

FIRE AND ICE

The background of the cover is a close-up, artistic shot of an ice hockey rink. The ice is a vibrant blue, with several wooden hockey sticks scattered across it. In the center, a black hockey helmet is the focal point. Resting on the helmet are three dark red cherries with green leaves. Below the helmet, a pair of black and white hockey skates is visible. The overall composition is dynamic and visually appealing, capturing the essence of the sport.

The
PLAYMAKER

MICHELLE SCOTT

The Playmaker

Michelle Scott



To Mandy ... my hockey loving Boston girl! You are wicked awesome! Thank you for introducing me to hockey. Thank you for reading my words before anyone else and giving me feedback. And mostly, thank you for being my friend. The older I get, the more I realize that true, genuine friendship is a rare thing. And ours has surpassed twenty years. Love you friend!

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Chapter One

Oakley

Sophomore Year of High School

My eyes are glued to the big bodies in pads and protective gear as they glide up and down the ice. You can hear their blades slicing through the frozen surface, their voices echoing off the rafters as they communicate. They're all chasing a three-inch-diameter black puck, their sticks poised to take a shot or block one from entering the goal. The enclosure rattles every time one of them slams into the side, sometimes taking another player with them. It's beautiful, watching them play. Brutal at times, but beautiful all the same.

"What did you get on number five?" Madison, my best friend, asks from beside me. She leans over to glance at my blank paper.

"Huh?" I respond distractedly, tightening my sweater around my body to ward off the chill in the air. My math book is in my lap, along with my homework assignment, but my attention is across the ice.

My best friend snickers and shakes her head. Her cerulean eyes follow my sight line until they land on a certain tall, dirty-blond hockey player that I've homed in on. "I guess you're not worried about problem number five. Not when you're focused on number twenty-one instead."

Twenty-one is Sam Anderson's number. The ice god I can't tear my eyes away from across the arena.

I shift in the uncomfortable stadium seats. Madison is occupying the one right next to me, and we're doing our assignment. Or I'm *supposed* to be doing my assignment. But

how can I concentrate on math when I have the option of studying Sam instead? He's the sophomore starting center on our high school hockey team, and even in practice, he's fire on ice.

The most obnoxious ringtone in the world erupts from Madison's phone, turning the heads of some of the players. She frowns as she reads the screen.

"My mom is outside." She starts shoving her things into a backpack, rising from her seat. Her blonde hair sways from the movement. "I'll see you tomorrow?"

"Okay." I nod.

She pauses after slinging the messenger bag overhead and across her body. "And, Oakley ... try talking to him. He'll never notice you if you don't make a move."

"I want him to make a move on me," I counter stubbornly.

Call me old-fashioned, but I want Sam to notice me. I've had my eyes on him from the first moment I saw him, but if it isn't reciprocated, then what's the point? I want him to be the lion in this scenario, and I'll be the prey.

Madison starts walking away, tossing one more suggestion over her shoulder. "Then, at least put yourself in his path."

Am I not already in his path? I'm here nearly every day after school, sitting in this arena, pretending to do homework while I watch the hockey team practice. My brother is a senior and the captain of the team and currently my transportation home. But it isn't a hardship, spending my weekday afternoons here, waiting for him. It isn't a hardship at all when you have Sam Anderson skating around, all sweaty and hot in his practice gear.

Coach blows a whistle, ending practice, and the guys start gliding closer, coming off the ice one by one. My brother stops when he's close to me.

"Give me a few minutes to grab my stuff, and we can go," Ollie huffs. His breath is still labored from the sprints they were running a few minutes ago.

“Okay.” I nod.

My eyes follow Sam as he walks behind my brother on his way to the locker room. He doesn’t even glance in my direction.

Chase Matthews stops next to Ollie though. He’s one of my brother’s best friends, and we’ve known each other since we were kids. He’s a defenseman on the hockey team. He played with Ollie for years in the minor league and now again on the high school team. Most of the guys on the team have played together since they were little.

“You got your braces off,” Chase comments, leaning against the wall separating us.

I smile widely, showing him my teeth. “Sure did. Yesterday.”

At least someone other than Madison noticed.

Ollie starts moving toward the locker room.

Chase undoes the strap on his helmet and pulls it off. “Look at those pearly whites. Now, you’re ready to star in all those toothpaste commercials.”

He’s joking about the commercials. But not about how good my teeth look.

“Well, if you make it into the NHL, you could be the one doing all those commercials. That is, if you can keep all your teeth.”

Chase smirks. He starts walking down the hall, pointing back at me. “*When* I make it to the NHL. Not *if*.”

“Right ...” I nod my head, stretching out the syllables. “*When*.”

I decide to listen to Madison’s advice. I store my homework in my backpack and move into the hallway to wait for my brother, hoping to run into Sam in the process.

Sam is a sophomore like Chase, Madison, and me. He transferred into our high school last year. I noticed him immediately. I think every person with two X chromosomes

noticed him. But he hasn't paid any attention to me. I'm determined to change that at some point.

I run my fingers through my dark strands and lean against the wall, attempting to play it cool. My spine straightens when the door squeaks open and the object of my affection walks out.

My breath hitches when our eyes meet. I start to smile when he gives me a subtle chin nod, but it dampens again when he walks right past me. My eyes follow him to the end of the hall, where Sidney Nelson is waiting. She's a senior. Tall and blonde. Beautiful. Sam pauses when he gets to her, and they walk off together with her under his arm. My heart sinks.

"Sam, huh?" Chase observes from next to me.

It startles me. I didn't realize he'd followed Sam out of the locker room. Chase's brown locks are soaked with sweat. He has an equipment bag resting over one shoulder.

"What?" I ask. The slight squeak in my voice belies my poor attempt to downplay the fact that I was just staring at his teammate.

"You're into Sam."

Chase is too observant for his own good. The only one who knows about my crush on the sophomore center is Madison. She's my closest friend and my vault. And she's the only one I want to know my deepest, darkest secrets.

