

I yelp when I find his broad body standing by the counter with a mug in hand.

"Morning," he says chirpily.

My hand is over my chest. "Jesus, Dad. You scared me. What are you doing up so early?"

He reaches for the light switch and flicks it on, taking a minute to respond. "I'm always up this early."

"Oh."

He looks into his mug. "You going to tell me where you spent the night?" And there it is.

I was prepared to tell him that I spent the night at Nicole's because she's a better answer than Jace Knight—his least favorite player. Or that I met a guy at a bar I got trashed at last night and we hit it off—also a better response than Jace Knight.

But something about the way he's looking at me, makes me doubt every option.

"Before you lie to me, you should know that I'm only asking because I was worried about you. Not because I have any control over your life or who you spend time with."

I swallow. "Jace. I spent the night at Jace's house. We just fell asleep, we didn't—"

He nods and pulls open the fridge, handing me a cool water bottle. "You're a little jittery, Angel. Maybe skip the caffeine today."

I take it and turn my head as he steps back. "By the way, you looked great on the ice last night. You're training with one of the girls, right?"

"Umm...yeah. They're helping me."

His dark eyes sear into mine before he blinks away. "Well, tell Jace I think he's done a fine job. He'll appreciate it. It's not often I give that guy a compliment."

I frown.

"Oh did he forget to mention that he told me he's the one working with you?"

My eyes sting and there's a ball in my throat I can't swallow down. "Dad, what are you doing?" The shakiness in my voice makes him look up. "You set me up to lie—you never do that."

He sets his mug down and softens his tone as he steps closer. "Angel."

I step back. "I'll be in my room. Please let me know when you've gone so

I can come out."

"Angel you're not—"

I take off as he mutters a curse under his breath and head up the stairs, shutting my door gently to not wake Rory.

I'm tempted to pull it open again and yell out to tell his daughter to stop barging into my room, but that would be stupid. It's the whole reason I moved back here. To help him with Rory.

Not because I mean anything to him.

I'm just free labor.

I break into tears and hear him come up the stairs, releasing a heavy breath.

"Angel, I'm sorry. You're right I don't do that." He fiddles with the handle of the door I left unlocked but doesn't attempt to come in.

Sliding onto my bed, I pull my legs up to my chest, feeling more confused and emotional than ever.

"Look I wasn't going to leave until later, but I'll take Rory to the pancake house and then to practice with me today. You can have the house to yourself for a few hours."

I don't respond and wait for the beating in my heart to stop. I miss my dad. I miss him taking *me* to the pancake house when I was little.

"I meant what I said, you looked beautiful back on your skates. I couldn't pull my eyes off you."

Except when you were staring at Nicole.

"Get some rest. I'll stop back at home in a bit and drop off a number five with extra blueberries for you."

The thought would have been sweet, if he knew that for the last five years, it's been the number seven with extra strawberries.

Another tear falls and I take a few more sips of water before curling under

my covers, wondering where and how everything went wrong in the last two days.

How my friends turned against me.

How I got lost in the idea of being with Jace only for him to plan on ending it before it starts.

And how I've managed to lose the father I've always known him to be.



The first time I smile all morning is when I get a text from Dad two hours later.

Dad: Rory seems to think it's strawberries you always order not blueberries. Which one of us is right?

I'm sitting in the backyard in a bathrobe with coffee when I read the message and set my phone down without bothering to respond.

After fifteen minutes, another message pops up.

Dad: Got it. Thanks. We'll get both. (wink)

I make a mental note to disappear back in my bedroom within twenty minutes as I scan multiple messages from Jace.

Jace: You alright?

Jace: *Everything go OK?*

Jace: Thank you again for coming by. It felt great this morning. Oh and my shoulder is good too. (wink)

I allow myself to smile and breathe a small sigh of relief. But then I remember how sweet he was last night. When he pulled me onto his bed. When it felt like he was silently asking me to stay before we both fell asleep.

I'm too emotional to talk to him right now. It's why I don't respond. More than anything I need to make sense of what this is. If I want it. And how I would feel if and when he tells me this went a little too far. That he didn't mean to give me the wrong idea.

For heaven's sake, why else would he tell me he'd never had a girl in his room? He was clearly giving me the first clue that he's not looking for anything serious.

A vision of Kerri racing in from the balcony the other night flashes in my head.

My stomach does that thing where it dips as a harsh realization hits me. He's made me feel safe and beautiful. He's made me feel capable of anything. He's managed to make me trust him.

And now he's going to tell me, "This was fun but I'm not interested."

I need to make sure I don't burst into tears when he does. I don't think I would, but I'm so emotional over what's happening with skating, the girls and my dad that one more heartbreak will destroy me altogether.

Making another determination I thought I was far from, I decide to go somewhere that used to be my safe space.

"Angelica," Coach Riggs calls out to me and extends his arms. He gasps dramatically when he looks over my shoulder. "You brought your skates."

I scrunch my nose. "I need advice."

He nods once and motions ahead. "Step into my rink."

Most days, during our sessions, Coach Riggs was like a therapist. He'd always know when something was on my mind and make me spill the beans. He'd remind me that the large, blocked out area where we practiced was a safe space and that I could tell him anything because he'd likely forget what we talked about the next day.

I put on my skates and meet him in our usual corner, far enough away from the junior hockey league practicing on the other side.

He points to the spot where he wants me to start. I position and he holds up his hand. "When was the last time you skated?"

Two days ago, at the Blades free skate fundraiser.

He nods. "Okay, give me a five-minute warm-up."

Remembering what he considers a suitable warm-up, I get into position and kick off.

He follows, staying in line with me. "How's Coach?"

"I'm not speaking to him."

"Why?"

"He called me out for lying to him."

"The devil."

"It's more than that and I can't really explain it. I just feel like I'm fifteen again."

"That's because you're living under his roof. It's natural to return to old

ways. He find a nanny yet?"

I laugh because it's the question of the day. "I'm not even sure he's looking. He just finds sitters who are young enough to not care who he is and are available on demand. The older ones are either more interested in him than the kid or looking for live-in, which he's made very clear he doesn't want."

"Understood. Sounds like it's not your problem then. What is that American saying? You make your bed, you lay in it?"

I sigh. "I'm not good at telling him things like that."

"Good." He stops, which calls for the end of my warm up. "Can you give me a double?" I'm not sure how much of it is a question. When he used to coach me, this is how he would tell me what he needed me to do next.

"As in a double shot of espresso from the machine?" I point to the selfserve café.

"As in a spin."

I get in position, and he moves behind me, holding my waist. "On three, Angelica." Pushing us forward, he counts off and if I remember correctly, he lifts on the third count.

On three, I jump at the same time he lifts and I fly into a double spin. I'm prepared to land on my feet, but he catches me and sets me down.

"I had it."

"You were off balance."

"So then I'll fall and try again, just like we used to."

He raises a brow. "Are you prepared to fall again? And get back up?"

"Maybe just...not in front of people."

"Olympic skaters fall all the time, Angelica."

"Not like that," I mutter.

"Let's try again. On your own this time. How's that boy of yours?"

"You mean Jace?" I ask, moving to my line.

"The hockey player."

"He's doing better, I think."

"You're helping each other?"

I push off, but only manage a single axel. But at least I land on my feet. "Yes," I respond.

"And maybe something more?"

"Maybe," I say, since it's easier to tell him how complicated I made things.

"What's the problem?"

"I think he wants to tell me he's not interested in anything serious. Or that this was a mistake."

"And you feel...differently?"

"I think I feel like I don't want to fall for something and then...get hurt again. I know it sounds stupid, but quitting figure skating was like ending a serious relationship." I stop and he guides me out of the rink.

"Water break. So you're avoiding him." He gathers.

"Until I figure out what I want—or until I'm sure I'm not going to give myself away that I want more. That would be really embarrassing."

"Why?"

"Because of the kind of relationship that Jace and I have always had."

"So you're delaying the inevitable instead of facing your fear so you can move on with your life...sounds healthy."



HAVEN'T SEEN ANGEL in three days. I told her we needed to talk, but she's being unresponsive and it's frustrating the hell out of me.

Tuesday:

Jace: *Game tonight. You coming?*

Angel: Not tonight. Good luck.

Wednesday:

Jace: Are we meeting up at the rink tonight? Or am I useless now that you've found your groove back?

Angel: You're not useless. Can't tonight. Maybe Friday?

Jace: Away game. Leaving Friday morning.

She doesn't respond to that so before I go to bed, I text her again and don't bother talking in circles.

Jace: *Need to see you, Angel.*

Practice is rough on Thursday since we're all gearing up for the game in Seattle. They kicked our asses last time we played them, and Coach has been in a mood all week—or more specifically, since the fundraiser.

Coach's pre-travel game lecture after practice is the same as usual except there's more frustration in it. "We're not going in there expecting to lose, guys. They're in the top of the league this week, but they're no better than we are. Don't let the scoreboard intimidate you." He rubs the bridge of his nose. "Get a good night's sleep. We've got an early flight tomorrow."

My teammates power out of the room mumbling to each other. I stand, following the herd out of the locker room.

"Knight." He nods his head back to the bench.

I pause and consider a snide comment but think better of it and haul my ass back to the bench. He sits on the one across from me so I know this isn't about the game or hockey in general.

"I'm not going to ask you what's going on with you and my daughter. She's gently reminded me that I don't control her life."

That's more than she'd said to me in the last three days, so I wouldn't be complaining.

Releasing a breath, I drop my head into my hand when I realize what he meant by that. I never had a chance to tell Angel I told Coach about our training. I wonder if she's mad at me because of it.

"But I am going to explain my concern to you in words you might understand."

"I'll try to keep up," I say with a glare I hope goes unmissed.

He clears his throat. "It wasn't too long ago when you found out about a relationship you weren't so supportive of."

That's low.

He holds up a hand. "Let's leave you out of it for a minute. In this analogy, Nick is...skating and Cora is... Angel."

I straighten my spine and rub my palms against my jeans.

"You didn't like it, but knew she loved him so you didn't want to keep her from something she *really* wanted."

He lets it settle in for a moment before continuing.

"Remember when he broke her heart? You kind of just...sat back and let it happen. As I remember it, she found a way to move on with her life—but what happened then?"

I slide my tongue in my mouth, hating where this is going. "She went back to him," I answer.

"And because I know you love your sister, you're afraid of her getting hurt again. More than the first time, because if she gets hurt again—there's no coming back. Not from a second burn. A part of her will be irreversibly broken."

"You don't have much faith in my sister, do you?" I scoff, knowing this has nothing to do with Cora.

His chin drops when he says, "She still wears them every day, Jace."

"I know."

He stands. "If she goes back into this before she's ready—because she's blinded by whatever it is you two are temporarily doing...and she gets hurt—I'm going to be really disappointed." He starts for the door.

"Coach."

He turns back.

"I'm not going to keep her from getting back on the ice, if that's what she wants. But I hear you."



I knock on the front door of Coach's house. It's highly inconvenient that the girl I want more than making this year's playoffs is living in the same house as the man who can't stand me.

But I need to get to the bottom of whatever is going on with her. Coach has been in a mood and Angel isn't speaking to me, so I assume things didn't go well when she got home Sunday night.

Collins usually stays late in his office the night before an away game.

Angel opens the door and looks at the bell on the side of the house. "We have a doorbell."

I glance at the tiny button. "I didn't see it. Can we talk now?"

Her eyes widen. "Now?"

"Please. This won't take long."

I notice her swallow before she steps back and lets me in. Even though I know Coach isn't home, I feel awkward as I follow Angel up the stairs.

"I know what you're going to say," Angel says when we step into her bedroom. "And you don't need to."

"I don't?"

She nods. "I know the other night at the arena was all out of the heat of the moment. Because I was...panicking."

I frown. Has she been worried?

When I don't respond or deny anything—because all I can think of is how much I've missed her—she shakes her head and walks further into her room, her fingers twining. She seems like she's panicking again. Or nervous about something.

"You told my father about our arrangement."

Right. That. "Yes. I'm sorry I didn't tell you. I just thought you had enough on your mind that night."

"Well, you should have. It would have been nice not to walk into his trap that morning."

I shake my head. "I'm sorry. I didn't even think about it."

"And don't flatter yourself, it's not like I was picking out wedding cakes." Her tone is suddenly very familiar. The Angel I'm used to but haven't heard in weeks. It has me intrigued.

"Come again?" I can't help the smile behind my question.

"I didn't mean to fall asleep in your bed."

"Angel—"

"It was late, and I had a long night, but you don't have to worry—I know it didn't mean anything."

The frustration between thinking she's been angry with me for three days to listening to my conscience and giving her space becomes too profound to disregard. I close the distance between us, cup her face in my hands and kiss her hard enough to never have to question what she means to me again.

She gasps for a breath. "Jace." In the split second it takes for me to hear the desperation in her voice, I press my lips to hers again.

"What were you afraid of, beautiful?"

"Nothing that makes any sense."

"Tell me," I say, brushing my lips against hers.

She closes her eyes. "That I'm just like anyone else."

The confession slices through my chest and I lift her, settling her on the bed. She gasps, but the heat in her gaze as she waits for me is unmistakable.

"I'm asking for permission this time, Angel."

"For what?"

"For me to show you that you're nothing like anyone I've ever met. How exceptional you are to me. How you've broken down every one of my walls. And no one will ever compare to how much I want you."

She blinks up at me. But I still don't have her answer.

"Well?"

She nods. "Show me, Jace. I want your hands on me."

I remove her leggings, peeling them off her body revealing a lacey blue thong. She doesn't flinch when my fingers brush along her scar.

I move over her on the bed and dip my hand under her shirt. A bare, perfect round breast fills my hand and I feel the hardened nipple press into my palm. She arches and moans with anticipation. Abandoning her breasts, I trail my hand down slowly and pause as I hook my fingers into her thong.

"Just my hands, Angel?"

She bites her bottom lip and shakes her head.

"Say it, Angel."

"Not just your hands. I want... your mouth on me."

With a grin, I lean down and whisper into her ear and swear I can feel the flutter in her stomach as I say the words I need to hear.

I pull back. "Loud and clear."

"I want you to fuck me with your tongue, Jace."

I stare down at her completely bare body. I've always known Angel to be hot. But she'll now be the hottest woman I've ever had the pleasure to make come with my mouth.

I run my thumb over her slick heat making her squirm. "I couldn't have said it better myself."

She giggles and I reach down to kiss her lips. The connection we have is intense and I like knowing that I haven't been the only one who feels it, the only one who wants this so badly, it drives us both mad.

I unbutton my shirt while I watch this hot as hell woman wait eagerly for me, squeezing her breasts, squirming in place. I pull my shirt down my arms and toss it aside.

I place my hands on her inner thighs and look up. "You better not get shy on me now, beautiful," I say, before spreading her apart, causing her to gasp.

She bites her lip as she holds my gaze before I place my mouth on her perfect pussy. I take my time, moving my tongue lazily. Keeping in mind that it's been a while since Angel has done this with anyone.

I squeeze her thighs as my tongue continues to linger and tease. She lifts her pelvis, needing more.

"Jace," she moans.

Instead of obeying her plea, I pull myself up and cup her face. "Baby, I intend for this to be one of many times I make you come, but I'm not rushing it."

"Y-you might have to work me back up again."

I grin. "Already one step ahead of you." Even when we're off the ice, we're competitive.

I move my hands from under her thighs and slide one hand under her bare

ass while the other strokes her bikini line.

"Keep them open for me baby."

She's practically shaking with anticipation as she grabs hold of her knees.

"Well obviously we're going with red velvet," I say, working her sensitive again with my fingers.

"W-Why not vanilla? Or chocolate?"

I trail kisses up her inner thigh again and pause when I reach her wet pussy. "Because you and I were never that black and white."

Without another beat, I slide my tongue over her, finding her clit and circling the entrance. With a moan, her hands go into my hair and she fights to remain still. My fingers curl into her flesh, holding her in place as her pleasure builds.

Her moans grow louder, and I know she's close. She grips the sheets with a wail the moment I slide two fingers into her. It throws her over the edge and she starts to tremble.

I suck her harder, I want to devour her just like this. I want her to feel how raw and hot we are together.

Most of all, I want to leave her tonight knowing that she will never feel like she's just like everyone else.

She pulls a pillow over her face and screams my name. Satisfying me more than if it were the other way around and she was on her knees.

I pull myself up and slide the pillow off her face. Her cheeks are flushed and I'm pretty sure I'm obsessed with this look.



E WIN SEATTLE TWO nothing, and celebrating is all anyone talks about in the guest locker room.

"Knight, what about you? The married chumps want to go to a dive bar for drinks. The rest of us cool kids are thinking Teasers Night Club or hittin' up downtown. You in?"

"Neither for me, thanks."

Ryan frowns. "Oh come on, man, don't go out with those idiots trying to get laid. Come out with me and the guys. We're not going to find any girls there looking to hook up with athletes, trust me. Stacy says it's one of the best."

Stacy is our social media manager. She'll usually tell us what's good in every town we hit up and what types of photos to send her or to post. But we can't do it without asking her and preclear our captions—which takes all the fun out of it.

It's ridiculously annoying.

"Thanks, but I'm headin' back to the hotel tonight," I say. It's not that I can't use a drink. I very well intend to order one at some point tonight. But I need to ice my shoulder and take a hot shower.

"I'll take a car back with you, I'm not going out either," Nick says.

"What? No captain?" Ryan complains. "You guys know we won tonight, right?"

Nick stands and grabs his duffle. "Yes, we were there. And I'd much rather wait to celebrate when we're back in our own town. Tonight, I just want to take a hot shower, order room service and call my girl."

Several players shake their heads at their captain—me included.

We're staying at the Grand Mile hotel, which is five star at its best. The service is impeccable. Coach is usually first to complain about hotel accommodations, and he seems just as impressed as we are.

It's no wonder the guy can't keep a nanny for more than a month, he finds something wrong with everyone and everything.

I take a longer shower than usual after icing my shoulder, then look at my phone.

Angel: Congrats. Also noticed you managed to stay out of the penalty box tonight—also a big win.

Jace: Aww baby, you watched the game. Careful, I might think you're getting clingy.

Angel: *I* watched a hockey game. You texted me twenty-seven times in the past four days.

She has a point. But I've got one better.

Jace: You counted.

I don't bother pointing out a critical loophole with that one because she thought I was ending whatever was going on with us.

And neither of us discussed it before I left her room Thursday night. She was too worried about Coach being home any minute. I wanted to tell her that I want this—that whatever this is, I want in. I don't want to question it. I don't care if we're rushing into something neither of us understand. Because the truth is, I'm pretty sure I've been waiting five years for Angel.

After she turned her back on everything and turned even icier than before, I thought I lost my chance for good.

I'm not sure what it is about her next text that makes me smile, but it does.

Angel: *I counted.*

My shoulder feels cool and soothed by the time I go downstairs to grab a drink. I find Nick at the lobby bar and take a seat next to him. "What happened to room service?"

Nick shrugs. "Cora went over to Angel's tonight so we only chatted for like a minute and we couldn't—uh..." He clears his throat. "What's your story?"

I glare at him and shake my head. "I wanted a glass—they only do bottles for room service." I look at the waiter. "Jack and coke, please."

"Put it on my tab," Nick adds before the guy walks off with a single nod. "I just ordered a few apps—probably too many. Want to stay a while?"

"Yeah, okay. I should probably eat something."

"Speaking of Angel, want to tell me what's going on with you two?" "It's complicated."

"I'll bet. I think Coach suspects something's up. Is that why he kept you the other night?"

"He knows that I've been helping Angel get back on the ice and... coaching her."

"Coaching her to figure skate?"

"No, just to help her get the hang of it again." I shrug. "I'm a good skater."

"One of our best," Nick agrees. "And Angel Collins, of all people, just accepted your help?"

"Like I said, it's complicated. And now...we're...spending more time together than on the ice."

"So that day, when Cora and I stopped by?"

"She really did come to tell me off, but I talked her into a workout."

"So what's the problem? I mean, besides the obvious." Nick points up as if Coach's room is above us.

"I don't want to distract her or...hurt her."

"What makes you think you will?"

I think about the analogy Coach gave me. About Nick breaking Cora's heart again. Because I let her get involved in something she might not be ready for.

But Angel *is* ready to skate again. It's been two years, and if she couldn't put it behind her during this hiatus, then she wants it. I'm confident that she's ready to get back on that horse. What she isn't ready for—is an audience.

"Just a little warning from her father."

"What did he say?"

I hesitate and then tell him what Coach said to me in the locker room to

make me understand his concern.

When I'm done, Nick twists his drink in his hands, focusing on the beverage. "Jace, I'm not going to hurt your sister again. There isn't a doubt in my mind that she's my future. She's a little young now, but in a couple of years, I plan to make that official."

I lick my lips but don't acknowledge his declaration.

"What's your point?"

"Well mainly I'm trying get my best friend to trust me again, but the real point is that sometimes, that second chance is what makes all the difference. Its where you right all the wrongs you did the first time."

We sit for a few more minutes, picking on finger food. "What if it wasn't skating Coach was referring to? What if it's a relationship with me, but he doesn't want to say it?"

"Maybe it's a little bit of both. If that's the case, you need to make sure that you and Angel are on the same page. That's the only advice I know to give from experience."

"What about Coach?"

He sighs. "Yeah. That might be a problem. But he'll come around."

"You think?"

"No, you're totally screwed." He takes a sip of his drink. "But career-wise, he can't do anything to you."

"This is my contract year."

Nick blows out a breath. "I know. But no worries. You're our lead defenseman, you're young, in perfect health." As if on cue, he slaps the back of my shoulder and I clench my teeth.

"Right."

After a minute, I ask the question that's been on my mind since I talked to

Coach. "Hey, Nick?"

"Yeah?"

"When you went after Cora—how did you know you weren't going to break her?"

He takes another sip and sucks his teeth as if knowing I'm not going to like his answer. "I didn't. I accepted the fact that I very well could. But I knew one thing for sure and that was enough for me."

"What's that?"

He looks at me. "That I wasn't about to let anyone else touch her."

I rub my forehead. "Remind me to never ask you anything like that ever again."

He grins and finishes his drink as he pays the tab.

I wouldn't admit this to my best friend, but I couldn't bear the idea of anyone touching Angel either.

In fact, I'm pretty sure something close to jealousy came over me when Angel admitted to touching herself. I became possessive in a strange way. It's why I needed to hear that she was thinking of me all those times.

Nick mutters something about heading up to try Cora again before he calls it a night and I order a beer for myself.

I debate on texting Angel or calling her, just so I could hear some of that sass before I call it a night. But then someone comes to sit next to me. I turn and find an attractive blonde in a tight-fitting dress. She's about as tall as Angel but doesn't hold the same beauty.

"Hi. You're Jace Knight, right? Buffalo Blades?"

I tilt my head. "You a hockey fan?"

"Huge. I missed the game tonight but heard you won—or that we lost. I'm Emily." She holds out her hand and I reluctantly shake it because I don't

want to be rude.

"Do you mind if I join you for a drink?"

I reach for my phone. "Actually, I was about to call my girlfriend and if I don't do it at ten on the dot, she'll start to worry."

"Right. Of course. Well, it was nice meeting you. Congrats on the win."

"Thanks."

When she walks away, I see Coach on the other side of the bar eyeing me and the girl suspiciously.

He smirks as he walks over, taking the empty seat next to me. "Is it always like that?"

"No. Usually I say yes."

Another grin. "You played well tonight."

Coach never gives me a compliment like that, so for dramatics, I glance behind me.

"Don't let it get to your head. It might have only looked that way because Seattle got overconfident tonight and sucked."

"I'll take it."

"How's your shoulder?"

I clench my teeth. I trust Angel to not have said anything but now that my secret's out there—with a Collins, no less—I can't help but be a bit paranoid.

"It's fine. Why do you ask?"

He shakes his head. "Just making conversation. I've been in the sports industry a long time. I've seen old injuries return too often to pretend it never happened."

I swing my head back. "Well, you can pretend it never happened because I got a clean bill of health months ago, so I'm all set."

"Good."

"Is that all?" I challenge.

"What else is there?"

"I would have thought you'd ask me about Angel."

"She wouldn't like that. And I'm trying very hard to not piss off my daughter any more than I already have."

"I know from experience, she's easy to piss off and almost always wins."

He leans in and whispers coarsely. "My experience is a little longer than yours. So, I have a little less leeway than you do."

"I'm just going to come out and say it, Coach. I like Angel. I'm not sure how much she likes me, but when we get back, I'm going to ask her out."

"Ask her out? Doesn't that kind of thing happen before a girl spends the night at your place?"

You're one to talk.

I bite my tongue and stay the course. "I want to tell you my intentions before I tell her and see if she feels the same."

"I remember you two hated each other." Is all he says.

"I think we'd both agree our feelings were misplaced."

"For five years? But you've skated with her a total of what, five times and now you're into one another?"

I don't respond.

"You don't think I'm one step ahead of you *both*, Knight? Maybe you need to give it some thought before assuming this is anything more than a production romance."

"A what?"

"It's when cast members start dating after doing a love scene on stage...it's brief and lasts about the duration of an off-Broadway run."

I shake my head. But don't bother explaining how wrong he is. This is

more than a heat of the moment fling. And after talking to Angel the other night, I've cleared up as much.

I have feelings for her. She's the first person I think about when I wake up. The only one I want to text when she's not around. I look forward to seeing her, helping her, reassuring her. I want to see her succeed. But at the same time, I'm scared to death that I'll do something fucked up and ruin it.

I can't say any of this to Coach. In fact, my instinct is to make a few comments about his choice of women, but don't. Mostly because one of them is Angel's mother, who despite what anyone thinks—that she's a real MILF—is completely fake and there's just something off about that woman. And the other one, a gold digger who dropped a baby at his door.

"I can see how you would think that Coach." I can hear myself giving up on this conversation.

He scoffs. "I'd be surprised if I turned out to be wrong on this one, Jace." He taps on the marble bar and stands. "See you in the morning."



ORA IS STAYING OVER, which has become somewhat of a ritual for us at least once a month when the guys are traveling for games. That way neither of us have to spend the evening alone and I have reinforcement when Rory wants to hide during bath time.

"I can't believe I didn't notice the girls railing on you at the free skate. They usually have smiles plastered on their faces, it's hard to tell anything is up."

"Yeah, they saved it all for me. I thought Kerri had nothing to do with it, until Jace told me she tricked him into following her to a bench."

Cora puts her hands on her hips. "So what are you going to do about it?"

"Nothing. I'm going to stay out of their way."

"Nicole and I don't support that plan."

"Nicole isn't even here. Besides, I'm not trying to cause trouble. If anything, I owe Kerri an apology for—"

"They fucked with your head, Angel. Retaliation is in order. The fact that my brother had a change of heart is no excuse to mess with you like that."

I shake my head. "I was never a vengeful person, Cora, and I don't plan on starting now."

She huffs out a breath. "But you'll still be sneaking into the rink at night to practice with Jace?"

"I don't know if we need to. I started going to the youth hockey rink to practice with Coach Riggins again."

"So no sneaking around and no showing up some bitches? Where's the Angel that was daring and snuck me into clubs when I was underage?"

"I did that one time and got in trouble for it."

"And yet somehow you had my brother grovel at your feet for yelling at you—teach me, oh wise one." She mock bows to me and I laugh.

"Seriously—you need to do something, Angel."

"I have no intention of ever being an Ice Girl again. I'm a figure skater, not a cheerleader. And besides"— I shrug with a smirk— "I wasn't offended by it."

Not after your brother came by and... set me straight.

"I hope not. Because you're gorgeous. And tall. With naturally beautiful golden hair. It's no wonder Jace has it bad for you."

"He does not have it bad for me."

"He does. And he's not the only one—I can see right through both of you." I brush her off. "It's not serious."

She's about to argue, but then frowns. "Yeah. Jace is a little—unpredictable, I guess. But still, I knew there was more to the story than you just coming over to throw coffee in his face for coming on you."

"We were working out just before you got there, that's why I was in my cami when you walked in."

"In the gym? So that's why Shania was playing."

I frown and she laughs. "So the app we use to connect the sound system notified me that Shania was played recently in the gym and I was like, that can't be right unless Jace has been a secret Shania fan all along."

"He didn't seem to mind it."

"Mmhmm. I'm sure he didn't hear or see anything else if you were just in your cami and leggings."

I press my lips together, remembering his eyes on me.

"So what's the issue?"

"I don't know. I like him but we haven't really talked about what this is."

"Well, what do you want?" she asks tentatively, and I'm sure I know what she's thinking. She's afraid I want more than he does.

"Right now, we're just helping each other," I say, digging in the fridge for more cheese and olives. Dad isn't a cheese lover, so it's always buried somewhere in the dairy drawer. "I hope I'm doing some good with his shoulder, he doesn't seem to be in as much pain after I started the holistic stuff that Coach Riggs used with—"

Shit.

I pull my head out of the fridge too quickly and hit my head against the freezer door.

When I turn back, Cora is faced away, playing with Scooter and refilling his bowl. She doesn't seem to react, seemingly infatuated with our dog.

When she turns back, she doesn't look at me. "You need any help there?"

"No." I blink. "Um... I found more cheese."

"Great. Shall we put on *The Lake House* again?" she offers.

"Yes. I'll grab the tissues."



I reach for my phone when it dings at an ungodly hour on Sunday morning. It takes a minute to make out the text message on my screen as my eyes adjust to the light.

Jace: *Good morning beautiful.*

Angel: I look like I just fell down an elevator shaft.

I drop my phone beside me on the bed and close my eyes again. When it rings suddenly with Jace's name, I groan and slide my thumb across the screen to answer.

"Ah, I see it now. You're right."

My eyes fly open and I jump. "You video called me?" I run a hand over my face.

"Hey, you answered. But I had a good reason. Okay, two. I had to see for myself what fell down an elevator shaft looks like on you. And second, I wanted to make sure there isn't anyone in bed with you."

I move my face from my hand. "What?"

"See when I picture a woman who just fell down an elevator shaft, I picture clothes disheveled, hair sticking up, breathless, you get it—in other words, the just fucked look."

"What is happening right now?"

He grins. "But—no you really do look like you fell down an elevator shaft."

"Why? Why so early?"

"I want to see you. The arena will be empty tonight. There's nothing going on."

"Jace—I told you, I'm going back to train with Riggs."

"Come on, Angel, we have great chemistry on the ice."

"Wanna take up figure skating?" I offer dryly, still trying to figure out where the right buttons are on my phone through blurred vision.

"We have great chemistry off the ice too—hey why'd you turn off your camera?"

"Because I'm going to the bathroom."

"Boundaries. I get it."

"Do you, though?"

"I want to see you. Go out with me tonight."

I unmute my phone after flushing. "Are you asking me out while I'm in the bathroom?"

"I wasn't planning on it. But nature called."

I run the water and wash my face. I don't know why I don't just tell him I'll call him back. But I like being on the phone with him.

When I'm back in my bedroom, I turn my camera back on. "What happened? You look normal."

"I washed up."

"Getting a head start for our date tonight?"

"Where are we going?" I ask.

"Cute. I'm not falling for that one."

I frown.

"Women like surprises, right?"

I roll my eyes. "I gave you a lot of women advice, it would in fact be a pleasant surprise if you remember them all."

"I do aim to please. I'll pick you up at eight."

I hang up and come down in my bathrobe to the kitchen for coffee.

It's empty, but I find my favorite glass coffee mug by the machine with a spoonful of sugar already in it.

Dad.

I pour the steaming pot into the mug, melting the sugar and smile.

Dad and I are somewhat back on speaking terms this week. I muttered some form of an apology for my part, which he told me was unnecessary. But I must have hit a nerve because he's been doing little things like this and has been careful about when he asks me to watch Rory.

Jace: *I miss your elevator shaft.*

Jace: *I mean your face. I miss your face.*

I laugh silently and put my phone down when Dad walks through the back door.

"Morning," he greets me, almost as cheerfully as a grumpy old man can.

"Morning," I mutter back.

He sets his bags down and glances at my phone. "What was funny? Another meme?"

"No. Jace is just being Jace."

He walks past me and pours milk into Rory's mermaid cup. "You two are more than just skating together, aren't you?"

I frown. "Are you really asking or did he already say something to you?"

Okay, passive aggressive. Not his favorite thing...

He releases a breath. "He didn't confirm or deny it."

I nod. "Well, then I won't either since I'm not sure what we are."

He nods and adds a straw to Rory's cup just as she hops into the kitchen in her nightgown and grabs it from him.

"You should probably know, I saw him turn away a really pretty girl this weekend."

I shrug. "She couldn't have been that pretty."

"She was to me. And you know I hate blondes."

"She was blonde?"

"I've never seen him do that." Then he walks around the counter to me. "Just be careful."

"Yeah, I'll be careful, Dad. Just like you were when you knocked up Mom before your rookie year."

"I don't mean that kind of careful. And for the last time, Angel. You were not a mistake."

I grab my coffee mug and head toward the back door to sit outside. "Just a few years early."



OU LOOK LOVELY," I comment shortly after I pull out of Coach's driveway.

Angel is actually in a dress. I don't see the color under her wool coat, but I know it's above her knee and dark. She's wearing legwarmers, which are tucked over the top of her boots like some sort of Angel-invented fashion statement. Her wavey blonde hair is down and I don't think I've ever seen her in lipstick or eyeshadow before.

"I hope a cocktail dress is okay since you didn't tell me where we're going. Also, I'm not skating in this outfit, so that better not be part of your plan tonight."

"You're not skating tonight. But I must be honest, I'm a little nervous about where I am taking you." I'm hesitant on taking Angel to the same place I took Kerri for our date but hope it doesn't backfire since Angel seemed like she really wanted to try the food there.

"You know we really do hate surprises."

I shake my head. "Nope."

"No, really. We hate them."

"You'll be fine. I won't be. But you'll love it."

She sits back in her chair and taps her foot nervously, then pulls out her phone. "Okay."

"What are you doing?"

"I'm just getting my emergency phone call on standby."

I grab the thing from her. "Give me that. Let me make one thing clear, you are not leaving tonight because of a sick aunt or a house on fire or your best friend crying over a breakup. Okay? You're mine until we finish our meal—and dessert."

She twiddles her fingers and pouts. "It was going to be a burst pipe."

"That's the best you got? Who was going to call you? If you say my sister, I'm turning this car around."

"Well since Nicole is still pissed at me for making her lie for me, it was going to be Rory."

I glance at her between keeping my eyes on the road. "What kind of soulless person are you?"

"Are we there yet?"

"Hmm? I'm sorry I was quietly trying to come up with my emergency excuse to bail, because so far, you've been a pleasure."

She smirks and settles back in her seat.

I pull up to Villamina's and glance at Angel before hoping out of the car. Coming around the front, I open her door and hold out my hand. She takes it and steps out, but I still can't read the expression on her face.

"Well?" I ask before making any moves to go inside.

She shrugs. "Well. It beats skating."

I take her hand and hand my keys to the valet, who eagerly takes them and

mutters into his microphone.

Stepping in, the manager is ready to greet us at the entrance. "Mr. Knight, we have your table ready just as you requested. I'm Marcus, I'll be taking care of you tonight along with our best staff."

Angel looks up at me. "I thought you didn't need a reservation."

"Not usually. But I had a few special requests."

The manager brings us to a prepared private table in a circular alcove by a window. A bottle of champagne is being chilled in the center. There is a silver bowl of strawberries and a wrapped bouquet of red roses tied with a blue ribbon sitting off to the side of the table.

Her eyes light and her lips part when she takes it all in as Marcus pulls out her chair. "Your special request?" she asks, looking up at me.

"If you don't like the champagne, we can get something else."

She shakes her head and smiles. "No, this is great."

Marcus pours for us and steps away.

"What's the verdict so far? Did I totally screw up by bringing you here?"

She frowns. "Did they forget our menus?"

"No. And you didn't answer my question."

She looks up at me, then scrunches her nose. "This is nice. But you know, I...I just can't do this. I thought I could but it's too hard."

I narrow my eyes. "What is?"

"You—you just look too much like my cousin Pete and it's super weird."

"What? You have a cousin Pete? With my face?"

She bursts into laughter. "No." She wipes at the corners of her eyes. "But that's better than a burst pipe, right?"

I shake my head. "That was terrible and also insulting." Her laugh is contagious, but I have to hand it to her, for a second, I really thought she was

bailing on me.

Our waiter comes by with two bowls, placing each in front of us.

Angel looks down and gasps. "Is this their lobster mac and cheese? Is it amazing?"

"I didn't order it that night."

She looks up at me. "Why not?"

"Because if it was terrible, you wouldn't be there to blame."

She looks at me like she doesn't buy it and lifts her glass. "What should we drink to? Making playoffs? For someone to knock Garrison's teeth out finally?"

I laugh. "No, we're definitely making playoffs, so let's not waste it on that. And Garrison is a dick, but I believe karma will get that guy."

"So what then?"

I hesitate because I don't know what she'll make of it, but then say it. "I want to drink to...finding you at the arena that night." I almost wince because I shouldn't be into this kind of fate, destiny bullshit. And now wish I went with something less...romantic.

She lifts her glass and with four words, obliterates my insecurities. "Maybe I found *you*."

We clink our glasses and take a sip.

"How's your shoulder?"

I release a breath and set down my glass. "Good. Although it's weird, Cora wanted to work out with me in my gym this morning."

"Why is that strange? Maybe she misses you."

"Unlikely, but one can hope."

"Do you miss her being around?"

"The house does feel...empty, I guess. But I like the quiet. I still worry

about her. But Nick keeps reminding me that he's got it."

She digs a fork into her mac and cheese and moans the moment it reaches her lips. "It is amazing," she whispers. "You've been raising her a long time."

I look up at her.

"I'm sorry, I've heard Cora's version of it and always wondered what yours was—you don't have to answer—we can totally go back to normal date stuff, like 'oh what kind of champagne is this' or 'so what's for dessert'." She lifts her brows suggestively.

I chuckle, enjoying watching her get a little nervous with me.