"No." I try to keep the defensive note from my tone, but I know it's there. "What makes you say that?"

Chase leans against the wall next to me. "You're about as subtle as a neon sign, Oak."

I roll my eyes. "Whatever, Chase."

But I stiffen when I see Sam reemerge from around the corner. He's alone this time.

Chase stays right beside me, his eyes slicing between his teammate and me.

"Did you forget something, man?" Chase asks Sam.

The blond center stops in front of us, towering over me. He's sweaty, like Chase.

"My phone," Sam answers, his gaze coasting leisurely across my face.

I can feel the heat rising on my cheeks from his scrutiny.

"Did you used to wear braces?" Sam asks me, narrowing his eyes.

My skin warms further. I nod, unable to speak.

"Nice," he comments.

I don't really know what that means, but it sounds like a compliment. So, I'll take it as one.

The locker room door flies open, and my brother comes walking out. He glances at the three of us and then down at his hands.

"Ready to go?" Ollie asks, his attention on his phone.

"We're ready," Chase responds, answering for both of us.

Chase lives down the block from Ollie and me, so he usually rides home with us after practice. That will change soon when Chase turns sixteen. He only has a few more weeks. I have to wait until spring to get my driver's license.

"Catch you guys tomorrow," Sam says, disappearing back into the locker room.

Ollie, Chase, and I fall into step beside each other. We're quiet until we make it outside as Ollie keeps typing away on his cell phone. When he shoves it into his pocket, Chase starts speaking.

"Did you know your sister has a thing for Anderson?" he asks my brother.

I scowl and shove my shoulder into Chase's side—hard. He stumbles a step and laughs.

"You've got a crush on Sam Anderson?" Ollie asks, that furrow on his face deepening.

I roll my eyes. “You make me sound like a child. I don’t have a *crush* on anyone.”

It’s easier to lie than to bring my brother’s attention to the fact that I’m interested in one of his teammates. He’s already overprotective enough.

“Anderson,” he scoffs under his breath. “Well, you’d better get that thought out of your head right now. Everyone on the team knows you’re off-limits.”

“What?” I pause before opening the door to his Bronco.

“Everyone knows not to screw around with a teammate’s sister,” Chase confirms.

“That’s the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard,” I mumble. “I spend more time around you guys than I do anyone else.”

“Exactly,” my brother says, climbing into the driver’s seat. “I don’t need one of my guys breaking your heart. Then, I’d have to break his face. And that’s not great for team morale.”

I glare out the side window. “What makes you think I’d get my heart broken? Maybe I’d be the heartbreaker in this scenario.”

“Yeah, right, Oakley.” Ollie chuckles. “You wear your heart on your sleeve.” His eyes meet my stormy-teal orbs in the rearview mirror. “Don’t be pissed. It’s one of the best things about you.”

“He just means all of us are assholes, Oak. It isn’t about you. It’s about us.”

Us, as in hockey players collectively.

“Well, I guess we can agree on one thing,” I scoff from my seat while crossing my arms over my chest. “You all *are* assholes.”

Ollie and Chase chuckle and then start talking about their upcoming game. I stare out the side window, realizing my path to Sam just became a lot narrower and harder to navigate. If my brother instigated some sort of unspoken rule about me, those guys will follow it.

Unfortunately.

So, why does that only make me want him more?

Chapter Two

Oakley

Junior Year of High School

Mike Hoarst cannonballs into the pool, fully clothed, splashing my lower legs with water in the process.

“Mike!” I yell as the party rages on around us.

But he doesn't hear me since he's submerged underwater.

A couple of his teammates follow him in.

“How drunk are they all tonight?” I ask Madison as she walks closer.

She has a cup in her hand. I steal it from her grasp and take a drink. It's plain Sprite. No alcohol.

“Did you think I was drinking?” Madison asks, side-eyeing me.

I shrug, reaching down to wipe the water droplets from my shins. “Wasn't sure.”

“I drove you here. I wouldn't do that.” She slings an arm across my shoulders as we watch the guys thrashing around in the swimming pool.

Madison and I don't typically drink anyway, though on nights like tonight, it's tempting.

“That water looks ice cold,” she observes.

“Tell me about it,” I agree. “Mike drenched the bottom half of me. It's freezing.”

It's early March, but we're in some sort of cold spell. The winter temperatures won't disappear yet, no matter how eager

most of us are for spring. I was comfortable in my skirt and sweater until Mike soaked my lower legs and shoes.

“Let’s go inside,” Madison suggests.

I follow her into the packed living room. The place is crowded, but it’s a somber mood tonight. The team got knocked out of the playoffs earlier. They made a deep run, but these guys are never satisfied unless they have the championship trophy in their hands. And that’s not going to happen this year. So, half of them are drowning their sorrows in a keg from the kitchen, and the other half are already drunk and drowning in the pool outside.

“We needed your brother tonight,” Chase says, coming up and slinging his arm across my shoulders.

Ollie was an offensive machine last year when he was playing with these guys. The team needed him today. But he’s in college now, playing for the Sinclair University Lions. I go up there to watch him as often as possible. And I plan to join him at Sinclair when I graduate high school, if he hasn’t left for the NHL before then.

“He would’ve made a difference,” I agree.

Chase’s arm is heavy and solid, draped across me. Every time I see him, he’s a little bit taller and a little more muscular. His other hand holds a cup of beer.

Out of all the guys in this house tonight, I’ve known Chase the longest. And he was the closest to my brother despite their two-year age difference. He’s good-looking, in a quiet and serious kind of way, and he keeps getting hotter, the older he gets. Most of the girls at school have noticed. And I see more than one envious glance watching me while Chase’s arm is comfortably resting on my shoulders.

“Drinking away the loss?” I ask him, motioning at the cup.

He shrugs. “When in Rome ...” And then he tilts it back, emptying the liquid.

Chase doesn’t drink much either, so I’m surprised to see him with a beer tonight. But I guess the season’s over now, so he doesn’t have to be so regimented anymore.

My eyes scan the room until they land on Sam. He's talking to one of the wingers over by the fireplace. My obsession with him is still alive and kicking even though our situation hasn't changed. He still pays no attention to me, even after my brother graduated and disappeared from the high school scene, taking his threats of bodily harm with him. I thought maybe Ollie was keeping Sam and me apart last year. But that theory has been proven wrong because the stud center still barely glances in my direction. And it's not because he's not interested in girls. He's plowed his way through most of the junior and senior class females this year and last. But he never seems to notice me. Somehow, that only makes me want him more. It's a sick obsession, I know. But one I can't seem to shake.

I see Sam look over. His eyes linger on us when he spots Chase with his arm around me. My skin tingles, and my heart begins to race from his attention. I make a rash decision to push things a little further to see how interested he truly is now that one of his teammates—and one of my oldest friends—is touching me.

I reach up and lace my fingers through Chase's, where his hand is dangling over my shoulder. I can feel him stiffen beside me.

"What are you doing?" Chase asks tersely.

Ignoring his question, I angle my body until my chest is pressed against Chase's side. I can still see Sam watching us from the corner of my eye. I slide my free hand up Chase's solid chest. His heart is beating faster beneath my touch.

"Oakley ..." My name sounds like a warning.

Before I can talk myself out of it, I'm anchoring my hold on Chase's thick neck and rising to my toes, aiming for his lips. But right before we make contact, my old friend wrenches away from me.

"What was that?" he asks. His eyes are narrowed, and he looks pissed.

Embarrassment floods my cheeks, coloring my skin red. "I ..."

I don't have an explanation. At least not a good one.

I glance over at Sam, but he's talking to the winger again.

Chase is holding my forearms in a firm grip, keeping distance between us. He follows my gaze over to the fireplace before looking back at me. His olive-shaded eyes study my face for a few minutes, and then he drops his hold on me altogether. He takes another step back, gaining even more separation. His face is an angry mask. I've seen the same expression on him in the past, usually when he's on the ice. But it's never been directed at me before.

"Am I really that awful, Chase?"

Chase looks disgusted at the thought of kissing me. I take it personally. The sting of rejection is a real thing. It hurts. I've experienced it for over two years from Sam, and now, I can add Chase to the list.

"Next time you want to use someone to make Anderson jealous, pick another guy," he growls.

"I wasn't—" I start to say.

"You were," he insists, cutting me off. He's still fuming. "And that's a hard pass for me."

Then, he stalks off.

I watch him go, feeling awful. I was using him to get Sam's attention. And Chase knows it. Not only was my old friend not into kissing me, but he also seemed repulsed by it. I've never looked at Chase as anything but a friend, but he's undeniably hot. And kissing him wouldn't be the worst thing in the world. I guess he disagrees.

I spend the rest of the night sulking in a corner, avoiding Chase while he dodges me, too, until Madison is ready to leave. Sam leaves with Hailey Winters under his arm, making me feel even worse.

I'm starting to wonder if there's something wrong with me, considering the way I repel men. Or maybe it's just hockey players who are averse to me. Either way, it sucks.

Chapter Three

Oakley

Senior Year of High School

Recent rain makes the air smell clean as I close the car door and move into position beside Madison. She bounces as she walks, always excited about life. Her good mood is contagious, rubbing off on me, even as my nerves flare. The night pulses with possibility, but I'm scared to give in to the feeling. I've been disappointed so many times before.

I fidget with my crop top, pulling it down so it covers more of my stomach.

"Stop it," my best friend scolds from beside me. "You look hot, Oak."

I resist the urge to push my long black hair behind my ear.

I got ready with Madison at her house earlier, so she styled me in her clothes. I'm wearing a jean skirt that leaves little to the imagination and a crop top that looks like a T-shirt on top but disappears just beneath my chest. The material barely covers the full C-cup breasts that developed suddenly last summer. I'm still getting used to my curvier body, and I don't usually show this much skin.

"How did you find out about this little gathering?" Madison asks as we walk up the driveway to Mike Hoarst's house.

"Chase told me about it in second hour," I answer her question, dropping my hands to my sides.

"Is Chase still dating Samantha Warnley?" Madison asks, glancing over at me.

I shrug. "I'm not sure. I think so."

We stop at the front door.

I tilt my head and smirk. “Why? Are you interested in him?”

She narrows her eyes coyly. “I could be. Chase is hot, in that mysterious, brooding sort of way.”

I laugh.

Madison knocks on the door, and it swings open a second later.

“Well, hello, ladies.” Mike smirks, eyeing Madison up and down before turning his attention to me. He freezes, his eyes stuck on my belly. “Little Burnham ...” he drawls, using my last name. There’s a spark of interest in his brown eyes. “You’re looking all grown up.” His gaze continues down my torso, stalling on my thighs.

Madison reaches over and wipes imaginary drool from his mouth before he slaps her hand away. “Stop slobbering all over yourself, Mike. Haven’t you ever seen a girl in a skirt before?”

“Not one looking like that,” he quips with a nod in my direction.

I roll my eyes, acting like I’m annoyed, but secretly enjoying the attention.

I’m used to the hockey guys giving me a hard time, but I’m not used to them openly flirting. I grew up with a protective older brother. His friends and teammates have always been around. Most of the time, they’ve either treated me like a little sister or a leper. Because my brother threatened them within an inch of their lives if they looked a second too long in my direction. And the ones who weren’t intimidated by him tended to live by bro code. The result was the same—none of the guys on the team would touch me with a ten-foot pole.

I thought that would change when Ollie went off to college last year. You know, now that the main threat was out of sight, out of mind. But the curse of being the little sister of a teammate seemed to follow me into my junior year. They still treated me like one of the guys. I’m hoping that’s not the running theme as we live through my last two semesters in

high school. Tonight, I'm testing that theory with my sexy clothes.