"No, it's fine. What I've been telling anyone who asks, is Mom died and Dad and I did whatever we could to raise a vulnerable adolescent. But the truth is something I'm sure only Cora and Nick know." I clear my throat. "Dad mourned for a long time. But you'd never know it because he kept himself busy. Always picking up extra jobs anywhere he could. We didn't need the money as much as we needed him at home. Or at least Cora did. He wasn't there when Cora was feeling sad or when she asked questions or when she needed...woman advice. It's not like he'd know any better, but can you imagine having to tell your older brother certain things because you technically have no one else? I had to look this stuff up, I don't know if I was doing it right, I was afraid she'd end up—well, the opposite of who she is today."

"He didn't just abandon Cora, he abandoned you." She seems to take my lack of response as confirmation. "Did you ever confront him?"

"I didn't have to. He knows. Cora is a very forgiving person."

"What about you? Have you forgiven him?"

"I'm not as forgiving. Just ask my best friend." I grin tightly.

"Do you think you ever will?"

I shake my head. "He doesn't need it as much as I don't need to give it. Nick on the other hand...maybe. Because contrary to what my father did, Nick is making Cora happy. So, I guess I'll come around."

I see her face fall slightly and take her hand. "Are you alright?"

"Hmm? Yeah. I'm good. This...this is really good." She takes another forkful but seems to have lost her appetite.

"Hey." I rub her hand until she looks up at me. "Why don't we finish these and get out of here? Take dessert to go."

She nods and swallows and my chest tightens, because I don't know what I said to upset her, but she clearly is. I pull back and motion for a check before turning back to her. "I'm not ready to take you home yet."

She smiles. "I'm not ready to go home yet."



Jace opens the car door for me and I hop in, telling myself to get a fucking grip before he comes around the driver's side.

His words are in my head, and I can't stop thinking about how I almost ruined everything by slipping to Cora last night. I can't let something like that happen again.

I like Jace. He confided in me. Sure, I sort of called him out on it, because unlike most people, I pay attention. I can tell when someone is uncomfortable on the ice. And he has definitely been in pain. Thinking that I might have broken his trust hurts me to the core. We barely got through twenty minutes on our date before I had to get all weird on him.

I want to tell him. I want to tell him I almost slipped. Or that I did but luckily, she didn't hear me. But I'm afraid it's only for selfish reasons.

To clear my conscience.

Or maybe to hear him tell me not to beat myself up over it.

"I bummed you out there, didn't I?" Jace says when we walk into his house.

I swipe my face. "I guess this is just a little strange. Us getting along in a completely different way."

He grins. "You don't know how to act like you like me?"

I feign relief. "Oh good, you understand. I'm finding that part exceptionally hard."

He pulls me against him. "I've got something exceptionally hard."

Laughing, I push against his chest. "Oh good. You're still in there somewhere. I was afraid I lost you to all this sweet chivalry stuff."

"You liked it, and you know it."

I press my lips together because I really did like that side of him.

"Blueberry cheesecake?"

I nod and follow him to the kitchen. He keeps the lights dim and takes out two small forks.

"Thank you for sharing all that with me. I now know there's a human in there somewhere."

"Part human, part beast."

I raise a brow and take a bite of delicious cheesecake. "What exactly makes you a beast?"

He dips a fork into the cake and takes a bite, his eyes answering the

question and it makes me blush.

"Are you trying to warn me?"

"Why would you need to be warned, Angel?"

My eyes dip to the pastry and I'm suddenly very thirsty. I've heard rumors of Jace Knight being 'big' but never paid attention to it. Rumors will always be rumors until proven and I never intended to get proof.

"Can I ask a personal question without you stabbing me with that fork?" My eyes lift back to his. "I make no promises."

He inhales. "Two actually. Why is it that your last time was over two years ago?"

My smile fades. The exact timeline is something I shared with Jace the last time he was in my bedroom. But to my defense, I was delirious from the best orgasm of my life to think about how to answer if he asks me why.

It was the last time I felt confident with my body.

It didn't take a therapist to tell me that. But his question makes me swallow hard because I want to be honest. I should be honest. He has been with me. And he's been so good to me so far, it makes me want more.

"I only ask because if there's anything you're not comfortable with, I want to know."

My smile returns and my heart melts. He comes around the table to me and takes my hand.

"I'm sorry. You don't have to answer."

I twine my fingers in his and stare at his chest. "After my accident...I didn't just lose interest in skating. I lost interest in anything that puts me—and my body—in a vulnerable situation."

Damnit.

He's going to think I'm a scarred basket case and isn't going to touch this

with a ten-foot pole.

He pulls me off the bar stool and looks down at me with a frown. "I will never be the guy who puts you in a vulnerable situation."

Well, at least he's letting me down gently.

He lifts my chin. "I'll be the one to worship every inch of your body exactly where and when you want me to—without you even telling me. I'll be the one drowning in you, not the other way around, baby." He grazes my cheek. "If you give me that chance."

Words—if I even had any—are caught in my throat, but I nod.

"Do you have a curfew tonight?"

I shake my head.

"Angel?" He searches my eyes. "Will you spend the night with me?" His lips spread into a smile. "I want there to be no misunderstanding that I want you—I want you here. In my home, in my bed, and waking up next to me tomorrow morning."

I bite my lip. My eyes drop back to his chest. "You said there were two questions?"

He hesitates and asks. "I might be pushing my luck asking you this, but—" "I'm not telling you who it was."

His brows shoot up. "Well, now I'm curious."

"It wasn't another hockey player."

"Less curious." He takes another breath then looks back into my eyes. "Did you enjoy it?"

I shrug. "I mean, it wasn't terrible—"

"Enough said." He takes my hand and brings me up to his bedroom without another word.

When it was spur of the moment, like the time in Dad's office or when he

stopped by to confront me on ignoring him, it was easier. There was passion and time was against us, but now, we have all night. It's just him and me. And I'm a nervous wreck.

I walk in, remembering the last time I was here, racing out at the crack of dawn. I turn to find him lingering by the door.

Grinning, he follows me in and takes my hand, bringing it to his lips. "You nervous?"

I scoff. "No. But you should be."

His brows jump. "Why's that?"

"Because you've got quite the reputation, Mr. Beast. So I'm walking in with high expectations."

He nods. "And that's supposed to make me nervous?"

I shrug, attempting to hide my own anxiety. And possibly stalling.

Yep, and if my therapist were here, he would call me out on it.

His eyes burn into mine, but it's not seductive, it's somehow tender with understanding. It makes my stomach flutter.

I brush off the toe-curling sensation and try to feign my oblivion to his effect on me and turn to sit on his bed. Or more like pounce.

He pulls me back to my feet and looks into my eyes before flipping me around and pulling the zipper of my dress. "Your ass looks amazing in this dress, by the way," he says as he turns me back to face him and peels the straps down my arms, letting the dress fall to the floor.

He turns and walks back to his floor to ceiling windows, pulling apart the curtains.

"What are you doing?" I ask as he walks to the dimmer and shuts the lights completely. It's dark now, with the only light coming from the moon shining outside his window.

He comes back to me and whispers, "Angel, I'm not going to touch you. Not until you tell me to."

"But I—"

He puts his finger on my lips. "I want you to make yourself come. The way you did when you were thinking of me."

"Jace—"

"I'll be right here. And I'll come to you when you ask. But I need you to relax before I do."

My stomach clenches, and I'm not sure I can do what he's asking. All the sensations I tried ignoring come, hitting me with double the intensity. It's having the opposite effect.

He sits back in an armchair and watches me as I close my eyes, sink into his mattress, and release a breath in the same instant my hand dips under my panties.

I'm surprised to already find myself so wet. His husky voice demanding I pleasure myself might have had something to do with it, but I can't be sure. I don't know if it's knowing he's watching me or the fact that I'm doing this in the bed of the man from my fantasies, but I am so deeply turned on. My pelvis jerks as I dip my fingers between my folds, releasing a soft breath. My eyes open and I lick my lips as my pleasure grows and try to contain the rocking against my palm.

I moan again and turn to face him. "Jace."

His eyes move from my hand to my eyes, but he doesn't respond.

"Jace. Oh—"

"What is it, beautiful?"

"Please."

He stands. "Please what?"

"Oh fu-"

"I want—I want you to finish me," I swallow. "With your mouth."

"That's my girl." He pushes aside my wrist and fully removes my panties. Taking control, he grips my thighs, pulling them apart before finding my clit with his tongue.

I sink deeper, writhing, twisting, and moaning as he lures out the pleasure I'm fighting because it's coming so fast. I scream his name at the peek of the longest orgasm I've ever had.

I'm still coming down when he moves off the bed, taking his already unbuttoned shirt off his back and lowering his pants.

Before climbing back in, he takes my hand as I look up at him. "Is this where you want me, baby?"

I nod and smile up at him, feeling completely relaxed and ready for so much more.

My fingers wrap around his biceps, clutching tightly as he hovers over me, kissing my lips softly. I bring my fingers up behind his ears, pulling him and his throat rumbles in response.

"Are you going to make me do that every time?" I ask, smiling lazily—not even caring that I'm being highly presumptuous.

"If I need to," he responds without hesitation. He pulls his lips off my chest and looks up at me. "Or...if you want to."

He moves up and brushes his lips softly along my earlobe. His warm breath teasing my skin, making me shudder.

"You're beautiful, Angel," he says. "I can watch you do that all day."

He pulls me up for a deep, hungry kiss, stretching an arm around me. His fingers hover around the clasp of my bra as if he's waiting for permission.

I nod against his lips and it slides off my shoulders in an instant. His eyes

search mine, but he frowns as if he can't find the answers he's looking for. "How do you feel?"

I know he wants to know if I'm feeling vulnerable being so exposed. Pushing aside my pride, I look back at him and say, "Right here, in your arms...I feel perfect."

He kisses me deeply, moving over me, positioning himself between my legs. The intensity of his kiss builds and his breath hitches. "Fuck, Angel." His raspy breath heats the side of my face as the tip of his cock starts to slide between my thighs. "I don't know if I can be slow and gentle like I'd planned. Kind of backfired after watching you."

I chuckle softly. "Good thing I don't want you to. I like that I turn you on."

"From day one, Angel." He claims my mouth again in an all-consuming kiss. I lift my hips off the bed and he groans, entering me, but freezes before going any further. "Aren't you curious if the rumors are true?"

It's a warning, but I don't need one. I haven't waited two years to take anything slow. "Surprise me."

He hesitates, then dips his head to my nipple, pulling and sucking hard, making me writhe with pleasure and anticipation. I feel myself grow wetter, my need building uncontrollably.

With a hard thrust, Jace is fully inside me and I gasp. He starts slow, but quickly picks up speed, making good on his promise as he continues to plunge into me. I open wider for him, taking more of him, needing every inch, urging him with my hips.

He kisses my neck and holds me still. "Christ, baby, you're making me crazy. I want to make this last." He sweeps his lips down my neck as his hand moves to my knee, pulling it up, opening me wider, sinking deeper as he presses into me, each thrust drawing out louder moans from us both.

I clench around him as I feel another orgasm build. "Jace." I rise off the bed with a cry. Pleasure spreading through me like wildfire as I come completely undone.

His back bends as I feel him pulse inside me before he starts to shudder with a loud groan, coming violently.

Our breathing is hard, and he smiles down at me as he brushes hair away from my face. "You good, beautiful?"

I nod. "I'm good."

"Stay right there." He disappears into the bathroom, rolling the condom off him.

I don't move when he returns a moment later with a wet cloth for me. "When did you put that on?" I ask, referring to the disposed condom.

He grins. "When you were distracted."

I look up at him as he admires my body on his bed. "Should I even bother with this, because it looks like you're getting ready for round two," he quips.

I snatch the towel from his hands. "Give me that."

He slides in next to me as I wipe myself clean, loving how warm the towel is.

He's propped up on his elbow watching me.

"What?"

"I'm in love with watching you come."

I bite my lip and toss the towel at him before I say anything I'm going to regret in the morning, like *that was the most amazing sex I've ever had.* "Well, the show is over, go home."

Wrapping me in his arms, he settles me onto his pillow and holds me.

I'm so warm in his arms. I love listening to the sound of his breathing. Feeling his fingertips stroke my back. He's made good on his promise. He worshipped every inch of my body tonight. And I didn't feel an ounce of vulnerability.

I wake to Jace's fingers stringing between my legs again. "What are you doing?"

"Waking you up."

"I feel like we just fell asleep. Can't you wait?"

"I can. But I need to see you come again."

I groan and moan at the same time as he finds my G-spot.

"Jace." My voice betrays what I'm about to say but I say it anyway. "I can't again. I'm good."

"This one will be different. Turn around."

My eyes widen. The room is bright, and my body is no longer hidden in the dark. "No."

"You're hurting my feelings. I thought you trusted me."

Sighing, I turn around as his hands circle my hip and dip between my legs again. I'm already worked up because he's been touching me for God knows how long before I woke up.

I moan and move my hips as he continues to work me into a frenzy with just his fingers. It's incredible how wild I am so early in the morning. He trails bites along my shoulder from behind me as I come hard once again.

Holy shit. If I didn't know any better, I'd say he was in competition with himself on how hard he can make me come every time.

"Jesus. What was that?" I'm breathless and delirious.

He turns me. "That was your boyfriend ruining you for anyone else."

I look up at him. "Boyfriend?"

He grins. "It kind of comes with the territory of making you off limits to anyone else."

Butterflies swirl in my stomach and I release a breath, as he bites his lip, showing the first sign of insecurity I've ever seen from him.

Smiling, I pull him against my lips. "Well good morning, boyfriend."

He kisses me back and rolls me on top of him. "One more."

"Are you fucking kidding me?" I roll off him and whack him with a pillow.

He laughs. "Ah, the wonders of a true relationship. Denying me sex."

I pull the covers over me. "No. Now be a doll and close the curtains."

He grunts and jumps off the bed, darkening the room. Then jumps back in and huddles under the covers with me. "That was a bad move, sweetheart."

I shriek and laugh, letting him have his way with me again.



HE FOLLOWING FRIDAY, I'M at Bridges with the guys after an early game.

Angel and I have kept our relationship on the DL from everyone for a few days. Except for Cora, Nick and Nicole, who, each in their own way, are impossible to keep anything from.

She's been at the skating rink training with Riggs nearly every day this week, mostly evenings since she teaches at the university during the day.

Jace: Everyone's here. You on your way?

Angel: Hey. Not tonight. I had to fill out some forms for next semester on my availability so at the rink now, practicing late.

Jace: *Did you have dinner?*

Angel: *Yes. With my partner earlier.*

Partner?

The last time I checked, Angel did solo's, she didn't have a partner. Who the hell is this guy? Maybe she meant Riggins.

Yeah. She must mean her Coach.

Still, the idea of some guy's hands on Angel's waist, holding her, guiding her through the ice as she leans into him makes me queasy.

Ryan nudges my arm. "Another beer, Knight?"

"Nah, I'm good."

"Too late." Ryan sets a pitcher down and sits beside me. "Help me with this. It's massive."

I frown at my teammate. "What's your deal? You used to finish these in thirty minutes flat."

"Megan. She asked when I'm coming home. Wants me to bring organic Doritos. Where am I going to get that? Pregnancy hormones are driving me fucking crazy. She wants nuts, but they're not salty enough. She's hot, so I turn up the AC. Then she yells at me for keeping the house so cold. Anyway, I just got this pitcher but can't stick around for it."

"Second trimester?" Coach comes up behind us and holds up his halfempty pint glass."

Ryan fills it eagerly. "First."

"First?" Coach chuckles. "You're in trouble—must be a girl."

"That's what we think. Our first was a boy. I didn't hear a peep from Megan until she was in labor."

Coach seems nostalgic for a moment. "Angel was a feisty one too. She made her presence known early."

Ryan laughs. "What about Rory?"

Coach's grin fades and I step in, knowing Coach wasn't around for that pregnancy. "Hey, Ryan, on second thought I'll take that refill." I hold out my

glass. "And I think I heard Nick about to order one of these too, so you could probably dump it on him."

Ryan rolls off the seat. "Sweet. See you guys tomorrow. Good game." He nods at the older man. "Coach."

Coach takes his seat beside me and I almost wish I left him hanging with Ryan's question.

"Thanks for that."

I shrug.

"You know I didn't come up here to chime in on Ryan's woos. I was hoping to chat with you about Angel."

"I'm not sure I should be saying anything—kinda got in trouble last time I did."

He chuckles. "Considering she's slept over your place three times in the last week, I'm going to assume you had the decency to make it official?"

"We have."

He nods and I get the sense he's not done talking about Angel but choosing his words. "I don't like it."

"Can I ask why?" I hate that I wish he was happy for us. Or hell for Angel finally being happy, but I'm pretty sure it's more her happiness I'd like his blessing on. "I get you don't like me, but—"

"It's not that I don't like you, Jace. You're one of the best on the team, the fastest in the league—and yet somehow, you're the one we're all worried is going to end up on the news for knockin' up a girl from Florida or Vancouver."

My gut clenches. Because at one point, I was worried about shit like that too. Didn't stop me though.

"That's been your thing, hasn't it? And I minded my own business but now

you're dating my daughter. My Angel, who only recently wrapped up her therapy sessions from twice a week to once a month."

I frown.

"Oh, did you not know she's still in therapy? Yeah. Well, when you think you've lost everything you dreamed about since you were little and become scared to death to ever do it again, most people would highly recommend therapy."

"Coach—"

"But no, you just twist your little spats over the years into some crazy sexual tension. How long do you think that'll last?"

I stare into my drink.

"A couple weeks? Months? Long enough for her to believe this could be something real?"

I've heard enough. I wet my lips and turn to face him. "Your daughter isn't as weak as you perceive her to be."

He leans back. "Ah. So when you do break her heart, she should be just fine, right?"

"Coach, I'm not going to sit here and tell you the things that Nick tells me about Cora. Because I'm still not sure I believe him. I understand your worries, I do. But as far as I'm concerned, I'm not asking for your daughter's hand in marriage tonight, so we really don't need to be having this conversation."

I walk away and immediately know that this wasn't the best way to handle my girlfriend's father. In fact, it was undeniably the worst. But I'm done trying to justify our relationship to the man who has had it in for me since I stepped foot on the Buffalo Blades Arena.

I don't bother saying my goodbyes and make a b-line for the youth hockey

center to see my girl.

Angel

"That was better," Riggins calls from twelve feet away. "Angel, you're still a little too stiff."

That's because my ex-boyfriend keeps undressing me with his eyes.

"Riggs." I skate up to him out of earshot of my old partner. "Look, I was fine skating with Alex twice last week and practically all of this week, but you didn't tell me this was going to be a regular thing."

My coach glances at his other student, who looks particularly annoyed. "Angelica, sweetheart, I don't feel comfortable with you doing your spins solo quite yet and my legs aren't what they were twenty years ago. Having you skate together makes sense. For you, especially."

"Then I won't spin," I whine. "Riggs, I don't need a partner."

He sighs. "You don't need a partner, or you don't like him?"

I purse my lips.

"Get over it. And take advantage. Alex is good and he's available."

"Yeah, because he's an asshole and no one else wants to skate with him," I mutter as I skate back into position.

"You done bitching about me?" Alex chides.

"For now," I sigh.

Alex Channing was my old figure skating partner back when I had partner routines, even though many of my competitions were solo. When Coach Riggs booked me on partner-only competitions, it was always with Alex.

Alex is the exact definition of a rich pretty boy. I'm still not sure what his parents do, but he comes from money and good genes. High cheekbones, the silkiest hair and a murderous smile. His perfect white teeth could be in a commercial. Frustratingly enough, he could probably pull off modeling underwear, but I wouldn't be sold.

Alex's arrogant personality killed my attraction to him. He used to be sweet and funny, and we got along great on the ice. Until we started sleeping together and he thought he basically owned me. Choosing our songs, changing up our routine. I finally dumped his ass and refused any more couple-only competitions.

"Try to keep up, Alex," I say as we kick off. He's behind me with his hands gripping my waist the way he should be and I'm bending into a spiral. He pulls me up and twists me to face him, keeping up with me as I skate backward with us face to face.

"I would but you seem to have put on a few since we last did this," he mumbles.

I pivot in his arms and bend my foot back, kicking him. He flies a few feet across the ice behind me.

"Ow," he whines.

I turn back, feigning shock. "Oops."

"What the hell was that?" Coach Riggs growls.

I look up, ready to defend myself and stop short when I find Jace standing behind the plexiglass glaring at us.

Super.

I hadn't had a chance to tell him about Alex, but it's too late now.

"It's cool, I'm okay." Alex comes up behind me. "Angel was just reminding me how well we work together."

Riggings grunts and turns away from us. "Water break."

I release a breath, preparing myself, and step off to see Jace. I throw my arms around his stiff body and kiss him deeply. He doesn't kiss me back but he's not pulling away either.

"This is a nice surprise," I say, wincing visibly.

He stares down at me like he knows I'm full of shit. "Is it, babe?"

I glance back at Alex. "We can talk about that later."

"You didn't tell me you had a skating partner. When did that happen? Are you planning on competing?"

"What? No. I'm not ready and the only reason Alex is here is because Riggs doesn't want to follow me around the ice when I do my jumps."

Jace steps back and rubs his chin. He's looking over my shoulder and I know it's at Alex.

"Can we please talk about this later?" I plead in a way I know he can't refuse me.

He breathes a throaty growl. "Yeah. Yeah. Of course. It's not like you were ever involved with that guy."

I stare at him and bite my lip.

A slightly deeper growl. "You slept with him?"

"We hooked up a few times when we were—" I cut myself off because I know how it will sound.

"When you were skating together?"

"Jace, he's an arrogant jerk. He's just helping me until I can do this alone. Trust me, okay?"

He sighs and his whole body softens when he looks back at me. "I'm sorry." He pulls me back against his chest, kissing me properly, sliding his fingers around my neck. "Of course, I trust you. I just had a rough night."

"Oh no, did we lose?"

"You didn't watch the game?" he asks, his frustration resurfacing quickly. He's looking everywhere but at me.

"I couldn't, I came straight here from work and haven't checked my phone." When it doesn't appease him, I'm starting to understand just how rough his night might have been and that finding me here with Alex didn't help.

I hook my fingers in his hand and it relaxes at my touch. "Can I come by later...maybe I can turn the night around for you?"

"I don't know, Angel."

My face falls. "Jace, at least let me come by and explain. Look I'm sorry I didn't tell you about Alex—"

He finally looks at me and cups my face, kissing me softly. "Baby, you don't have to explain. It's not about that. And I'm not mad at you at all. I just —we should talk later."

"You're making me nervous. About what?"

He hesitates for a moment. "About your dad."

I sigh. "What did he say?"

He takes my hand. "I don't want to be the disrespectful asshole he thinks I am. Every time you stay over, I feel like we're just fueling his fire. I want his blessing—not to rub it in his face. That's why I'm not sure if you should come by tonight."

I release a breath. "So you're not upset about Alex?"

He scoffs. "No. I saw you whack that guy with your blade. You can take

care of yourself."

I smile and throw my arms around him. "I love that you trust me."

He rakes his fingers through my hair and kisses my forehead. "Call me when you get home? We'll figure this out with Coach."



It's almost ten o'clock when I get home. Dad is cleaning up the toys in the living room, which already makes me feel guilty for not coming home earlier.

"Hey."

He looks up. "Hey."

"Um...I'll get the kitchen," I offer.

"Already done. You had a long day though. You should probably get to sleep—oh Rory is in your bed. She missed you the last few nights."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I'll spend some time with her tomorrow."

"She's not your responsibility."

"I want to help, Dad. And she's my sister."

"How was practice?"

"Riggins has me practicing with Alex again. Because he's too old to keep me on my feet on the ice. It's a little insulting." "Alex, huh?"

"Yeah. Another one of my boyfriends you didn't like."

He releases a breath as he stacks away the last set of Rory's toys. "Different reasons."

"Does she really play with all of this stuff?"

"Nope. She scatters her things around and plays with a ball of slime for an hour."

"I don't know why you bother cleaning up."

"You sticking around?"

"Yeah. Jace thought it would be better if I stayed home tonight—something about not wanting to piss you off any more than you already are."

"Hmm." His brows shoot up.

"Dad?"

He looks over at me.

"I'm not going to break."

He looks down at my legs. "Noticed you haven't been wearing your leg warmers."

"Do you want me to put them back on? I mean, I know winter is coming, but—"

"No. No, you don't need them. You never really needed them."

"Dad. I'm fine. I promise."

He steps over to me and hugs me. "I know. I still don't like this. For reasons you won't understand. I'll go move Rory."

"Thanks," I say weakly, wishing I would understand so I could tell him how wrong he is.

Finally alone in my room, I take a long hot shower and get ready for bed. I put on my aloe socks to soothe my feet and make a mental note to pick up some more and leave them at Jace's place.

Once I'm settled in bed, I dial him with video. He answers almost immediately.

"Hey. How was the rest of practice?"

I shrug. "Alex and I hooked up by the water cooler."

He grins and shakes his head. "Cute. What else?"

"I actually ended it shortly after you left. I was tired."

"All good at home?"

I put on a smile. "Never better."

"Hey, what did you mean today, when you said I was making you nervous because I wanted to talk?" he asks.

I blink, a bit thrown off by the question. "It's just an expression. People make you nervous when they say they need to talk and leave you wondering."

Come to think of it, what was I afraid of?

"I don't want you to be nervous with me, Angel. If for any reason you are, tell me, okay? Trust me, I'm the least likely to judge."

I roll my eyes. "Yes. I have years of experience with you *not* judging me," I tease.

"I was flirting."

"You were using me as a demo of what *not* to do when flirting."

He chuckles. "You miss me?"

I shrug. "Nah. I'm good. This was a good idea, putting some distance between us."

"Don't get too comfortable. I want you back here tomorrow."

"What will we do?" I raise a brow.

He leans back in his bed, throwing his arm behind his head. "Well, when you thought I was pissed about Alex earlier, you said something about making it up to me."

"Hmm...you heard that huh?"

"You taught me to pay attention."

I laugh. "Fine. What do you want?"

"Surprise me."

I lick my lips. "Good night."

"Sweet dreams, Angel."



OVEMBER SEEMS TO WHIZ by and my relationship with Angel grows stronger. I know it's early, but I'm seriously considering asking her to move in with me. Maybe we can even pull off a 'well, we've been friends for years' bit but doubt anyone would buy that.

When I ask Nick for his thoughts, he proposes starting with a key to my place and taking it from there. And that the gentleman thing to do is offer unlimited babysitting services for Rory—if I really want to win over the old man.

When Thanksgiving creeps in, Angel and I make a solid decision to *not* spend it together since her mother is coming for her parents attempt to keep one tradition alive as a family.

According to my girlfriend, it always ends with the two of them fighting like they did when they were married—so it's best to keep me out of it, for everyone's sake.

Instead, I go to Nick and Cora's and make my famous butter herb turkey while the two of them barely manage the sides. I must have had too much

wine because I crack jokes about their future children starving to death unless they come to uncle Jace's for decent meals.

I end up falling asleep on their couch for what seems like the best sleep of my life until Max starts licking my face at the crack of dawn.

I groan and pull myself up, only to groan louder as shooting pain runs through my shoulder.

Wincing when I realize where I am, I stand and look around the den. Cora is standing in the kitchen watching me.

"You alright?"

"Yeah. Max uh...bit my nose." Sorry buddy.

She doesn't look at the dog but her expression is flat. I brush it off and point down. "What's with all these blankets?"

"I thought you'd be cold. Nick keeps it an ice box in here."

"I do too now that I don't have you cranking up the heat in the middle of Spring. Why are you up so early?"

"Because you're always up early. I thought I'd make you breakfast."

I laugh. "Okay. You can try."

"Shut up and sit down."

I watch her start up the stove, heating up oil and preheating the oven.

"Don't make too much. Just a coffee and then I'll go work out for a bit."

Cora focuses on the stove. "Maybe you should not today. You know, take it easy?"

"When have you ever known me to take it easy?"

She frowns and mumbles her response. "Never."

Her mood is off, and I think I know why. "Have some coffee, sis, I'll be back in a few."

Jace: *Morning. How was last night?*

Angel: *Morning. Delightful.*

Jace: What made it delightful?

Angel: No dishes were broken.

Jace: *Jesus. Okay. So what's the plan for today?*

Angel: *Shopping with mom, then Riggins wants to see Alex and me.*

Jace: Any idea what it's about?

Angel: I think so. How about you pick me up? Maybe watch our routine again? We're getting better.

Jace: Front row seats to watching you in your ex's arms? Count me in.

Angel: Come by around five.

I make a mental note to try not to act jealous when I stop by later. I've been watching them practice their routine on a few occasions over the past few weeks and it doesn't seem like Angel wants Alex to have any part of it. Almost like she's tolerating him.

But if skating with a partner is where she's most comfortable, then I'm not getting in her way.



I step into the youth hockey arena in my usual hoodie and sweats. Only a handful of folks, mostly the ones who work here, are not fooled by my disguise at this point, but I don't care. I sit on my usual bench watching as Angel glides onto the ice as Enrique Iglesias starts the lyrics to the song *Bailamos*. As usual, Angel waits a beat before entering and Alex catches her mid stride.

She's absolutely stunning on the ice. There's just so much more confidence than when we started nearly two months ago.

Each time I watch, I'm utterly lost in her movements. She's in a black leotard and stockings, but her leg warmers are on today.

At the near end of the song, Angel kicks off—away from Alex for her triple and falls. I'm on my feet but can't get on the ice. Riggins and Alex are already over there.

Angel stands and wipes the sides of her legs.

She seems annoyed but when she sees me, a smile touches her lips and she skates over to me as Coach calls it for the day and asks them to meet him by his makeshift desk on the benches.

"Hey," she breathes.

"Are you alright?"

"I'm fine, I was trying to break free and lost my balance."

"Why?"

She shakes her head. "It's nothing."

"Angel, what's going on?"

She's looking down and I know there's something she's not telling me.

She turns when Riggins calls her over, but I catch her elbow, keeping her with me.

"Alex makes me...uncomfortable on the ice. This is my routine, and he's trying to take the lead and he—"

"He what, Angel?" Her hands are shaking, and she's barely looked at me since coming over here. I think back to what she said about my making her nervous—which she clearly is right now as I'm pressuring her to tell me what's going on.

I release my grip, and lift her chin, finding her misty eyes. "Okay. At least tell me that I didn't bring those tears out because that, I can't handle," I tell her softly, picking one up with the back of my finger.

She releases a breath and closes her eyes. "He's been making comments like, 'you move better between the sheets'."

Rage simmers in my chest and I look over her shoulder. "How long?"

Her voice is small when she responds. "Basically since we started."

I glare at her and she turns away, ashamed. It breaks me seeing her like this. No one should ever make her feel so inferior. This isn't the Angel I know.

And love.

I put my hand on the back of her head and pull her close. "I love you."

She pulls back and looks at me. "What?"

"I know timing isn't ideal, but right now, I need you to know how much I love you. How amazing you are. How proud I am of you."

"Jace..." She reaches for me, and I embrace her.

"Don't you worry about a thing. I'm going to take care of it."

"Jace, no. What are you going to do?"

"I'm ending this because you deserve better." I walk around her and fight the urge to punch Alex in the face. If Coach didn't have it in for me now, he would when he sees charges being pressed against me.

"Riggins, a word, please?"

Riggs sighs and steps over to Angel and me. "What is going on?"

"Angel isn't dancing with that guy. Find someone else."

He glances at Angel understandingly, which surprises me. "Angel, is this what you want?"

She doesn't look at me. "I'm sorry. I tried to make it work, but I don't feel comfortable. I know you're just trying to help because I still can't dance alone, but—" She shakes her head. "Not with him."

He nods. "I don't have anyone else that's not already paired up or willing to step in to help you train." Riggs looks at me.

"No. He can't," Angel says quickly, glancing at my shoulder. "He's already got too much going on and he'll never get any rest with the junior hockey league always around this place."

"There's a holiday showcase in a month. It's for couples and solos. I was hoping you and Alex could perform. It's not a competition. It's mostly for entertainment. So the pressure would be off and maybe you could participate."

Angel shakes her head. "Maybe next year."

"Okay, I'll let Alex know."

She breathes a sigh of relief. "Thank you, Riggs. And tell Alex I said thanks, but no thanks."

He nods and leaves us alone.

Angel looks up at me and takes my hand. "Sorry I didn't say anything sooner."

I pull her against my lips. "You're not the one who owes anyone an apology, Angel." I flex my shoulder and she puts a hand on it.

"Are you okay?"

"Slept on Nick's couch last night. Haven't done my routine in like two days."

She tucks her hand in my arm. "Come on. Let me take care of you."

We're on my bed after Angel has carefully tended to my shoulder, and I'm so happy to have her by my side. I do love her. And it doesn't feel rushed. I've liked her for longer than I'd admit, lusted after her when I first found her back on the ice and over the past few weeks, fell madly in love with her.

"I have something for you," I tell her in the middle of a Tom Cruise movie. Reaching over my nightstand, I pull on the key chain and hand it to her.

"What is this?"

"Key to the house. If you ever need to get away or just want to stop in and surprise me in your underwear." I shrug.

"Jace. This is—" She sighs and looks up at me. "I love you too."

I wrap my good arm around her and pull her to my chest. "Plans for the weekend?"

"Just a girl's night tomorrow."

"Cora and Nicole?"

"No. Kerri and Chloe and maybe Maggie."

The scowl on my face must say it all.

"It's fine. Look, I feel bad that I pushed you and Kerri together and then high-tailed you away from her. I feel responsible." "You're not. Don't go." I'm pretty darn serious about this but I know I can't stop her.

"It'll be fine. I'll have muscle with me."

I raise a brow. "I'm not going."

"Not you. Nicole will be with me. I just want to make peace. It's been bothering me."

I brush back her hair and kiss her forehead. "I know it has, baby, but you don't owe anyone anything."

"I'll be back here by ten—eleven latest."



Inight and I've been worried about Angel going out with her old friends. The same ones who made her feel like shit just a few weeks ago.

I was wrong about Angel. She's always had a big heart. Always forgiving and choosing to make things right with everyone. It's a quality I've never had and likely never will.

Some people are just bred differently.

I glance at the clock. Almost midnight. Despite my combat with the sheets earlier to find the perfect sleeping position without my girl next to me, I managed to fall into a deep sleep.

Two months ago, I wouldn't have been caught dead sharing my bed with anyone—much less anyone who woke me up after a tough practice. But I'm relieved as hell Angel ended up here tonight instead of Coach's house.

Swinging my legs over the side of my bed, I stand and open my bedroom door, turning the lights on. The soft patter of footsteps I'm expecting doesn't

reach the stairs, suggesting that Angel might have stopped in the kitchen first before coming up.

Coming down the steps, I find her standing by the front door, her head is down, and she's visibly upset. Quickly, I scan the rest of her. She's in a black dress that hugs her body, her heels are in her hands and the moment I hear the soft sob, I'm in front of her, lifting her chin.

Pushing her blonde locks away from her wet face, I tuck them behind her ear and whisper, "What happened?"

She meets my gaze with teary eyes and my heart cracks.

I knew this was a bad idea.

All I want to do is fix this. Break the person who made her feel this way and then hold her until the pain goes away.

"I should have just gone home," she whispers.

I swipe at a stray tear. "I'll try to not take that personally."

She looks up at me again. "You were right."

"You met up with them hours ago, it took that long to realize I was right?"

She shakes her head. "Kerri didn't show up. The other two did. Hashed out their issues with me—told me I was fake, a terrible leader, and that I 'hurt one of my own'. Then they just stared at me and said they're waiting for my apology."

"What?"

She laughs a little. "Nicole started to shift off her seat and cracking her knuckles, but I stopped her. I stood and with a diabolic grin, gently reminded them what they actually do for a living. I played dirty. I made them feel just as worthless and insignificant as they tried to make me feel. And I succeeded. And I hated every second of it. I hated it because it's not who I am. It's not what the job ever was to me. We had fun out there. We loved cheering you

guys on. But—but I just wanted to hurt them—" She breaks down again and I pull her into my arms.

"Come here. I know, babe, it's not who you are. I wanted you to fight back but not if it was going to hurt you too."

She's miserable and I hate that I feel responsible. Lifting her, I carry her up the stairs and straight into my bedroom where I remove her dress and sit her on my bed. "Wait here."

I start the shower, getting it to the hot temperature my girl likes, and hang one of the mesh bags she'd made me over the shower head. Hell, if she can make this shit up as she went along, then so can I.

I peek at her from the doorframe of the bathroom, finding her in her undergarments and looking at my disheveled sheets. "I woke you." She pouts, making me want to suck on that bottom lip until it turns purple.

I hold out a hand to her and she takes it, entering the steamy room, breathing in the scent of lavender.

She bites her fingernail as if we've never done this before. Showered together.

I level a playful stare. "Guess we're giving you the full VIP treatment tonight." Moving behind her, I unclasp her bra, letting it fall to the floor and slide her panties down. Coming back around, I take her hand and step her into the shower.

"It's nice and hot for you."

"For me? You're not joining me?"

I cross my arms and try to hide my grin. "You think you're being rewarded for tonight? I warned you not to go." It might sound harsh, but I think a little game of teasing might be just the distraction my girlfriend needs.

She pouts and steps under the warm spray. I watch her through the glass

door. Her eyes close and she inhales the soothing scent again, letting the water soak her hair and body. I wait until I see her shoulder tension dissolve. The pouring drops washing away the negativity she dealt with tonight.

Finally, she fills her palm with two pumps of shampoo and lathers her scalp. My hand goes to my dick, and I turn to grip the edge of the counter. But it does no good. I can still see the soapy suds trail down her body through the mirror as she lathers up and down. Her eyes are still closed when she brushes past her mound and repeats like she's stroking herself.

My throat rumbles with a groan and I turn to watch her. She's bent over, running soap over her legs. Her eyes open and she finds me with my boxers down and my hand over my length.

There's a twinkle in her eyes as she steps back and leans against the cool tile, watching me before her hand trails down her body slowly. I know when she's reached her clit because her mouth drops. I'm about to lose control if I don't get in there and finish her off myself.