Especially where Sam Anderson is concerned. I still haven't captured his attention. And I still haven't stopped trying.

Maybe Sam just needs a reminder that I'm a woman and not just Ollie's little sister.

Mike moves to the side, and we walk across the threshold. After the door closes, he drapes an arm across each of our shoulders, connecting the three of us as we walk farther into the house.

His living room is packed with teammates. In reality, there are less than a dozen here, but they're all huge, tall, and muscular, so it seems like more. Mike's parents are out of town this weekend. He's taking advantage by throwing a little get-together. I don't think most of the school knows, but a lot of the hockey team does. So far, Madison and I are the only girls here.

The guys are scattered around the room, drinking from cans of beer. There's music playing in the background, and a Bruins game is on the television screen.

Their heads swivel in our direction as we walk into the room.

A tingle of awareness trickles down my spine.

All eyes are on us, but there's only one pair that really has my attention. Sam is sitting on the far end of the couch with a can of Coors Light in his hand. His head is facing the hockey game, but his attention is on me.

And I'm suddenly glad Madison forced this outfit on me tonight. Because this is the first time Sam has ever looked at me like this—with heat in his gaze.

“Oakley.” Sam nods in my direction, his eyes still eating me up. He glances over at my friend. “Hi, Madison.”

“What's up, Sam?” my best friend greets him.

Sam rises from the couch, his six-foot-two-inch frame stopping in front of me. “Did you offer them something to drink?”

The question is directed at Mike, but Sam's gaze never leaves me.

I feel my cheeks flushing from the attention.

"I was just about to," Mike says. "We have beer, White Claw, and sodas."

Mike's arm is still resting across my shoulders as he ticks off our choices.

"White Claw," I say, surprising everyone, including myself.

I don't usually drink. But I need something to take the edge off and settle my nerves. Having Sam this close to me, looking at me like I'm a snack and he's a starving man, has me rattled. Rattled and exhilarated.

I glance over at Madison when she speaks. "Make that two." There's a gleam in her eyes.

We've been friends for a long time. And she knows all about my unrequited crush on the man standing in front of me.

Sam takes my hand, pulling me away from Mike. He leads me into the kitchen, dropping his hold to open the refrigerator. I feel the loss instantly.

"Tangerine, black cherry, mango ..." Sam lists my flavor options while his head is stuck inside the fridge. He glances over his shoulder, a slight tilt to his mouth.

"Surprise me," I say, mostly because I've never had hard seltzer before and I have no idea which one I prefer.

"Black cherry," he quips, handing me the drink, "since you're a White Claw virgin."

I tilt my head flirtatiously. "What makes you think I've never had one before?"

I haven't, but he doesn't know that.

He smirks, grabbing another can for Madison before shutting the door. "I've known you for four years, Oakley. I've never seen you drink before. I don't think Ollie would've allowed it."

“Three years,” I correct.

I know exactly how long we’ve known each other. I can still picture the first time I laid eyes on Sam. It was our freshman year. He was in my homeroom class. He caught my attention at first glance and hasn’t relinquished it since. His shoulders were broader than the other guys’, his frame filled out. He was already tall, around six feet, and he’s grown another couple of inches since then. He had dirty-blond hair that he kept longer on top—still does—and it was messy and sexy, like he’d just rolled out of bed. His gray-blue eyes were more gray than blue and shone with mischief.

“And Ollie’s long gone,” I remind him.

My brother is in his sophomore year at Sinclair University now. He’s still killing it on the ice, making a name for himself in the D1 hockey world.

Sam moves a step closer.

I’ve been hyperaware of him since day one. But this is the first time that attention has been reciprocated.

The guys are jeering at the television in the other room. I open the can and tilt it back, swallowing a large gulp of the alcohol-tinged liquid. The taste is a combination of bitter and sweet, the alcohol flavor foreign on my tongue. I try not to react, but Sam’s eyes crinkle in the corners when he sees my nose scrunch up from the bitter taste.

“Not a fan?” he asks, leaning against the counter.

I trap my lip between my teeth, and his attention lands on the movement.

“You’ll get used to it,” he insists, his gray eyes heating even more as they study the shape of my mouth.

I take another drink. A drop escapes down my lower lip.

Sam reaches out to trap it with his thumb before it dribbles down my chin. Then, he lifts his hand, the pad disappearing into his mouth.

I swallow hard.

“Now, I’ve tasted your cherry.” His words are low and intimate as he winks at me.

The butterflies swarm in my stomach, and my cheeks grow warmer from the innuendo.

The right corner of his mouth quirks as he watches me. I’d like to say I’m immune to his charm, but I’m not. Sam is as showy off the ice as he is on it. He’s a natural-born leader. He has always been the life of the party, ever since I’ve known him. He’s flirtatious and outgoing. He could talk to a wall, and it would be the most interesting conversation of the night. His confidence is bold and borderline arrogant. But it only makes him more desirable to me.

To say I’m enthralled with him is an understatement.

And I know it’s a dangerous position to be in. Because Sam is a notorious womanizer. He’s aware of his effect on the opposite sex, and he uses it to his advantage. I’ve watched him run through most of my classmates at one time or another. He never seems to date a girl for more than a few weeks, and even that’s been a stretch lately.

Deep down, I know his attention on me will likely be fleeting. It might only last a night. But I can’t resist the temptation, the pull I feel toward him. I just hope that if I play with the flame, I won’t get burned.

I hear new voices entering the living room, recognizing Andrea and Cassie—two other senior girls. Sam glances in that direction. And I wonder if our few seconds of connection is already over before it even began.

Andrea and Cassie enter the kitchen, pausing when they see the blond hockey player standing in front of me. He’s close. Too close to be construed as friendly. Cassie’s attention is on him as she moves toward us, her eyes shifting over to me.

“Hey, Oakley,” she says, watching me curiously.