"Who's punishing who, Knight?"

I pull the door open and stand in front of her. Her body is flawless. She's fucking perfection all around. The notion that anyone could make her feel worthless is tough to grasp.

"What do you think you're doing?" I ask.

"Making you regret not joining me. Too bad for you, I'm almost done." Her voice is playful again. I feel like patting myself on the back for bringing my girl back in record time.

I step in fully. "You weren't even close," I say, pushing her back against the wall. She's completely calm now, her focus only on me. I've got her back and I'm not letting anyone else hurt her ever again.

I pull her leg and place her foot on the pedestal. I reach down and run my

fingers through her folds before pulling away.

"Jace."

"You're clean now. Rinse off."

"Have I ever told you that I hate you?"

"For the last five years. Now rinse off."

She runs a soapy hand over my chest, and I silently note that it would be a hell of a lot easier to torture her if she weren't touching me and she's refusing to cooperate.

Pulling her under the spray, I rinse us both off, keeping hold of her. I take over, my hands running all over her body to wash away every last bubble. Then I shut off the water and lift her in my arms.

Within minutes, we're both dried off. She's wrapped in one of my towels practically pouting as I brush her hair.

"This isn't what I had in mind for making me feel better, Jace."

I hold her face in my hands before pressing my lips against hers. "You're going to be the death of me, Angel. Get on the bed."



NIGHT." THE BARK IS from Coach as I step out of the shower after practice.

Collins covers his eyes when I step into view. "Put some clothes on and meet me in my office."

I wrap a towel around my waist. "Why?"

"A few questions. Five minutes." He walks off before I have a chance to ask what about.

It's been a week since I've seen Angel, mostly because of both our schedules. Now that she's skating solo, Riggs is practically doubling her hours at practice. And I'm paying the price for my protective actions.

I'm worried that I might have prematurely ended her partnership, but I couldn't just stand by and let her get harassed.

Besides, going solo is what Angel wants. It's always who she was, why not guide her back in that same direction?

I try to push down thoughts of Angel as I walk into her dad's office, but it might be hard considering what we did the last time we were in here.

"Jace. Have a seat." Collins rarely refers to me by my first name. I'm not the only one in the room. Another man—serious, thin, and holding a briefcase—is also in the room. He wears a stethoscope around his neck.

I turn to Coach. "Did I miss an evaluation or something?" I know I didn't. And I don't have one scheduled.

"No. You didn't miss a thing." He clears his throat and pulls up to his desk. "Except for a few passes."

I frown. "What? When?"

Ignoring my question, Coach looks at the man. "This is Dr. Roberts, he's a friend of mine. I've asked him to look at your shoulder. The one you injured late last season."

My gut twists and I practically seethe. "We usually get notices for these things."

"I figured you might not want an official one." He glares back, daring me to read between the lines.

"Right. Fine. Go ahead." I pull my shirt up and over my head.

Roberts starts a visual examination first, then presses fingers into my skin around the sore area. It doesn't help that I just had practice and feel every stab like an unnumbed dental procedure.

I bite the inside of my cheek when he presses on the tenderness and release a steady breath.

I keep my face even when I look at Coach. I don't flinch. I don't even blink. But he still motions for Roberts to stop instantly. "That's all, thanks, doc."

I want to ask him if he enjoyed that, but I don't feel like speaking. Roberts leaves and Coach and I have our very own face off in his office.

"How long have you been hiding the pain?"

I stare at a pen on his desk and don't bother lying at this point. "It came back a month after I finished physical therapy."

He sighs and sits back in his chair. "Jace, you can't keep playing like this."

"I can and I have."

"I can't let you."

"Why don't you just get to the point so I can get out of here."

He stands, turning to the wall behind his desk. The same wall I used when I brought his daughter back from her panic attack. The wall where I made her come for the first time.

Angel's skates aren't here. She keeps them with her now.

"You're in your contract year."

"I'm aware of that," I fire off, not that I was expecting him to say this to me today, but at some point soon, I was expecting it.

"I can't let you get back on the ice. Not knowing you're in pain every time you play."

My jaw locks. "For how long?"

"For the season," he shoots back. "And since you're injured and haven't fully recovered after therapy, you'll likely not be extended."

I nod. "Or receive a contract offer from anywhere else," I mutter. A reality I've been dreading but knew was coming.

He stands and paces his office. There's tension and a heaviness I'm picking up from him and it's making me anxious. "Christopher Marcs is number one prospect for next season. Plays defense. He's gunning for your position."

I swallow.

"He's not in pain everyday..."

I nod and look up at him. "And he's not dating your daughter, right?"

He stares at me but doesn't deny that it may play a small part in where this is going. "You'd make a great mentor for him while you're on the bench. And that's if you get extended."

"Is that why you brought in someone who would keep this off the record?"

He leans across the table. "You're a superstar when it comes to your ability to fly across the ice like no one else, but I doubt it'll be enough if the executives hear you might never be the same." He shrugs. "Maybe I could talk to Roberts about your options."

Something about his tone makes it sound like he's about to make a bargain. I've never known Coach to do anything like this. He's always clean and by the book. It's uncharacteristic which makes me nervous because when someone steps out of their comfort zone, it usually means they're desperate.

I release a breath I've been holding and stand. "What do I do?" I ask, hoping the guy has a shred of sympathy for my career.

He meets my eyes, but there's hesitation in them. Maybe even fear. "You could start by breaking up with my daughter."

I frown, jerking my head. "That's not even a question at this point, sir."

His brow twitches then jumps like he's surprised I agreed without blinking.

"Let me clarify something before you look at me like a complete asshole. Normally I would have told you to take your threats and shove it because I'm in love with your daughter. But clearly, I've been fooling myself."

"What are you talking about?"

"She's the only one who knew," I shout. "And I don't give a damn what you think you saw, I never show my pain. A trick I learned a very long time ago when you're trying to be strong for your kid sister. I didn't even flinch when your guy touched me. You already *knew*." I push the chair, kicking it to the floor.

Collins eyes it but doesn't move.

I shake my head. "She told you."

There's a beat before he speaks, staring at the tile floor as he does. "It doesn't matter who told me."

I pull open his door, having enough of this.

"Jace, wait."

"Don't worry. I'll be in a suit for Monday's game, prepared to be benched."

"Sit down. I'm not done," he howls.

I close the door and lean against it, waiting for his last blow.

"This doesn't leave this room. That's why I brought my own guy. When they come to me in a few weeks, because of what I know, I can't recommend you to be resigned with the Blades but if you go back to therapy—under the radar—this doesn't have to get out either."

I shake my head and storm out of his office. I want to get in my car and drive as far as possible, but I'm in no state. Instead, I sit behind the wheel and curse because there's no way to fix this.

I won't get any sleep tonight if I don't talk to the one person I need to.

My fingers fly across my phone as I pull up my messages.

I scroll past Angel's new message until I find the name I'm looking for.

Jace: Can you come by tonight? Need to talk.

Nick: *I'll be over in an hour.*

I start by telling my team captain about the pain from my injury returning and I've been hurting since the start of the season.

It's a strange relief but also gut-wrenching having to tell him this after hiding it for so long.

Nick is leaning over my kitchen counter, sighing heavily but listening until I'm done. I tell him that I'm aware of the impact it may have had on my performance and how it might have affected our team, our losses and apologize for not telling him sooner.

Being the best friend I've always known him to be, he tries to look for a shred of silver lining or anything that might help me. But we both know the facts.

When a player returns from an injury, there is that possibility his strength and productivity decline in the seasons following his return to the ice.

"This isn't good. This isn't good at all." Nick runs his hands through his hair. "I can't even call anyone to ask about this. What's ironic is that the first person I would have called for advice is—"

"Coach. I know."

"What a fucking dick."

I lean against the wall. "Don't tell Cora for now. I don't want her to worry. You know how sensitive she was about my getting hurt."

"Yeah. What are you going to do about Angel?"

I told Nick that Angel was the only one who knew other than Riggins. As much as I want to believe it was the old man who told him, it doesn't seem likely.

It had to be Angel. It's possible that she didn't mean it intentionally to hurt my career. It's possible that she just wanted me off the ice and told him something he should know.

Either way, it's a betrayal. So I tell him the only thing I can at the moment. "I don't want to think about Angel right now."



 \mathbf{I} SEND JACE A text after I finish practicing at the center with Riggs and ask if he's free to meet up for dinner later.

It's the third text he doesn't respond to. The first one was last night while he was at practice to see if he wanted to chat before bed. The second was this morning when I sent a picture of myself just out of bed since he claims to love the look so much. In the photo, I manage a small smile with a smoldering look.

Not going to lie—kind of stung when he didn't reply to that one.

If it were two months ago, I'd have freaked out from my insecurity. But because it's Jace, and I trust him, I don't doubt him—which I'm sure he'll appreciate.

His husky words are in my head. Where he tells me I never have to feel nervous with him. That I should trust him and share things when I'm feeling weird about it. Between making me feel special the first night we had sex, to understanding why I couldn't tell him about Alex, and just being my everything when I needed him to be, I'd be a fool to doubt him now.

What Jace and I have is unparalleled. And he reminds me of this every day.

On my way out, Coach Riggs stops me. "Angelica."

"It's still just Angel, Coach."

"Fine, listen, the showcase I was telling you about is three weeks away. I need to finalize the performers. Are you positive you're not interested? Remember, no judges. And you can probably use the same song you and Alex have been dancing to."

The faith he has in me going up there alone is heartwarming and hard to say no to. "I need to think about it, Coach. I don't think I'm ready, personally, to perform in public. Even if it's not judged or scored. I know you're eager for me to get back out there, but I'll wait."

"Okay, if you change your mind, you know where to find me."

I smile and wrap my arms around him. "Thanks, Coach. You didn't have to take me back, but you did. I know I've been difficult, but—"

He gives me a squeeze. "Always one of my favorites. I'd train you for free if I didn't have to pay rent."

My stomach clenches when I shower hours later and check my phone, still nothing from Jace.

Given I have no plans on a Saturday night because my boyfriend is MIA, I offer to hang out with my little sister.

"Hey, Rory," I chirp when I head back downstairs. My hair is still wet, and I've already settled into my pajamas for the evening.

"Angel, wanna play with me?"

"Hess trucks? Really?" I look at Dad sitting on the couch, reading a magazine.

He doesn't look up from it. "Well, I gave up on having a boy, so she'll have to do."

I laugh. "It's cool. Girls can play with Hess trucks, and drive 'em too. Or date a guy who drives one..."

He sets his magazine down. "Are you here to bother me or play with your sister?"

"Oh, come on, I'm just having some fun with you."

He sighs as if the weight of the world is on his shoulders.

"What's wrong, don't you have a date or something you could be doing while I hang out with Rory?"

"No."

I don't call attention to the fact that Dad doesn't date much. He goes out with a woman about as often as I go to the dentist.

"Well, you should. Then maybe one of us could get laid tonight," I mutter.

"Please don't talk to your father that way."

"Sorry." I pout. "I'm just annoyed Jace has been avoiding my texts...and one phone call."

With the same firm scowl on his face, he stands abruptly, tossing his magazine down. "I think I'll go for a drive."

Dad returns an hour later and if possible, he looks even more distressed than before.

Rory's asleep and I'm staring down at a text from Jace.

Jace: Hey. Let's talk tomorrow.

"Dad, where did you go?"

"Just had to go for a drive. Clear my head."

I toss down my phone. "It just seems odd that you and Jace are both acting very strange."

Yeah, I'm back to being fully paranoid.

He shrugs. "I'll talk to you tomorrow. It's been a long couple of days."

"I'm not getting any sleep." I stand from the couch, my heart in my throat.

"Not until someone tells me what the hell is going on."

He scoffs. "You know, it would have been nice if someone told me what's been going on but as usual, I'm the last to know."

"What are you talking about?"

He takes a step into the living room and leans against the wall. "Found out someone on my team has been hiding an injury. You know anything about that?"

There's a beat before I respond because I'm struggling to take a breath. "Wh—why would I?"

He glares at me.

"He told you?" It comes out as a whisper, or maybe shock because I just don't understand. Jace has been hiding this, working past the pain because it's his contract year. If they find out it's worse than they all thought, he's done.

"No. He didn't tell me." His voice is gravelly and his eyes drift to the side. "I had one of my doctors come in and examine him."

"Why?" I practically shout. My eyes sting, knowing what this could mean for him.

"Because I had a suspicion."

The tears I've been holding back come streaming down my face. I've been pushing down this sick feeling all day, convincing myself that everything's good and we're solid. We're *in love*.

But it's finally caught up with me and pouring out. "I don't believe you. And I'm willing to bet he didn't believe you either."

His jaw locks and he runs a hand over his face.

"What did you do?" I ask.

"I did what was right. For everyone."

"What does that mean?" I shout, not giving a damn if I wake his bastard child upstairs.

"It means that I did him a huge fucking favor. He'll be fine."

"Do you know that for sure?"

"Of course not. Nothing is ever definite for an injured athlete, Angel."

I shake my head, refusing to believe this could be it for him.

I swipe at a tear. "Does he think I told you?" I ask quietly, because I don't want to hear the answer to that.

He licks his lips. "Yeah. I think he does."

"Did you tell him he's wrong?"

He stares into the darkness outside the window.

"Dad?"

"No."

My mouth drops and I step back, in shock. "Why?"

He pushes off the wall. "It was either that or telling him that his kid sister came to see me in hysterics that her brother is in pain, and no one is doing anything about it."

I fall back onto the couch. "Cora."

"That's not all, Angel."

I pull my hair away from my face, my chest aching.

"I don't think Jace is good for you. Plain and simple. But I don't think anyone is good for you. The ideal guy I had hoped you'd find doesn't play hockey. He sits behind a desk, wears suits, wants three kids and two dogs. You wouldn't meet him until you were twenty-nine or so."

"Get to the point, Dad."

"In the heat of the moment...in my office yesterday, I told him to break up with you. In exchange for my keeping this hidden until we find a solution."

Anger simmers in my chest. It's so profound, I can't see straight. My vision goes blurry, and the nausea is overwhelming. "You did what?"

"He said something in response that made me question what kind of father I am. So I just went to see him. I hope I made things right. I'm so sorry, baby."

I'm in too much pain to speak. I want to ask him what Jace said, how Dad thinks he made it right. But my voice is gone. There's a clog deep in my throat and I can't seem to drag it out. I can't breathe.

"Angel." He starts towards me, and I jump off the couch, shaking my head. He pauses and backs up. Knowing when to give me space.

Stay away from me.

How could you?

Those words just don't make it out no matter how hard I try.

With a final apology, he retires up the stairs, leaving me alone in the dark.



On Sunday morning, I'm a zombie. I manage to brush my teeth, my hair, put on something sensible—if a hoodie and matching sweatpants count as sensible—and even accept the cup of coffee Dad prepared for me before he made himself scarce. Rory included.

I text Jace back finally that I'll stop by this morning. I don't know what I'll say, but I know I need to do this. As angry as I am at him, Dad's right. How do I tell him it was Cora?

It's the first week of December and thirty degrees out. But I don't feel cold. I feel empty, scared, betrayed. But not cold.

The clouds threaten a thunderstorm, so I grab an umbrella before heading out.

I don't know if I can do this. I wish I didn't have to. I wish—I wish Jace were here to make it better. To make it easier on me. The way he had when I thought he'd be furious to find out about how Alex has been treating me on the ice. He felt my anxiety, he held my face, kissed me softly and told me he loved me. He told me not to worry, that he'd take care of it.

And he did.

He did something for me that I didn't have the guts to.

The same way he did with the Ice Girls ganging up on me at the fundraiser. He protected me.

And now I'm afraid to face him.

And I didn't even do anything.

Except tell Cora something I shouldn't have.

I ring the doorbell and wait. Swallowing hard.

Nicolas answers after a minute.

"Nick, morning," I breathe, forcing a small smile.

His expression is hard when he looks back at me. "Hi, Angel."

"Umm...I'm sorry to drop in like this. Is Cora here? I was hoping to—"

"She's still sleeping."

"Oh." I look around, wondering if I should wait. I need to talk to Cora before I see Jace.

Nick folds his arms across his chest and leans on the doorframe. "But I don't think Cora is the one you should be looking for at the moment."

I blink, preparing to respond, but he doesn't give me the chance.

"He trusted you, Angel. He's done nothing but help you, why would you betray him like that? Do you have any idea what this could do to him?"

"I—"

"Was this some sick plan you had the whole time? You getting that final win after a five-year battle?"

"What? No. Nick, I didn't tell—"

"Then who did, Angel?"

I bite the inside of my lip. "Um..."

"Oh, I sure hope you have something better planned when you go see Jace."

I shake my head. "I don't."

He looks utterly disgusted. "I didn't think so. Is there anything else?"

"No." I turn as another roll of thunder sounds in the distance, and I jump in my car.

Jace is only a three-minute drive from Nick's and I'm not sure I can do this. I didn't get to speak to Cora, so I have no idea what I'm going to say.

I look at our last text message exchange, almost as if to confirm if I did in fact text him that I'd come by.

Yep. Did *that* for some reason.

I scoff. "If Jace were here, he'd call you out on being a coward. Now get out of the fucking car."

Since no one else is speaking to me, talking to myself might just be my new thing.

I swallow the hard lump in my throat and knock with one hand, while the other fumbles with the keys to his place in my pocket, not daring to use them.

Jace pulls the door open within seconds. Or at least it seems that way because I barely had enough time to catch my breath. He's wearing a clean t-shirt and dark sweatpants. There's a light scruff along his jawline and I fight the urge to touch him.

"Can we talk now?" I ask.

His jaw is clenched, but he steps aside, letting me in. He stops in the hall and leans against a wall. He doesn't look at me. He isn't making this easy like all those other times.

"I'm sorry," I breathe.

He turns to me. "I'm just curious how it happened. Did you plan it? Was it

an accident? Do you and your dad conspire how to finally get rid of the one guy you both hated for years?"

I move toward him and his eyes drop to my feet. As if daring me not to come any closer. I stop in my tracks. "Jace. I don't hate you. I didn't—it was an accident."

He nods and swallows painfully. "You're lying."

"I'm not. I swear, I didn't betray your trust—well I—"

"It's okay, Angel."

My heart wants to feel relieved when he says the words, but the tone behind it is deceiving.

"It's okay. You don't have to explain because I don't care why—not anymore. You hid the part about you having a partner—who was your ex, no less. Then you chose to not tell me he's harassing you with sexual comments while you're literally in his arms—but hey, I get it—this one just…slipped."

"Jace."

"Well, that little accident cost me my career with the NHL."

I shake my head and curse myself for letting my tears surface. "That's not true. We can fix this. My dad can fix it."

"Your dad is the one who wants me out," he grits. "And you helped him make it happen."

I press my lips together. How can his voice be so soft and yet so slicing?

I swallow and pull the key from my pocket. He watches me place it on the console. "Thanks. I'm sure you can see yourself out." He disappears down the hall and toward his kitchen.

I hold my breath, afraid to make a sound until I'm back outside. The thunderstorm is now in full force, and I slide to the side of the house as the rain beats down on me. My shoulders drop and I release the sob I'd been holding.

I'm cold now. The adrenaline keeping me warm has gone and I'm shivering as I race across his driveway to my car and start the engine.

My tears are hot and relentless. I know on the drive back home, this is the first of many days I cry. Then it'll turn to anger. And eventually, I'll accept it and move on.

If only there was a way to speed up this process.

I don't want to go through it again.

But this pain is different. It's so much deeper.

Isn't it?

When I quit skating, I was upset and humiliated. But it's nothing like a broken heart.

I take a hot shower when I get home. A long one as I fight more tears. I sit on my bed and stare out the window. Eventually, I stare into space and fall in and out of sleep.

I ignore knocks on my door and Dad asking me if I want dinner. I ignore a text from Nicole and a call from Cora. I ignore a reminder from Riggins about practice tomorrow.

Finally, it's Monday morning. The rainstorm continues and is supposed to last through the evening.

"The first day is always the worst of it, right?" I mutter to myself, pulling out of bed.

My therapist would disapprove of my reasoning. But I know better now. I've done this before. I've sulked and fell into a depression. Even started a

whole new path so I never had to think about skating again.

I'm not doing it again. I'm going to pull myself together.

I stare at my bed before crawling back in. "Just not today."



I hear the sound of a car door slamming and Rory outside my window. She'd left for the game with Dad a while ago, and from what I know, the game is still going, so I take a peek to see what's going on.

When I see Nicole with her, I race down and pull the front door open.

"Hi." Nicole waves happily, holding an umbrella over Rory. "Someone was feeling queasy at the game."

I pull the door open further and bring them both in. "Come in." I bend down to my sister's level. "What's going on, sweetie, you okay?"

"My tummy hurts."

"Oh. You didn't have one of those hotdogs at the game, did you?" She nods.

"Okay. I'm going to make you some warm sweet tea, come on."
I turn back to Nicole. "Thank you."

"My pleasure. The game was kind of dull, but Coach couldn't leave yet so I offered—told him I was on my way here anyway."

When we step into the bright kitchen, she looks at my face. "Sooo… you've been crying. What's going on?"

I glance down at Rory, who's now staring at me with wide eyes. "Are you sick too?"

"Um, yeah, sugar. I might be sick too." I mix her tea and set it on the counter to cool.

Nicole scans me and puts a hand on Rory, swiping the mug from the counter. "How about we get you ready for bed while this cools, and let Angel make herself some sweet tea too."

A few minutes later, Nicole is still in with Rory and I'm back in my bedroom with my tea, which is surprisingly soothing. I also grabbed a granola bar since I haven't eaten all day and may go down for a second.

Nicky slips into my room and is quiet when she sits at the foot of my bed, watching me.

"I take it you haven't spoken to your brother lately?" I ask.

She frowns. "No. I've been at my apartment the last few weeks. I rarely stay at Nick's anymore."

I sip my tea.

"What is going on, Angel?"

Desperately needing to speak to a human that doesn't hate me, I tell her everything. Starting from the real deal Jace and I struck when we started meeting at the rink. I tell her about Kerri being a diversion, about his shoulder, my slip when Cora was over and what went down with Dad downstairs Saturday night.

When she asks me what happened on Sunday morning, I break down but

eventually walk her through the most painful day I've had in my entire life.

She's quiet for a moment, staring out my window at the rain.

"What are you thinking?" I finally ask.

"I hate to say this but I'm glad that you didn't get to talk to Cora yesterday."

I look up at her from the tissue box.

"This is much bigger than you, Angel. This is between a little sister and the older brother who raised her. The one who cared for her when everyone else abandoned her, including her very much alive father. Cora has always worried about how much Jace sacrificed for her. So I don't blame her for taking matters into her own hands to finally take care of him. It's something I would have done."

I sigh. "I know you're right. I don't hate her. To tell you the truth, I'm a little worried about her."

"Are you kidding? It's Jace. If there's one person he hates to upset its—oh sorry."

I release a small laugh. "It's fine. I'm glad. For both of them."

"What's next for you? You're still skating right?"

I nod. "I think I'm going to take a few days off."

Nicole frowns. "And what? Stay here with granola bars and tissues? You're getting your ass back on that rink tomorrow."

"Tough love," I grumble. She rubs my knee and I pull myself off my bed. "Do you mind if I stay with you for a few days?"

She beams. "I would love the company. Is your dad going to be okay?"

"Yeah. He tells me he needs my help with Rory but he's always hiring a sitter anyway. I feel pretty useless here most days."

She hops off the bed. "Well come on over, I'll put ya to work."

I laugh. "Let me just put a few things together. I'll meet you at your place later tonight after Dad gets home."

"Riiiight. There's a kid in the house."

"You worry me. Really," I tease.



I SHUT OFF THE audio in my gym and step into my sauna. Then immediately want to step out because the herbs she hung in here nearly two months ago hit my senses like a ton of bricks.

I manage to sit through it for twenty minutes before hitting the shower and making a mental note to dispose of anything that reminds me of her.

And with the same thought, I can't wait to dry off so I can get to my phone. I wrap a towel around my waist and reach for it, scrolling down to her name in my messages. Every day it drops lower with every new message I get from everyone *but* her.

Finding it, I click on the image of her lying in her bed that morning. My heart tugging every time I look at it. The corner of my lip stretching a tad when I take in that smoldering look she's giving me.

I wait for the anger to come. The same one that's been growing weaker every day. Which means I'm growing weaker.

"This'll be fine. I'm still benched as of tomorrow's game for a made-up concussion. I'll be better tomorrow," I assure myself.

I'll be stronger.

It's been ten days since I've seen Angel. Since I told her to see herself out. When I didn't hear her car door slam seconds later, I turned on my front door camera, watching her stand against the wall as the rain poured down on her.

Relieved when she finally raced to her car because another few seconds and I would have been out there dragging her back in, drying her off and kissing her senseless.

It's what I tell myself I would have done.

It's what the man I was trying to be for her would have done.

My doorbell rings and I glance at the clock in my kitchen as I toss my uneaten dinner plate in the trash.

Need to fucking delete that photo.

Makes me lose my appetite every time. Because I hate myself for missing her.

I pull a clean t-shirt over my head before opening the front door.

The hell?

Nick and Cora are standing outside my door. It's not surprising for them to stop by for a visit, but it's the look on their faces that has me concerned.

"What's going on?"

Cora steps past me into the house. I look at Nick with a scowl and he just shakes his head. We both follow my sister into the living room. She looks troubled and I'm growing angrier by the second if someone doesn't say something soon.

Crossing my arms over my chest, I turn to Nick. "Why is she upset?"

Pulling his eyes off his girlfriend, he turns to me. "It's not me this time." He takes a breath. "Look uh...Cora has something she needs to tell you."

I frown as he walks around me, catching my sister's face in his palms and leaning down. "I'll be right outside, okay?"

She nods and her face falls again.

What the hell is going on?

Nick steps outside and I'm rooted to where I stand, glaring at my broken-hearted kid sister. She's gazing at the enlarged painting above the fireplace of her drawing. "Come here." I take her hand and lead her to the kitchen. She looks like she's been crying, and I don't want to upset her even more by demanding she speak.

"I love that painting," she starts softly. "You're going to have to get rid of it soon and get something more fitting for that room."

"Never. It's my favorite thing in this house." I pour hot water over the chamomile tea bag and hand it to her.

She looks at it and presses a hand to her stomach, like she's going to be sick.

"Oh my God, you're pregnant."

She bursts into tears. "No. I wish that's all this was." She looks up at me. "I'm so sorry," she sobs. "I—I went to Coach Collins about your shoulder. I told him you were still in pain and that you shouldn't be playing. I thought I was helping you, but now you might be kicked off the team—or…or move away because of it." She covers her face, sobbing.

Looking at her from across the counter, my instinct—no matter what is bothering her—has always been to fix whatever is wrong.

And I don't know how to do that now.

A million things run through my head and it seems like forever before I

respond. At least I know it is to her.

"Cora."

Her red, puffy eyes are glued to the counter, and she shakes her head vigorously.

"Cora, look at me," I breathe softly.

She looks up, but there's anger in her eyes now, not despair. "You lied to me, Jace. You said you were better. You said it healed and that you were good as new. You've been suffering for what, six months now? Are you insane? You don't know what kind of permanent damage you could be causing. You don't care. All you care about is hockey and playing for as long as you can."

Before I know it, I'm standing in front of her, embracing her as she shoves hard against my chest before sobbing into my shirt. "I'm sorry." This time the apology comes from me. I stroke her hair tenderly before pulling back.

"Cora, I need to know how you found out."

She blinks away with guilt, and I have my answer. "She—she didn't mean to tell me. It slipped."

I inhale a sharp breath and grip the chair beside me. "Angel." It's the first time I say her name out loud in ten days.

"Jace." Her small voice brings me back and I run my thumb against her cheek, swiping at a tear. "I should have come to you."

She should have, but I'm not going to make her feel worse. If there's anything I hate more than betrayal, it's my sister upset—because of me.

"It's okay. We're going to work this out, I promise."

"How? You can't leave."

"Who told you I was moving?"

"Nick said it's one of the possibilities."

He's not wrong, but I'm not going to tell my sister that now.

"You're right. I wasn't honest about my recovery, and I could have done some major damage, but the good news is, I didn't. I'm going to need surgery and I might miss the rest of the season, but I'm going to take care of this."

"You will?"

"Yes. Please don't be upset. I'm sorry I made you worry."

"What would you have done if I had come to you?"

I know she's looking for something to make her feel better, so I give it to her.

"Probably that you had nothing to worry about and continued playing through the pain."

She nods. "So, you don't hate me?"

"You're my kid sister. I'll always hate you a little bit." I flick her chin. "But I'll love you more."

She smiles for the first time in what I realize has been weeks and looks at me tentatively. "Can I...stay in my old room tonight?"

"I would love that, but why?"

"I think...Nick is mad at me. He's playing it cool, but I know he's disappointed that I went to Coach without talking to him...or you."

My jaw clenches. "I knew he'd let you down eventually. Want me to go rough him up for you? Nailed him pretty good that first time."

She shakes her head. "No. These things happen. You get mad, work it out. It doesn't mean he loves me any less. I'll go let him know I'm spending the night." She kisses my cheek and rushes out of the kitchen.

I reheat leftover dinner, my appetite coming back now that Cora is here and joining me. Eventually, she settles into her old bed, in a room I've left untouched, and invites me to watch one of our favorite shows. When she's asleep, I shut down the TV, cover her and step out.

An hour later, I'm still in my kitchen, staring at that last photo of Angel on my phone. One I'm positive if she'd known I'd be staring at so much after we broke up, she'd have never sent.

Broke up.

More like berated her and accused her of setting me up.

Tossing it down, I start cleaning the kitchen before shutting down. It's one in the morning and nothing is getting resolved tonight.

There's a knock on the back door. It's dark, but I can tell it's Nick from the dim lighting in my backyard. Pulling open the door, I scan him in his pajamas and look at my watch. "Four hours. You couldn't make it four hours."

He gives me a sheepish look and scrunches his nose. "What can I say? When you love someone, nothing can keep you away."

I leave the door open for him and walk back inside. "She's asleep in her old room."

He nods. "You good?"

I shake my head. "No. Cora's right. I wasn't thinking. Not about her, or myself. I'm going to take care of this."

He nods but his voice wavers when he speaks. "Yeah, I suppose."

"She did the right thing, Nick."

He doesn't respond. Keeping his hands in his pockets, he looks at me. "You going to call Angel? Because...I sure as hell need to."

"No." My answer comes fast and flat.

"Why not?"

I run a hand through my hair. "I said things—I don't know if I can take back." Gripping the edge of the bar, I release a breath. "I think I finally get

what Coach has been trying to tell me."

"You mean the breakup he instigated?"

I shake my head and at this point, I'm not even sure I'm talking to anyone when I whisper, "He was only a small part."

Coach made a poor decision, but he was right all along. His analogy. The validity of his concerns that she'd end up hurt.

He shrugs. "It happens. You disagree and you work it out. It has nothing to do with how you feel about each other."

I scoff. "That's what Cora said...or something like that."

Nick glances up the stairs, a smile touching his lips. "Mind if I head up?"

I shake my head. "No funny business. I'm right down the hall."

"We'll try to keep it down." He winks and heads up.



I 'VE BEEN STAYING AT Nicole's place downtown since that Monday after the worst weekend of my life. I waited until Dad had gone to bed before leaving my room and loading my car. I left a note by the door that I'm moving out and will be back for the rest of my things another time.

Which I now regret because I don't know how soon I'll get an apartment.

A big part of me feels guilty for not being there to pick up Rory from school or help Dad keep her busy while he makes dinner.

But what he did to Jace—to me—still hurts. It's ironic now that I think about all the times he promised to protect me from getting hurt. To love me and keep me safe and warm. When he's single-handedly responsible for the greatest pain I've ever experienced.

Nicole plops back over to the couch and hands me a small carton of ice cream and a large spoon.

"A soup spoon, really?" I look up at her holding a similar size spoon and carton.

"I picked these up for us the other day. Every time you broke down, I sat here and thought to myself, 'Man, I wish I had some sorbet, right now'."

I chuckle. "Gee, thanks."

"How are you feeling? Get to the angry stage yet?"

"Maybe in between hurt and angry."

"So...what you're telling me is...more Keanu movies?"

I nod with a sheepish smile.

Halfway into the movie, Nicky and I are curled on the couch with our hair tied in loose buns on the top of our heads.

"Oh, I have some cool cucumber masks we should put on tonight."

"That does sound refreshing."

Nicole pulls off the blanket and slides on her slippers. "Pause it...not that I'm into this romantic B.S. but you know, I want to see what happens."

She places her sorbet on the coffee table when there's a knock on her door.

We exchange glances and I shrug, not expecting anyone to be here for me. "If it's for me, tell them I'm dead," I whisper before she pulls it open.

"Hi..." My Dad's voice comes from the door and I'm on alert, sitting up. I can only see Nicole from where I am and her expression is flat, nothing like the rosiness that touches her cheeks when she usually sees this man. I had no idea that older men were Nicole's thing but then again, my dad seems to impress women of all ages. "Is Angel here?"

"No," she says, but nods her head simultaneously.

"Alright. Um...is there anything you can tell me?"

There's a beat before she answers, and I can tell she's avoiding looking at me. "That she's safe and...she's fine."

I hear him release a breath. "Good. I'm glad."

There's silence by the door and Nicole finally speaks. "Do you want me to tell her anything? You know, when I see her."

"Yeah. Actually. Uh...I'm not good at leaving voicemails...I tend to ramble and it's never a good look for me. Would you tell her I miss her? And that I'm—so very sorry. I know she thinks she comes second to me after Rory but it's not true. I love Angel. She's ...well she's my angel. The light of my life. For a while there when she was younger, she was the one that gave me reason to keep out of trouble. To be strong, present, able." I hear him sigh. "And when she... got hurt two years ago...I lost my way. I wasn't a good father to Rory or a decent Coach. I had to accept the reality that I failed to protect my little girl. At some point after I...set her free, as they say, she got hurt and I let it happen."

Nicole shakes her head slightly but doesn't say anything.

"It's why I asked her to live with me. Not because I needed a live-in babysitter. I was just so worried about her after her accident — it's no coincidence I asked her for 'help' a month later. I wanted to take care of my baby girl. Who stopped my heart when she went flying across the ice."

There's a pause and a deep breath on the other side of that door. The side I'm happy I can't see.

"She's my everything, Nicky. Always will be. Rory—well she's a handful. But I can manage. What I can't bear is my daughter hating me."

Nicole nods slowly and there's a crack in her voice when she speaks. "I—I'll give her the message."

Dad laughs. "You uh, you think you got all that?"

Nicole nods. "I don't think you need to worry. You know how we girls are..." She swipes at a tear. "We don't leave anything out."

"Thank you, Nicole. And one more thing, if you wouldn't mind. And this one is important. Please tell her I'm relieved she's chosen to stay here—instead of her mother's."

I don't see Nicole's reaction to that because I'm fighting tears as I stare down into my carton of ice cream.

Silently, my best friend closes the door and comes to sit next to me. She frees my hands before wrapping me in a tight hug.

"You have to talk to him," she says after a moment.

I blink the remaining of my tears away. "He threatened someone he knew I was falling for, Nicky. That was a touching speech and I know he meant it. But this time, not only did he sit back and watch me get hurt again—he was the reason for it."

She nods. "Yeah. You know Cora told Jace that she was the one who told him."

"She did?"

Nicole nods and covers my feet with a throw blanket. "He knows it wasn't you now, hun."

"Do you know when?"

"A few nights ago. I didn't want to say because I thought Jace might come by and try and talk to you, but—"

"But he hasn't. And I'm sure I know why." My chin falls. "I'm still responsible."

She shrugs like this is a job interview I'm waiting for. "I'm optimistic that he will."

But I'm not.

"He won't. Because this isn't him. He doesn't want a relationship. We were rushing into things—he gave me a key, told me he loved me. This was

probably—it was probably the escape he needed."

Nicole shakes her head. "I don't think that's true."

"Please stop," I snap. "I let myself get trapped in believing that he and I were destined for each other. I'm not falling for this bullshit anymore. I'm better off without." I sink back into the pillow behind me.

Nicole grins. "Welcome to the angry stage."



The angry stage is in full effect when I go to the rink to practice. My hastiness has me falling on my ass a few times but I'm good with that. In a sick way, a part of me likes it.

Bring it on, gravity. Or maybe, clumsiness?

Doesn't matter. This is the best I've felt in two weeks.

"Slow. Down," Coach Riggs calls when I land on my side like I'd just been slapped. He's pinching the bridge of his nose in frustration.

"Maybe I just need a faster song," I suggest, grimacing in pain as I notice someone glaring at me from behind the glass wall. He's wearing a baseball cap and hoodie. But he turns as soon as our eyes meet and walks off. I pull myself up and dust my hands off with a breath.

"You need to slow down, Angel. Your spins have been flawless and now you can barely get a single without falling."

"You said falling is part of training," I say absently, skating in a circle as I try to rationalize with myself.

That wasn't Jace. It couldn't have been.

"Not when you're practically doing it on purpose."

I grunt and take position again when he starts the music. I take deep breaths and focus on the routine, my speed, and not losing momentum. It's the most important part of figure skating.

Even if it was, it was likely to come here and watch me do exactly what I did. Fall on my ass.

Over and over again.

"That's perfect. Again. And may I suggest keeping your eyes open?" Riggins chides.

After another hour, I'm thoroughly exhausted. More than usual, since my entire upper body hurts from all the falls and bruises I gave myself today.

"By the way, I need to cancel our practice for the rest of the week, I'm going to be working overtime to prepare my skaters for the holiday showcase."

My head snaps. "If it's not too late, I'd like to participate."

He looks up from his iPad suspiciously. "Why?"

I shrug. "I'm ready."

He hesitates and I'm not surprised. These last few days since I've hit the anger stage, I've been hasty on the ice, disrespecting it. "It's not too late, but Angel—"

"I said I'm ready. No judges, right? Which means no pressure."

He waits a beat before carefully commenting. "For some people..."

"Count me in."

"By yourself?"

I scoff. "Do you see anyone else here? Yes. By myself."