I know Cassie and Sam have hooked up before. In fact, I think they were dating for a few weeks this summer, if the rumors are true. But I haven’t seen them together since school started.

“Hi, Cassie, Andrea,” I say with a forced smile.

I'm shooting for casual and unbothered on the outside. But inside, my stomach is clenching. I can feel the tension rising in the room. Cassie is wondering what Sam is doing with me. She's sizing me up like we're in a competition. And maybe we are.

I steal the unopened can of White Claw from Sam's hand.

"I'm going to take this to Madison," I announce to the room in general.

And then I walk away, finding my friend sitting on the end of the couch.

Madison's eyes narrow when she sees me move into the room alone. Her attention flicks over my shoulder before settling on me again as I pass over her drink. She pops the top.

"Where's Sam?" she asks casually, tipping it to take a sip.

Her nose scrunches from the taste, too, and I smile, taking comfort in our similarities.

I shrug in response to her question, and she frowns.

I take a seat in an oversized chair next to the couch. I glance over at Madison to see Chase's olive eyes looking back at me from the space beside her.

"Hi, Chase."

He tips his chin. "What's new, Oak?"

Chase's laid-back personality is the opposite of Sam's, but he gets just as much attention from the girls. I guess he has that silent, mysterious vibe going for him, like Madison said. I know my best friend isn't the only female who's taken notice of Chase.

"No beer for you tonight?" I ask when I see his empty hands.

"Nope," he responds.

I should know better than to ask. Out of everyone here, Chase takes the hockey season the most seriously. He won't drink during it.

"White Claw?" His eyebrow lifts.

He's watching me with a judgmental, disapproving scowl on his face.

I roll my eyes and take another defiant sip.

This is the thing that's always bothered me about Chase. He acts like he's my sibling. When Ollie isn't around, it's like I have another watchful eye on me, waiting for me to mess up so he can report it back to the warden—aka my brother.

"Take it easy with that stuff," he says, his eyes dipping to my drink. "You're a lightweight. It'll sneak up on you."

He treats me like a child even though we're the same age. It's annoying.

I look to the right, where Sam is talking to Cassie. He has his back to me, so I can't see his face. She reaches out to run her fingers through his hair. My gut clenches in jealousy and disappointment, even as he shifts away from her touch.

I glance at the hockey game, trying to focus on something else. Anything else.

When I feel Chase watching me again, I lift the can to my lips and drink until it's empty. My mouth is in a flat, challenging line as I lower it to the coffee table in front of him.

I dare you to say something.

His eyes narrow, but he stays quiet.

Madison reaches over to touch his leg, stealing his attention. I see his shoulders relax as he laughs at something she said.

A shadow falls over me.

"You're in my chair," Sam says.

He's crowding my space. His leg is pressed against my knee.

"You were on the couch," I argue.

His lips tilt, shooting me that panty-melting grin of his. "Move over."

I scoot to the side.

The chair is large, but Sam crowds me with his big body when he sits beside me. He lifts my hips as soon as he's settled and

repositions me on his lap.

“What are you doing?” I ask, stiffening and then squirming on his legs.

“Relax,” he commands, his warm breath brushing across my neck.

He slides his hand along my thigh and leaves it there. My skin tingles where he’s touching me. Sam smells like cologne. I want to bury my nose in his warm skin and inhale, but I don’t. I can see Cassie glaring at me from the corner of my eye.

We watch the second period of the game like that—with me on Sam’s lap—for the next twenty minutes. Part of me wants to pinch myself to make sure this is real. The guys are commenting the entire time, analyzing each play, but I don’t hear any of it. All I can focus on is Sam’s thumb as it strokes along the skin of my leg, leaving chill bumps in its wake. The little bit of alcohol I had is coursing through my veins, lighting me up. And my body is on fire right now, the heat from Sam’s skin scorching through my clothes. When his hand drifts to my bare stomach, landing there, my thighs clench. His pinkie slips beneath the waistband of my skirt.

I hear him chuckle in my ear as I tense from the intimate touch. He knows exactly what he’s doing to me.

When the period is over and intermission starts, the music is turned up, and Mike challenges Kenny, the left winger, to shotgun a beer with him. Cassie and Andrea start dancing in the middle of the room, aware that most of the eyes are on them. I don’t miss the way Cassie glances over at Sam more than once, hoping to get his attention.

“Let’s go outside,” Sam whispers in my ear. “It’s hot in here.”

When I look over at him, we’re mere inches apart. He has a smattering of freckles across his nose that are faint and only noticeable when we’re this close. I can smell the beer on his breath, and I wonder how many he’s had tonight.

“Okay,” I agree, rising from his lap.

He grabs my hand as he stands and turns, lacing our fingers together.

I catch Madison's eye as I'm trailing behind the tall blond.

She winks at me in encouragement.

Sam grabs two new drinks on our way through the kitchen, but this time, he doesn't drop my hand, balancing the beverages against his body. He opens the back door, and we step outside. The yard is shrouded in darkness. We take a seat on the stoop. The concrete is cool and damp beneath my legs. I pop the top of my White Claw and take a sip, setting it down beside me so I can lean back on my palms.

I'm glad for the alcohol already in my system. I have a light buzz going, and it's settling my nerves.

Chase is right. I am a lightweight.

This is the first time I've been alone anywhere with Sam. I don't notice the moon or the stars. I don't feel the chill in the air. All I'm aware of is him sitting next to me. His thigh is brushing against mine, and the fact that his skin is covered by jeans does nothing to dampen the contact.

He leans back against the railing, angling his body toward me. I can feel his gaze traveling along the side of my face.

"Why don't you ever talk to me at school?" he asks.

My eyes widen as I meet his cloudy orbs. "Why don't you ever talk to me?"

"I've tried," he counters, noticing my disbelieving expression. "I *have*. You're not the easiest girl to approach."

"Why do you say that?" I ask.

"Well, your brother, for one."

"Ollie's been gone for over a year," I argue.

"He's gone ... but he isn't."

And I know what Sam means. Ollie is off at college, but somehow, his presence still lingers. Especially around this group.

"And you're intimidating."

I snort, causing a grin to spread across his face.

“You are,” he insists.

I shake my head and look off into the distance. “I never thought I’d see the day that Sam Anderson called *me* intimidating. The only guy in the entire school who could have any girl he wants.”

There’s silence for a few beats as my statement sits between us.

He reaches out to trail a fingertip down my calf. Then, he leans closer.

“If that were true,” he murmurs, “then I would have had you a long time ago.”

Man, he’s smooth.

Is this a line?

I don’t think I care if it is.

“You never acted like you wanted me,” I challenge. “You never made a move.”

His fingers grasp my chin, turning my head until we’re facing each other.

“Did you want me to?” he asks, his eyes flickering to my mouth.

“Maybe,” I admit softly, not wanting to show all my cards at once.

We breathe the same air for a few seconds.

And then, in the blink of an eye, the space between us vanishes. And Sam Anderson, the guy I’ve obsessed over for three years from a safe distance, is kissing me.

His lips are soft at first, and then the pressure increases. I open for him, and his tongue slips inside. He tastes like beer and excitement, all wrapped in one. His hand is at the back of my neck, tipping my head so he can deepen our connection. He’s pressing my chest against his, my soft curves molding to his chiseled muscles. His other hand is sliding up my thigh and slipping beneath the hem of my skirt. But he stalls on my upper leg.

It's everything I've ever dreamed about, only more.

When he finally pulls back, we're both breathing hard.

"I've wanted to do that for two years now," he growls, leaning his forehead against mine.

"Only two?"

I've been wanting it since the moment I saw you.

I feel the warmth across my lips as he scoffs out a chuckle.

"I'm serious, Oakley. I've been waiting for you to notice me for a while."

I close my eyes, absorbing his words. Swimming in the feeling of this moment.

I hope I'm not dreaming.

When I open my lids, Sam's still there. His stormy irises are watching me. His hair is tousled and messy, just the way I like it. I run my fingers through it to test the softness. It's just as silky as I always imagined it would be. And he doesn't pull away from me the way he shifted back from Cassie earlier.

We kiss again.

I memorize every detail of the moment. The way the night air cools my skin. The scent of Sam's cologne, mixed with the fresh smell of rain from earlier. The way his mouth feels when we connect again. The taste of his tongue as it dances with mine. The sensation of his fingers mapping trails along my body, igniting electric pulses in my nerve endings that I never knew existed.

I imprint every detail on my brain so I'll never forget it.

Just in case this is a one-off.

Just in case this is part of his ammo and I turn out to be just another girl to him on any other night.

Because I don't trust it yet.

I don't trust him.

But I enjoy every single second of it.

Chapter Four

Oakley

I lace my arms around my body and hug my torso, trying to generate some heat. The arena feels extra cold tonight. I feel off center and unsteady with this jersey on.

But I also feel *alive*.

“These intermissions take too long,” Madison grumbles at my side, popping a fresh piece of buttered popcorn into her mouth.

I reach across to steal the Coke sitting on her armrest. I take a long pull through the straw.

“I thought you wouldn’t mind the wait.” I smirk, placing the cup back down. “It’ll give you more time to think about Chase.”

“That ship has sailed, my friend,” she sighs, slumping in her seat. “I threw down my best game for that kid, but got nothing in return. No interest, no flirting. Nothing. Nada. Zilch.”

“Maybe he’s still seeing Samantha,” I say, searching my memory for recent sightings of the two together.

She shrugs, slicing her eyes to mine. “Or maybe he’s in a relationship with hockey.”

I laugh. “We already know that’s true. He’s been married to the sport since I’ve known him. Just like Ollie.”

“You should’ve hooked me up with your brother years ago,” my friend laments, crossing one leg over the other. “I wouldn’t mind coming in second to the sport for him.”

I scrunch my nose. “Gross.”

“What?” she challenges, lifting her eyebrows. “Ollie’s hot.”

“Don’t ever say that to me again,” I command, only partially kidding.

She laughs, purposely poking the bear. This isn’t the first time she’s described my brother as good-looking. And it isn’t the first time I’ve shut her down on the subject.

I watch as the Zamboni exits the rink. The ice glows beneath the lights. All the scuffs and divots made from the previous period are invisible now.

I inhale the cold and the slight chemical scent from the processed frozen water. It smells like home here. I’ve grown up watching my brother play. Some of my first memories were of him practicing in the arena or of me playing in the stands at his games.

The frigid temperatures sink into my skin again, and I pull the sleeves of the jersey down over my hands.

“You would think you’d want to hook your friend up now that you’re the number one chick in Sam’s life. Share the love, so to speak,” Madison mumbles.

“Don’t jump the gun,” I say cautiously. “We’ve only been on a couple of dates.”

Turns out, that night at Mike Hoarst’s house wasn’t a one-off. Sam messaged me the next day. And the next. He asked me out the first night we both had free. We went to dinner and a movie, just the two of us. He held my hand and kissed me good night. He started meeting me between classes at school and sat beside me during lunch. And then yesterday, he brought his jersey over for me to wear to the game tonight.

Madison rolls her eyes. “These guys,” she starts, pointing to the ice, where our team is emerging from the locker room, “don’t give their jerseys to girls to wear unless they’re serious about them. Have you ever seen Sam do that before in all the time we’ve known him?”

“No,” I admit.

I want Madison to be right. I want this to mean something. I want Sam and me to be an *us*. And things have been going so well ...

I shake my head.

I can't think that way yet. Not until he says the words. Because I know this is uncharacteristic of the hockey star. And I guess the cynic in me is waiting for the bottom to drop out.

“He put his name on your back. He's branded you. That means something, Oakley.”

I hope so.