He takes a breath. "Okay. Come tomorrow. In costume. And if I see you fall on purpose again, I'm taking you out."

I grin and wink. "Dinner and a movie?"

That breaks a laugh out of him, and he sends me on my way.



I 'M SITTING IN COACH'S office on Friday night. Last week, we told the executives about the pain from my injury resurfacing and the recommendation from a personal orthopedist for surgery.

I wasn't part of the conversations but was interviewed shortly after news broke. Of course, they asked about my fears of this being career ending, considering I'm in my final contract year.

My response on national television? That I'm more concerned about living pain free for the rest of my life than playing hockey another three to four years.

"Bottom line, they paused all negotiations and agreement drafting until after the recovery period."

"Paused," I repeat, almost as a question, but not quite.

Coach nods and leans back in his chair.

"As opposed to ending and shredding?"

He rolls his eyes but there's a faint smirk. "Jim and Christian are cockier than you and me...they like the idea of having the fastest player in the league

—and when they asked me—I told them the truth."

"What's that?"

"That I didn't notice a change in your performance. Or your speed."

I breathe a sigh of relief. "I thought I was fooling myself."

"No. You've had a good season. You paid the price every night. But you played well." He pulls on a drawer, removing a bottle of scotch and two glasses.

I frown and scoff.

"I know, I'm a cliché. But I've got to be prepared when the owners stop in." He pours us each a finger and lifts his old fashioned glass, waiting for me to do the same.

I lift and he stares at the liquid before meeting my eyes. "I know you're nervous. But things are moving in the right direction."

My gaze drops. Because there's one thing that will never be right.

"You're not the only one who misses her," he finally says. Following my lead in setting the glass down, untasted.

I look up, confused.

"She moved out. I haven't seen or spoken to her since...that night."

I frown. "Where is she staying?"

"I'm pretty sure at Nicole's." He leans back. "I'm disappointed you don't know that. Shouldn't you have been chasing her down after you found out it wasn't her?"

"No."

"Jace, it was an innocent slip, it could have—"

"It's not that. You were right, Coach." My chest aches having to say the words out loud, and I swallow down the pain. "I'll just end up hurting her again."

He doesn't confirm or deny it as he sits in his chair assessing me.

Before he has a chance to respond, there's a light knock on his door. "Come in."

Rory races in, heading straight for her daddy's lap. Lifting her, he looks up at Cora, stepping in behind her with a laugh. "She's better than I am on the ice. And she had a penguin walker."

Rory giggles. "Cora couldn't keep up."

I grin up at my sister. "How are we related?"

She shrugs and looks at Coach. "You guys good? Nick and I are going to head out. He's just changing."

"Yeah, thanks again for watching her while we caught up. You free tomorrow?" he chuckles, and I assume he's asking as a joke.

"Oh, can't, I'm going too."

He frowns. "I was kidding, but what do you mean too? What's tomorrow?"

Her eyes widen. "Umm..."

Nick comes up behind her. "You ready, babe?"

"Wait." Coach stands. "What's going on tomorrow?"

Nick glares at Cora. "Really?"

"I thought they knew," she shrieks defensively. She turns back to us. "I thought you knew. The showcase, Ang—"

"Okay, we're going to get going." Nick cuts her off and grips the door handle, stepping out. "See you after the new year, Coach."

Once they're gone, Coach and I exchange glances and he darts back in his chair, pulling up his computer screen.

I swing around and hover as he types in the search engine.

"Angel is on the roster. *For a solo*." He looks up at me with utter dread in his eyes.

I shake my head, remembering her saying no to this weeks ago. "She's not ready," I mutter. "She's not ready, Coach. I just saw her—she's tripping herself up." I'm pacing his office, irritated that she's chosen to do this, and I don't know why.

"When?"

"A few days ago," I answer quietly. He doesn't ask for details, and I don't offer them. I've only gone to see her on two occasions. The second time, I think she might have spotted me, so I haven't been back.

Coach scratches his head and dials a number from memory on his office phone and puts it on speaker.

For a minute, I think he's dialing Angel, but a male voice comes on.

"Hi, you've reached Paul Riggins. I'm unavailable at the mom—" Coach picks up the receiver and drops it to end the call. "I can't let her back out there, Jace. Not yet."

I face him squarely. "You can't stop her." *But I can*.



Kerri: Hey girl. Saw your name on the roster today. Good luck.

Angel: Saw yours too. Last right? Are you running the Zamboni?

That's right bitches. There's a new Angel in town. Better get used to it. Spending time with Nicole has been doing nothing but wonders for my self-esteem and overall mindset.

Nicole: Hey, I wanted to come back there but they're not letting me. Sending hugs. You got this.

Angel: <3

Cora: Nick said he'll knock down security if you need a hug before you go on. Shall we proceed?

Angel: Lol. Stand down. Thank you for coming. Hope you got good seats.

Cora: The best.

I force myself to shut down the betrayal that still lingers in my chest over what Cora did. Exposing the information she knew I meant to keep private. But Nicole is right. This is more Cora's business than mine. And she only did what she thought was safest for her brother.

At the end of the day, my feelings are selfish. But after a visit with my therapist last week, regardless of Cora's right to know, I need to tell her how it made me feel.

A discussion I promised him I'd have but not entirely sure I'm ready for.

I store my phone away. The words of encouragement from my friends are touching but it's not helping my nerves.

I stare down at my short, electric blue dress. It's not sparkly or embroidered like the others. It's just blue. The only thing that makes it remotely fancy is one sleeve that hangs off the shoulder.

Tying my skates, I step onto the waiting bench behind the curtain, willing my heart to stop pounding.

Where was the adrenaline I had pumping through my veins earlier this week? The one that got me here. That spark is fading, and I know if I back out now, it would be all the more humiliating than falling.

It doesn't help that Coach Riggs doesn't seem as enthusiastic about my going on today as he was weeks ago when he first mentioned it.

I swallow hard.

My hands are starting to shake and I'm two steps away from becoming a blubbering mess. Ruining my makeup and my dignity in one shot.

I'm seated next to a few paired couples. Alex isn't here, thankfully. The last thing I need are his crude comments moments before I step on the ice for the first time under a spotlight in two years.

Slowly, not to draw attention, I release a breath. My routine is last—well second to last. Apparently, the Ice Girls planned a surprise performance following my solo.

"Angel, you're up next."

Umm...no.

I close my eyes as I listen to the familiar song that the couple ahead of me are dancing to. My heart beats faster with every verse, chorus and bridge. My eyes fly open in time for them to take their bow and skate off together. I see them both move to an exit door after their performance, and I'm tempted to follow.

"Angel Collins." I hear my name but can't move.

Oh God.

"Angel," Riggs hisses behind me.

Oh sure, now he gets my name right.

I stand and step up to the edge of the ice, expecting to be sweating with anxiety, but instead, I feel a brisk chill as I linger by the wall when the introduction starts.

"Excuse me."

I gasp at the familiar husky voice and turn, finding Jace standing behind me.

He's looking over my shoulder at first but then his eyes dip to meet mine. My mouth falls as I scan him in his tight-fitting black pants and fitted back polo. His muscles bulging from under the sleeve.

His expression is flat when my eyes meet his again. When I don't move out of his way, he smirks and steps around me onto the ice, skating to the center. It takes all of eight seconds for the crowd to recognize him and cheer. But he doesn't hear them. Or at least he doesn't acknowledge the crowd. His entire focus is squarely on me. As if I'm the only other person in the room.

The soft intro to *Bailamos* by Enrique starts, and Jace skates in place, looking at his feet like he's getting impatient.

It's frighteningly familiar. His bored expression, his challenging glares... daring me to move. It brings me back to our time on the ice together in the late hours of the night.

He's acting like...we're alone.

My heart melts and he must see it in my face because a small smile touches his lips. The lyrics to the first verse start and I scan the crowd again—my cue to hit the ice has come and gone.

Toward the end of the first verse, he extends an arm.

With a smirk, I fly onto the ice in a forward spiral, perfectly in line with the first chorus. Jace catches me mid-glide and pulls me against his chest. We dance and spin across the ice face to face and for a moment, I forget where I am.

"That's it. Don't look at anyone but me," he murmurs.

"Don't flatter yourself," I snip.

A wide grin spreads across his face. "There she is. I've missed you."

"Don't lie to me, either."

He pulls me against him and tightens his grip, pivoting and lifting. On instinct, I jump over his feet circling him in a waltz-jump. It's when I realize, he's following my routine—or rather mine and Alex's routine almost step by step.

"You've been watching Alex," I mutter.

"Like a hawk."

Taking my hand, he moves beside me, placing his hand on my hip. I'm mildly impressed when he pushes off at the same time I do and glides with me. He balances me as I fall into a forward spiral, lifting my right leg behind me as he guides me across the ice.

"Cute," I comment. "Got anything original?" It's the only way I know how to be with him now to keep from completely losing my mind.

"Thought you'd never ask."

The moment I set my foot down, he pivots and takes my hand, maintaining a strong grip as he extends and lowers me. Naturally, I fall into a familiar spin known as the death spiral. Something I've only practiced a few times with Riggs carrying me. My eyes are wide as he brings me back up effortlessly. Cheers roaring around us.

"Too much for you, baby?" he breathes against my ear. Before I have a chance to answer, he moves us in line with the music to the chorus, falling back into my routine.

"Jump."

My eyes find the crowd for the first time since I got on the ice.

"If you don't, I'll throw you. Jump."

With a breath, I squeeze his hand and nod. I push off as he lifts and tosses me in the air. With a snap, I spin midflight and fall back into his strong arms.

The softest pair of eyes find mine when my feet are back on the ice, along with an infectious smile. I know I should force this feeling down—because he's purely in the moment with me. But I don't. Instead, I let it float inside me, filling me in a way I've needed to be. I'm relishing being in his arms again, feeling his touch against my skin.

"Angel."

My eyes snap to his because there's a warning in his tone.

"Angel, you can finish this."

"What?"

"The second half. Go back to your solo. You don't need me."

"You're leaving me?" I hate how small my voice is.

His jaw tightens as we move across the ice. "You've got this. And if I see you trip yourself up again, I'll make them repeat the entire number." He lets go of my hand and takes a quick bow before skating off the ice.

I want to close my eyes, but I know I can't. Instead, I start by staring at the ice in front of me as I fall back into my routine. My movements are surprisingly fluid.

On the last chorus, I pick up my pace, spinning, spiraling, keeping my jumps low to the ground. My song doesn't have a hard stop, so I slow my movements and finish with what used to be my signature spin, which I hold until the song fades out.

I bring down my arms and look up and around at the thunderous roar from

the audience. My eyes are wide as I take in my standing ovation. I'm almost frowning in shock.

It's not until I find Jace on the edge of the ice, with a smile that lights up his whole body, do I smile back at the uplifting crowd.

I skate off the ice, but the cheers don't stop. Several people crowd around, taking pictures and asking questions. I hear someone say I had them fooled, thinking I wasn't ready to perform but realized the delay was for dramatic effect.

I'm blinking, searching for the exit door, but the crowd is overwhelming.

Finally, Jace catches me and takes my hand, luring me through the doors and down the hall until we're alone.

"Jace."

He cups my jaw and kisses my forehead. "You were phenomenal."

"Angel." I hear Dad and Rory burst through the doors behind us and race toward me.

I turn back to Jace and he thumbs the side of my face. "Thank you for the dance," he says softly, before giving my dad a curt nod and taking off toward the exit.

Tearing my eyes off the door, I bend to my little sister and laugh to keep from crying as I pull her into a hug. But it's no use, the tears pour out of me. "I've missed you," I whisper.

"Getting a little jealous over here."

I stand and look at my father. His expression is a mixture of joy and concern.

"Hi, Dad."

He nods. "I'll take it. That was incredible, Angel." He looks over my shoulder to where Jace took off.

Something I can't bring myself to think about right now. I'm a whirlpool of emotions and Jace must have sensed that I can't handle anything more right now.

Nicole and Cora find us and simultaneously embrace me.

"We have to go celebrate," Cora suggests. "Anywhere you want. Where's Jace? Is he getting the car?"

I smile through the cloud of sadness that hangs over me. I'm not upset he left. I'm not even angry anymore.

Not when I loved being in his arms so much tonight that it hurt. I'm grateful to him and will always remember what he did for me.

But the fact remains that I broke his trust.

Just a few weeks ago, Jace believed he found someone he could confide in. And I let one colossal, career-ruining secret spill out into the universe.

He'll never get over that.

He might not hate me forever, but he'll never trust me with something like that again.

"Actually, I was hoping to just go home tonight. Dad, can I catch a ride with you?"

It almost seems like the same cloud is hanging over him, but he manages to give me a smile. "I'd love that."



It was nice to shower in my bathroom again.

I'm grateful to Nicole, but her bathroom is the size of the linen closet I have in my bathroom. I tried not to comment on her living space, considering she doesn't have a job, but maybe in the new year, I can propose we get a place together.

I'm sitting with Dad in the kitchen long after Rory's asleep.

"I heard everything you said when you stopped by Nicole's."

"Oh, were you there?" he teases with a smirk then touches my hand. "I'm sorry. I thought I was doing what was best for you."

"Did you really bring me back here because you wanted to look after me, not help you with Rory?"

He leans back with a guilty look. "I know, you can take care of yourself, and it was sneaky, but—"

"No. I—I'm not offended. I think it's sweet."

"I want to do more for you—but you're getting older and it's hard to keep up with what you need."

"I think I need to be busier. I just put in for double the classes I had last semester at the university. I think it'll help keep my mind off things." "And you'll keep skating?"

I nod. "Absolutely."

"Good. You guys really looked unbelievable out there."

My face falls. Over the past few hours, I forgot that Jace and I performed in *front* of an audience and a large one at that. For most of our segment, it felt like we were alone.

"What happened?" he asks after a moment. "Why did he leave?"

"Probably because there's nothing to say."

He looks down, his eyes shifting. "No, that can't be it. It was probably just too busy."

"Why do you care, Dad?"

"Because I want to see you happy. I want you to be with someone who deserves your love."

I frown. "And you think that's Jace?"

"I think that's any egotistical jock who's willing to twirl in tights and deal with mocking headlines just to make your dreams come true."

I press my lips together and stand, refusing to let myself go down the rabbit hole again. "I'm going to make some tea and head upstairs."

He stands. "If you're not too tired tomorrow, how about we hit the ice for a few hours at the park."

"It's freezing."

"So, we'll dress warm. Come on, we used to go every year on Christmas Eve."

"Sounds good. Good night."



OU THINK IT'S TIME to get a nanny?" I ask Dad when we get to the park. I'm sitting on the bench while he slides on Rory's tiny skates. Considering they were mine twenty years ago, they're in pretty good shape.

He tightens the velcro straps and stands. "Yeah, maybe." He waits until Rory wobbles ahead of us. "I just don't want anyone moving in only to realize that Rory's impossible and move out."

"She's not...impossible," I say, trying to come up with a softer adjective for Rory. "She's unique."

"And then there's that other issue." He scratches his chin.

"Oh you mean your dashing good looks," I tease.

"Don't make fun of me, I am dashing."

I chuckle. "Come on, Rory, I don't know if we're worthy to walk the same ground." I take her hand and carefully step us both onto the frozen water.

We skate around for a little while until a car pulls up next to ours. My best friend steps out of the passenger seat holding two Starbucks cups. "Are we late?" she calls out as Cora steps out of the driver's side.

I wave for them to join us. "Dad, I hope you don't mind. I invited Nicole and Cora."

"Only because I said we were going to Starbucks and she told me where to find her," Nicole says, making her way toward us.

Dad chuckles. "No problem at all."

I reach over for my cup. "Bring your skates?"

"No, but Cora did. I'll just sit safely on the bench and watch." She holds up a small brown bag and looks at Rory. "I brought a cake pop for someone special when you're done."

Rory beams and wobbles her way around the ice holding dad's hand.

Cora joins me on the ice with her skates and I hold back a laugh as I reach for her. "I admire the bravery, my friend."

"Well, since you're dodging my calls, I thought this might be the best way to your heart."

I blink and bite my lip.

Dad bends down to his younger daughter. "You want to go sit with Nicole for a bit?"

Rory nods. "I like Nicole. She has a dark soul like me."

I snort and cover my mouth. Dad blinks and then pinches the bridge of his nose.

He pats her arm. "We're going to talk about why you think you have a dark soul later," he whispers and stands to his full height, looking at my friend on the bench. "You didn't hear that, did you?"

Nicole is hunched over laughing silently, then shakes her head. "Hear what?"

Dad licks his lips and takes Rory to where Nicole is sitting.

She reaches out, eyes still filled with laughter. "Come here, sweetie. Join my dark circle—I mean bench."

I reach back for Cora's hand again. "Come on." I lead us down the frozen lake for some more privacy. "I'm sorry I've been a terrible friend lately."

"You? I'm the one who owes the apology for being the worst friend ever. I should have told you I heard you that night and not kept it a secret until I was brave enough to go to his Coach about it." She drops her head. "I guess I didn't realize you were the only one he told and that it would fall back on you. I was so focused on getting him help, I didn't even consider—"

My heart tugs and I grab her shoulders when it sounds like she's about to break down. "Cora, sweetie, you did the right thing. Don't ever regret protecting your family."

She looks up at me with hopeful eyes. "What about protecting friendships?"

I smile and wink. "The strong ones will make it through anything."



An hour later, we're driving home because Rory was getting cold. "Hey, you know if Nicole got a job yet?" Dad asks.

"She did. Can you believe Hank hired her as head bartender?" "What?"

"I know, Nick doesn't like the idea of her going back to bartending either, but she's been clean for a year now. She'll be fine."

The car is quiet, and I know that Dad is worried. We all are. But Nicole being back at work is exactly what she needs to feel normal again.

My chest tightens when I spot Jace's car in our driveway as we pull up to the house. He's sitting on the front doorstep. He's wearing a sports jacket and beanie hat. His hands are in his coat pockets.

Dad glances at me. "I don't think he's here to see me..." he mutters.

I release a shaky breath.

"You can't hide in here forever," he says before jumping out and getting Rory out of her car seat.

Moving to the front door, he shakes Jace's hand and mutters a few words before going inside.

Closing the car door behind me, I walk to where he's standing. We're quiet for a moment as he studies me, as if he's choosing the right words. Something that was never a problem when it came to us.

"I'm sorry I took off."

I nod. "It was for the best. I know we have nothing to talk about."

He watches me with pain in his eyes and shakes his head. "It was the opposite. I had so much I wanted to say to you. But I wanted you all to myself when I do."

I frown. I want to ask him about his shoulder—especially after lifting me yesterday—but it's probably not a topic he wants to discuss with me.

"Fuck it," I mutter under my breath. "How's your shoulder?"

He grins but then it fades when he meets my eyes. "Nothing compared to

the pain of losing you."

I blink away, facing my watery eyes against the wind.

He steps closer and I step back, keeping our distance.

"Thank you for what you did for me yesterday," I say rapidly. "And... I'm sorry I kneed you in the nuts."

His eyes shift as if he's remembering our dance. "You didn't."

"Oh right. Well, cats out of the bag, I still have fantasies about you, they're just...different now."