We watch as the third period starts. The score is tied two-all. We're playing our across-town rivals, Flescher Hall, so the tension is high. There's no love lost between these two teams. I stop feeling the cold as soon as the puck drops, and Sam wins the face-off.

About midway through the period, Sam gets a breakaway, but his shot on goal is blocked. The defenseman on the other team checks him into the wall—hard. He goes down. I'm on my feet as I watch Chase and Mike skate over, getting into number thirty-three's face before helping Sam back up.

Sam moves to the side and leaves the ice, appearing dazed.

Play continues while the trainer assesses him on the bench. He must be okay because, a short time later, his helmet is back on.

The puck goes back and forth. There are five minutes left on the clock. The other team is in control as Chase skates backward, squaring his body in defense. He blocks the passing lane, and the puck ricochets off his stick and right into thirty-three's possession.

As he skates by, I can see the determination on Chase's face. His sole focus is on the hockey player in his path—the one who checked Sam into the wall a few minutes ago—and the position of the puck as the player maneuvers closer to the goal. Just as he passes it, Chase plows into him right in front of me—retribution for the earlier hit on his teammate.

My mouth drops open. I can feel the force from the collision from where I'm sitting. The wall is still rattling from it. I'm on my feet with the crowd around me.

I'm not surprised that Chase retaliated. He's known to mix it up when needed, and I've never seen him back down from a fight. But he's far from the enforcer of the team. I would give that honor to Mike or Kenny.

I have a clear view of Chase's face through his cage as his opponent jumps to his feet, ready to mix it up. Chase smirks and then says something I can't hear. Thirty-three's face turns red as he lunges for him. The other team holds their player back, knowing if he throws a punch at Chase, he'll be tossed out of the game.

Thirty-three's glare follows Chase off the ice as he skates back to the bench.

Sam knocks fists with my friend as he sits, and another player takes his place.

I settle back into my seat, watching them from across the rink. The camaraderie and the way they always have each other's backs are what I like most about hockey. It translates into life outside of the stadium as well. You can't get into one of their faces without the entire team coming for you. And they don't mind using their fists to communicate.

It's brutal at times.

And savage.

But it's so hot.

With two minutes to go, Chase and Sam are back on the ice. Our goalie makes an incredible save as the team regroups. The puck is passed to Sam, and he maneuvers around a couple of players. He's one of the best skaters out there, and it shows. The puck makes its way around the group and finds Chase, who's hovering near the blue line. He rears back and hits a slap shot toward the goal.

It's a bullet, but the goalie reacts, blocking it with his body. When it hits his chest, the puck bounces a couple of feet in front of the net, right where Sam is planted. He knocks it in.

And with one minute left, we go up by one.

Sam skates off with his hands in the air. Mike and Kenny jump on his back, nearly knocking him to the ground. Chase glides up to join the celebration. Then, they skate along the bench in a single file line, bumping gloves with the rest of the guys, just like the pros.

The other team gets another two shots on goal, but nothing crosses the line. The place explodes when the clock hits zero.

Madison and I are on our feet with our student section, hugging as the guys pile onto each other on the ice. This was a big win. We're ranked first in our division. Our rivals are second. We'll meet again in a few weeks, but both sides wanted this victory badly. You can see it in the elation on our team's faces and the slumped shoulders of our opponent's as they leave the arena.

"Party at Analise's!" Madison yells in my ear after checking her phone.

We don't wait for the guys to shower after the game. Their families will be front and center outside of the locker room anyway, vying for their attention. I'm starving, and so is my bestie. So, we head to a local fast-food restaurant to grab some food.

It's an hour later when we're walking through the front door of Analise's place. By the size of the crowd, I think the entire student section is here. We had to park on the next street over.

The music is pulsing when we enter the house. I spot Sam and the guys right away, holding court in the center of the living room. Sam is surrounded by several of his teammates and a bunch of girls. He's recounting a story, his arms flailing around, and his face is flushed. His laugh is louder than most, his personality larger than life. He has the attention of everyone in the room.

He's magnetic. And not just with the females. The other guys are drawn to him too.

I watch as he pulls Chase closer, slinging an arm around his neck. He ruffles his hair affectionately as Chase shoves away from him. I can hear him give Chase props for the hit on

number thirty-three, acknowledging his teammate for having his back.

Chase smirks and rolls his eyes. The tips of his ears are red from the attention. My old friend has always preferred to be on the outside, looking in. I'm sure he's uncomfortable, being drawn into the middle of the spotlight.

He pushes away from Sam and leaves the circle, heading in our direction. The defenseman stops right in front of Madison and me. I'm forced to crane my neck to look at his face.

"Hey," he says, his eyes traveling over each of us. I watch as his gaze freezes on me when he sees the uniform I'm wearing. "What's this?" He reaches out to brush his fingers across the number, briefly tugging the material.

Twenty-one.

Sam's number.

"Sam asked her to wear it," Madison supplies smugly.

Chase nods his head, his expression unreadable. "I see ..."

"Tell her it means something," my best friend continues. "Oakley seems to think it's no big deal that Sam wanted her in his jersey. I think it's a *huge* deal."

"With Sam," he says, watching me with those murky-green irises, "you never know."

I'm waiting for the brotherly defenseman to emerge. The one who's been taking the place of Ollie ever since he left for college, warning me away from his teammates. Pushing me away when I tried to kiss him. But Chase just stands there with a blank expression.

My eyes flicker over his shoulder to see Cassie standing in front of Sam. She rises on her tiptoes to whisper in his ear, her hand resting on his chest.

I sigh as my mouth falls into a frown.

Chase glances over his shoulder and then back at me. "Be careful there ..."

I'm not sure if the warning is about Cassie or Sam. But before he can elaborate, pink-painted fingernails snake around his neck. Samantha Warnley's arms hug Chase from behind, her lips pressing against his neck.

Madison and I exchange a glance, both of our eyebrows elevated.

I guess that answers our question about whether they are still dating.