He laughs with his whole body. "If that's what it takes, Angel. I'm willing to take all your hits."

I draw in a breath, not certain if I'm ready to hear what that means. "If that's what it takes to what?"

"To give me another chance."

Looking down, I close my eyes because I don't know if I can. "Jace, I—"

"Baby." He reaches forward as if he feels me slipping away, and moves me against the brick wall, shielding me with his body. "I am so sorry I pushed you away. Give me the chance to make it right. I know I can. That—the way I treated you is not who I am. I'm—"

I look up at him with teary eyes. "The man you were when you forgave Cora." My eyes shift to the side because I know it's not the same thing. She's different.

"Angel," he breathes, leaning his forehead against mine. "What hurt most about that conversation is that I wish it was how I handled things with you. Cora does have the advantage but what you need to know is that by the time she came to me, my priorities changed."

When my head drops, he catches it in his hands. "I should have told you I slipped—"

"It doesn't matter, Angel. Nothing mattered after I lost you. You're everything to me. You make me a better man. You make me happy. You've filled something that's been empty for as long as I can remember. I'd give it all up without a second thought for another chance with you. For a life with you."

My eyes lift to his and he smiles when he has my attention. "Because when you're mine again, I will never, ever let you go."

I lift my hands to pull his off me. But it's like they have a mind of their own when they wrap around his neck instead. "Jace."

"I love you, Angel."

I want to drown in this moment. The moment he tells me again that he loves me. The words I thought meant nothing.

Dad pulls the door open. "Seriously, you two, it's freezing out here, at least come inside."

I shake my head. "Jace was just leaving, Dad."

He seems disappointed and nods before closing the door.

Jace releases a heavy breath and pulls my hand, covering it with his. My hands are practically numb, but I feel cool metal in my palm and look down when he moves his hand.

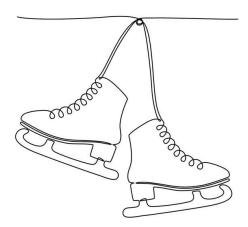
It's the key to his house. The one I returned.

"It's been a while since I've cooked for anyone. Maybe tomorrow, after you've had time to think, you could come by for dinner." He doesn't pose it as a question. He doesn't want a response right now. So I don't give him one.

With one final stroke against my cheek, he releases and walks away. I stare down at the key in my hand and can't help but wonder if this is all situational. And if he's not as forgiving as he's making himself seem.

I can't help this insecurity. This doubt.

"Jace?" I call when he's halfway to his car. "What if it was me?" His lip twitches. "Wasn't it?"



I spend half the night commending myself for staying so strong with Jace. The other half cursing myself for not throwing myself around him and insisting he never let me go.

Once again, he was right. I did need this time to think. To process everything he'd said to me outside the house.

But it's hard to think when all I want is for it to be tomorrow.

He doesn't text me. Which in a strange way warms my heart because he doesn't want to cloud my thoughts.

Christmas day is the slowest it's ever been and I try my best to focus on how happy Rory and Dad are. Although his smiles are mostly for Rory's sake. And maybe even mine. But I know there's an emptiness he's felt long before he and mom split up. One I'm not sure anyone can fully fill.

"Dad, I'm going out for a bit."

He looks up from Rory still ruffling through her presents. "Out with the girls?"

I press my lips together. "No."
He nods. "Will you be back tonight?"
"I don't know."
He smiles knowingly. "Love you."

I ring Jace's bell a second time, wondering if he's expecting me later. I didn't think seven o'clock would be early. Has he changed his mind?

My phone buzzes in my coat pocket.

Jace: You're killing me.

With a soft chuckle, I pull out his key and unlock the door, letting myself in.

Jace is leaning against the wall with his arms crossed.

"God, you're stubborn," he says, coming over to me and pulling off my hat and coat.

"Smells good in here." I try to push down the stomach-churning feeling I got the second I walked back into this hallway.

He takes my hand. "I know." He winces. "Originality is out the window here because I made you lobster mac and cheese. Before you roll your eyes, I wasn't impressed with Villamina's version so from now on, when you get the craving, it will be here."

I step into his kitchen, it's dimly lit. The table is set for two with lit candles, red wine and white roses.

"From now on?" I repeat.

"Too presumptuous?"

I shake my head and smile.

I yelp as he pulls me against him. He's clean shaven and smells like coconut and birchwood. I breathe him in as I rest my head against his chest.

"Jace," I whisper painfully, shielding my heart from piecing back together just yet. "Tell me what this means."

He pulls back, cupping my face in his hands, his brows furrowed.

"Does it mean you think you can...trust me again?" I ask.

He shakes his head. "It means that I'm getting another chance to win back yours. And I swear I won't break it."

I nod, my eyes lowering because he still hasn't answered my question.

"You protected my secret, Angel. You protected my sister when I confronted you. Why did you do that?" He asks the question as if he already knows the answer. Like he's not surprised that I would.

I shrug. "Because it's Cora."

He shakes it again. "Because you're the most trustworthy person I know. I know you, Angel. Maybe better than you know yourself. I know how forgiving and passionate you are. I know you're afraid to let go, to give things that let you down a second chance. I know I've broken down all your insecurities only to put that wall back up." He swallows at the hard truth and searches my eyes. "But you don't need me for that anymore. You faced your biggest fear, and you blew it out of the water."

"With your help. I love you, Jace. I don't want to do any of it without you."

"Angel," he breathes before crushing my lips with his in an all-consuming kiss. One that builds my appetite. But not for food. I wrap my legs around him and he catches them, pushing me against the wall before breaking the kiss. "I'm sorry. I can slow down."

I shake my head, missing his lips, the way his body takes control. I poke

his stomach. "You forgot one thing. You also know how to turn me on like no one else."

He chuckles. "Are you turned on?"

I glance at the dinner table and bite my lip, nodding in response.

He lifts and spins me right there in his kitchen, as a sense of completeness settles in me. He brings me down to his grinning lips again. "Dinner can wait."

Jace carries me into his bedroom and sets me down, looking at his bed then down at me. "What do you think, shall we start with just you first?"

I laugh and shake my head, eager to have his hands on me. "Maybe next time."

He groans before lifting me again. "That's too bad."



EPILOGUE

(2 months later)

I take the empty seat at the bar next to Coach. We haven't been alone since I got word from my agent about further delays to my contract extension. Which he and I both agreed is still a good thing. No news is good news—for now.

My surgery was a month ago and I've still got several weeks left before I could return to the ice.

We should know more then.

Based on the statistics my doctor outlined, I should return to full competition abilities with a low risk of re-injury. The statistics consisted of professional hockey players around my age and experience, having undergone the same surgery. A total of thirteen in the last ten years. Eleven of which returned to the ice.

Those other two is what keeps me up at night.

"Hangin' in there?" he asks without a glance in my direction.

"Staying positive," I lie.

He nods. "Good. So are Scott and Jeffrey."

The owners always did like me a lot more than the man I'm sitting next to.

"Just take care of yourself," he adds. "A lot of factors are playing your favor right now, so don't ruin it."

We're sitting at the bar at Bridges on Valentine's Day. Which isn't unusual. For the past few years, it's become somewhat of a ritual for the guys to meet up here for drinks instead of overrated and overpacked restaurants.

I release a breath. "I won't, but that's not what I sat down to talk about."

He sighs and shifts in his seat, knowing the other thing is likely his least favorite subject to discuss with me.

"Coach, I plan on asking her tonight. Do I have your blessing?"

"No," he answers on autopilot, then gives me the side eye that says he might mean something else.

But I'm going to drag that yes out of him if it kills me. It's the final step in my execution plan of asking my girlfriend to move in with me. Okay, the second to final step.

I know Angel doesn't need his blessing, but I do. Coach never told me he was wrong about me. He simply gave me a nod of approval—but I need more. For this next step I plan to take with her—and the one after that—I need to hear him say it.

"What if I buy a house directly across the street from yours?"

He scoffs. "Last I checked, it's not for sale." He takes a slow sip of his whisky and swirls an ice cube in his mouth.

Behind the bar, Nicole drapes a damp towel over her shoulder. "What are

you two going on about this time?" She rests her elbows on the bar.

"Nothing," I say quickly. Not trusting my girlfriend's best friend to keep my secret long enough.

"Okaaayyy." She lifts her brows at me then turns to Coach with a warm smile. "How's the drink, Coach?"

He gives her the tiniest of grins. "Perfect, as usual."

She releases an exasperated breath. "You know it'd be nice to hear it without having to drag out a compliment from you each time."

He lowers his drink and looks at her, his eyes glazed with intrigue. "Do you really need it?"

She pulls on the rag from her shoulder and moves along. "I suppose not."

Coach turns back to me, but his eyes linger on Nicole as she addresses another patron. "I'll take tonight."

I frown and lower my voice. "But it's Nick's turn."

He shakes his head. "It's Valentine's Day. He should be with his girl."

I glance back at our bartender.

Since she started working here, we all take turns—as discretely as possible —"watching" Nicole. Not every single shift, as that would spark suspicion, but anytime she's closing, one of us would be here. Nick, Angel, Cora, Coach, and myself.

I keep warning them that this isn't going to last long; she's going to catch on. Especially the nights when it's my turn because I can't easily come up with reasons to stick around like Cora and the others can. Angel insists I can use her for a reason. Pretend we had a fight and I need advice from her best friend.

Back when she made the suggestion, I asked my girlfriend if that's what *she* does and she quickly changed the subject.

I tap on the bar, knowing when an opportunity has presented itself. "That's very thoughtful of you. I'll let Nick know. He'll be grateful. Unless I also mention the shadiness of this whole thing based on the way you two look at one another."

He glares at me. "I don't know what you mean."

I smirk and meet his eyes. "You can cut the tension with a knife when you're both within two feet of each other."

"Didn't you have someplace to be?"

"I don't know, do I?" I prod, enjoying this a little too much.

"Blessing. You have my blessing. Go ask my daughter to move in with you. I'll even help her pack."

Surprised he fell for my bluff, I jump off the bar stool and freeze when he grabs my arm.

"But if I find her back on my doorstep in tears, I'll break every bone in your body."

"Please, Coach. Have a little more faith in Angel. If I hurt her again, she'll break them herself."

He turns away, hiding a grin and releases my arm.

"Nicole," I call back. "Have a good night. I'm going to head out with Angel."

She wiggles her brows. "Have fun. You staying, Coach? Another whisky?" "No, one's enough. Just a soda with lime, thanks."



Thank you for reading! I hope you enjoyed Jace & Angel's story. Hatefully Yours is the 2nd book in the Blades of Heart Series. If you missed the 1st book; Nick & Cora's story; keep reading for a peek at Becoming Mine.

Please consider leaving a review. I read each and every one!

Becoming Mine – Nicolas & Cora

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The Roommate Deal

A fake relationship hockey romance

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A single-parent hockey romance

Wrong Twin

A mistaken identity hockey romance

Mistaken

A mistaken identity billionaire romance



Royanne GREW UP IN New York, where she studied screen writing. From an early age, she loved storytelling and knew she wanted to be a writer. While her genre was never limited, she now enjoys writing billionaire and sports romance, creating strong realistic heroines and swoony alpha heroes.

Website: https://www.roxannetully.com

Newsletter: https://geni.us/rtnewsletter



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Excerpt

Chapter 1

Nicolas

"What's with the pink hair, Cor? You got an audition for Jem and the Holograms or somethin'?" My best friend and teammate, Jace asks his kid sister Cora, when she breezes into the kitchen.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The sneaky result? We ended up agreeing it was time to be grownups and each bought our own house in a new gated community development. So Cora can "leave home" and live independently...in her big brother's new house... under his ever-so-subtle watch.

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

My place is merely a five-minute drive further down the road. I sprung for the lake house, while Jace—who's secretly afraid of reptiles—chose the street view.

But it's always easy to stop in—especially in the early mornings—to run through strategies and drills for the team before practice or a game.

We work best as a duo—it's why I recommended him as my alternate.

"It's a streak. Don't get your panties in a bunch over it," the now *almost* twenty-year-old in the room bites out.

I don't know why I remind myself of her age every time I see her or think

about how long I've known her or become creepily lost in her presence.

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

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

"And this is your only warning for the next three days." She grabs a bagel and heads for the back door.

"I can handle you any day of the month," he calls after her.

With astonishingly good aim, Cora turns and tosses the bagel at him. And the six-foot-four pro hockey player with bulging biceps winces as he rubs his shoulder.

I shoot him a look and he shrugs defensively. "Bagels are stale."

"Maybe you do have your panties in a bunch. Lay off the girl," I say casually, in what's become my continuous effort to get him off her back.

"Dude, I can't with her lately. She's testing me."

"She's also past the age of being your responsibility."

Jace runs a frustrated hand through his hair, and I know exactly what he's feeling. His next words confirm it. "She'll always be my responsibility."

I want to explain the logistics of how wrong he is. But when my twin sister Nicole comes to mind, my twenty-seven-year-old adult sister, who I will never stop looking out for, I bite my tongue.

But not for reasons that we both are protective over Cora—who lost a mother at a young age and needed to be looked after like no one else given her traumatic loss. Nicole's situation was different. Nicole unfortunately, inherited our mother's addiction gene. So there's no way I'd ever tell another brother that he's being too protective of his sister.

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

"Ready to head for practice?" he asks, eager to get his gear on and hit the

ice.

"Yep."

Chapter 2

Cora

Jace: Be home by sundown.

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

Jace: No reason to be out later.

Cora: *I'll find one.*

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

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

"I was too busy studying for my real classes," I say but it's not true. I left my gym bag by the door when I raced out this morning, feeling like a fool for trying something different. I push the artificial color strands behind my ear, self-consciously.

"It'd be a shame to lose that straight A average because you were too prissy to wear your uniform today," she points out.

"I left it at home with my reason for caring."

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

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

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

"Jace pissed me off today."

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

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

"When what?"

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

"Ugh, you know you're the only girl I know who hangs around hot hockey players all day and is constantly miserable."

"One of them is my brother and the other...might as well be." I try not to sound melancholic when I admit this.

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

She's right. I've been interning since the summer at Tales for Tots which is a mental health center where children in foster homes come for counseling where needed. Not your everyday dream job, I know, but my major is adolescent therapy, and talking to these children every day and feeling like I'm a part of what's healing them and making them feel normal has been good for me. As an intern, I don't do much. I talk casually to kids in between their therapy sessions, play with little kids as they wait to be picked up, and

occasionally do some light paperwork. It's not paid, of course, but it's a big step in my long-term career goals.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Who's having babies?" Angel asks, jogging up to us in her perfect, toned, gorgeous body. Her dark blonde hair in a tight ponytail and her smile as bright as ever.

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

The two should just fuck and get it over with.

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

"Yeah," Ava chimes in, ever in tune with my abruptness. "Cause Cora couldn't get a guy past Jace or his other half if her life depended on it."

It is gut-twistingly true. If Jace is distracted or otherwise unavailable, Nick is there to pick up the slack. It never fails when it comes to the subject of

keeping me in a bubble—out of trouble, home by curfew, and as far away from anything with a penis as possible.

My existence isn't embarrassing enough that my crush of almost ten years is my part-time babysitter.

Angel nods with an understanding smirk. She scans me head to toe and I remember why she's here. She's the new gymnastics and yoga teacher at North Buffalo State.

And I'm unprepared for her class.

I look up at her. She's the first person all day I give a smile to. It's a sheepish smile, but it works. She smirks back at me and holds out a hand for me to stand.

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

No one knows if the ice burns on her calves healed, since she wears leg warmers all year round now.

With her 'never look back' attitude in full gear, she's here in the gym with a permanent smile on her face, working toward what she calls her 'new dream'.

"Where's the uniform, Cora?" she asks in spite of our little exchange.

"It needs to be washed." My response is dry and unconvincing. I wouldn't believe me.

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

I grunt. "I don't have my period. Okay?"

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

class."

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

"Sorry, Angel."

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

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

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

"Thanks. I'll have it for next class."

She winks. "Thanks, kid. Don't make me look bad around here, alright."

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

Do I have it written on my face?

Chapter 3

Nicolas

I put the car in park and take a deep breath, calming myself down before I blow a fucking fuse.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I hope she doesn't hate me.

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

NHL Buffalo Blades Center Picks Up Twin from Rehab.

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

I zero in on her eyes.

Is she okay?

She spots the big black jeep in the circular driveway.

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

That's all you need at this place. An average size duffle bag. No overstuffed suitcases with various outfits and shoes. No accessories. In fact, I

remember being sent home with half the stuff I dropped her off with.

She flips her hair behind her shoulder and tosses her bag in the back seat before jumping in. "Thanks for the help, douche."

"You got this, Nicky."

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

"Oh sorry, Nicole," I stretch out.

"No. It's BadassBabe83."

I crack a laugh. "Can I call you BB-8 for short?" I joke, since Nicole's the only other Star Wars junkie I know.

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

"No. That's taken." She moves her seat all the way back and settles in comfortably. Once we leave the hospital grounds and get on the highway, she lowers her window and closes her eyes, breathing in the fall air.

I turn back to the road with a grin.

She's going to be fine.

"Have you thought about what you want to do?"

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

"You knew you were leaving for two weeks now, you haven't thought about what you're going to do?"

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

I don't mention her bartending as an option. That's not exactly a skill I want her going back to right now. I wrack my brain thinking of anything else Nicole might be good at. In college, she studied photography but it isn't the kind of thing that I could throw her back into.

"We'll figure something out, Nicky." My tone is casual, the way it has to be with her. But I hope she hears the promise.

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

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

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

I just hope I'm enough.

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

"Nicky," I whisper into her hair.

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

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

"I'm good. I'm good." She pulls back and wipes her eyes, avoiding mine and eyeing the perimeters of my house instead. "Jeez, a three-car garage? What on earth for? You'll never drive anything but this stupid old Jeep." "Let's go inside." I bought this house three years ago. Nicky's only been away for a few months. I don't bother telling her she's been here but was likely too high or wasted to notice anything.

I lead her through the double door entrance. My dog Max jumps at her immediately and she laughs, bending to scratch him in all his favorite places.

"Can I make you something to eat?" I offer, heading toward the fridge.

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

I turn and glare at her.

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

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

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

I'm mentally prepared for a fight.

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

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

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"My plants?"
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"Bubbles is gone too?" She feigns a sob and I can't help but chuckle, moving to sit next to her. Max jumps between us and rests his head on my

[&]quot;Dead."

[&]quot;My cat?"

[&]quot;You don't have a cat."

lap.

"Glad you still have your sense of humor."

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

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

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

She shudders and her eyes turn dark. "You hear from her?"

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

Her eyes go wide. "I get my phone back? Yeah—I'm good with whatever, dude."

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

She nods. "Okay."

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

I see her skimming through the contacts.

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

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

I change the subject. "I'm heading to Jace's to drive him to practice. His car is in the shop."

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

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

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

"Cora? That was like seven years ago and she's grown up."

A lot.

I clear my throat.

"Maybe I can hang out with her? She seems like the type who wouldn't judge."

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

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

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

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

"For now."

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

Oddly, I realize that I hope not.

End Excerpt

Read the rest of Nick and Cora's story here; https://geni.us/blades_bm