"I think I'm going to grab a drink," Madison croons.

"I'll come with you."

She takes my hand as we weave through the bodies on our way to the kitchen, leaving Chase and his fling behind. It's just as packed as the living room, but the music is lower in here, so it's easier to talk.

"Oakley!" Mike yells. "Mads! It's about time you got here." He notices my jersey. "What the hell is this? You're wearing Anderson's number tonight?"

A few heads swivel in our direction as his voice carries.

I fill a cup with ice and pour Pepsi into it.

"Yeah." I snort. "Me and about a hundred other people."

"I don't think those other ninety-nine peeps were given the jersey by the man himself," Madison says beneath her breath.

She isn't helping my attempt to fly beneath the radar because Mike hears every word.

He lifts a bushy eyebrow and rubs his palms together. "Very interesting."

I take a sip of my drink.

"There you are," a deep voice growls from behind.

Sam's arms wind around my waist, pulling my back into his chest. The scent of his cologne and the soap he used in his postgame shower envelop me. His lips dive to my neck, and I bend reflexively, his big body engulfing my smaller frame. His hand rises until he's lightly gripping my chin, and my head is

rotated until our lips meet. I hear a few catcalls and whistles in the background, but I'm lost in our connection when he deepens the kiss.

"Hey," he murmurs against my mouth when we part.

"Hey," I whisper, watching him beneath hooded eyes.

"Since when does Little Burnham wear your jersey, Anderson?" Mike asks Sam, slapping him on the shoulder.

"Since now," he replies resolutely, surprising me and everyone in the room. His gaze doesn't leave mine. "It's time everyone knows that Oakley's my girl."

My eyes widen.

"That's quite the declaration," I say.

He leans down to brush my mouth with his lips again, and my stomach flips. "Am I wrong?"

Those hazy gray irises are waiting for my answer. His arms tighten around me.

I give a subtle shake of my head. "You're not wrong."

When Sam leans against the island in the middle of the room with me still cocooned within his arms, my eyes meet Madison's.

Told you, she mouths.

And I can't stop the contented smile from widening across my face.

Sam steals my cup and takes a long drink, his Adam's apple bobbing as he swallows. "That would be better with a little whiskey in it."

I smile, relinquishing the cup.

He walks across the room and replaces the Pepsi with Coke, topping it off with two to three shots' worth of Crown Royal. After stirring it, he tips it back, eyeing me over the rim. I'm rewarded with a sexy wink as he lowers it again before offering it to me.

I take a sip, cringing from the overpowering taste of alcohol.

“That’s too strong for me,” I admit, handing it back to him.

He chuckles, catching my hand and pulling me into him. When he kisses me again, all I can taste is the whiskey, but I decide I like the flavor better on his tongue than I do from the cup.

“How’s your head?” I ask while I have his attention.

I run my fingers through his thick mane like it’s my right, my eyes flashing between both of his to assess for any damage.

“I’m fine,” he insists.

Yes, you are.

We stay in the kitchen for the next thirty minutes, talking with Mike, Madison, and whoever else enters. Sam is affectionate, always touching me or holding me. I never thought I’d like to be smothered, but I’m eating up every second of it. I can’t get enough of his touch. We’re never quite close enough. And I’m riding high right now.

Because Sam chose me.

In front of everyone.

“I need to use the bathroom,” I tell him, breaking away.

He tips his chin but keeps rehashing tonight’s game with Mike.

I walk down the hallway. Surprisingly, there isn’t a line for the downstairs bathroom. Probably because there’s another full and half bath on the opposite end of this floor. So, I head right in and take care of business.

When I open the door to leave, I hear shuffling to my left. The hallway is dark, but I can make out two figures embracing in the shadows. My eyes adjust to the dim lighting, and I see Chase kissing Samantha, his large palm gripping her ass. She has her back to me, and she’s wound around my friend like a python, grinding into him.

I smirk, attempting to stay quiet so I don’t interrupt them. But when I take a step, the floor creaks under my weight, and Chase’s eyes pop open. His mouth is still connected to the petite blonde in his arms as his eyes find me.

Sorry, I mouth.

He pulls away, and Samantha's ponytail whips around when she looks in my direction.

"Hi, Samantha." I smile sheepishly. "I didn't mean to interrupt."

She returns the grin, her cheeks flushed from the make-out session with Chase. "It's fine. I was just waiting for the bathroom."

"It's all yours." I wave toward the vacated space.

She slides past me and shuts the door behind her.

"So ... you and Samantha," I say, leaning against the wall across from Chase.

He props his shoulder on the other side, shrugging.

I narrow my eyes at his attempt to play it off. Like I didn't just see him nearly sucking her face off.

"I like her," I insist.

And I do. Samantha is sweet. She's smart and athletic. We played on the same soccer team when we were kids. I've known her for years. So has Chase.

When he stays quiet, I keep probing. "I heard a rumor you were dating."

He scoffs and looks away. "I think she started that rumor."

I roll my eyes, wondering why guys always feel the need to pretend they don't care. As if caring less gives them power.

"Samantha is great. You could do a lot worse."

I can hear the water running inside the bathroom, but I keep my voice low anyway so she doesn't overhear our conversation.

The silence stretches again, and my frustration grows.

"You don't have to act like you don't like her. Not with me."

"I never said I don't like her," he finally answers, but his expression is stony. Like I'm bothering him with my

questions. “I just said we weren’t dating.”

“Hockey first, right?” I ask, assuming that’s the reason.

He watches me for a few seconds. “Right.”

We hear a commotion in the other room, both of our heads whipping in that direction. Sam’s voice rises above the ruckus.

“What the fuck are you doing here, Adams?” Sam yells.

Chase stalks down the hallway with me right on his heels. When we make it to the living room, Sam is standing in the middle of the space with his hands fisted at his sides. His face is flushed red, and his jaw is clenched. Three guys I’ve never seen before are facing him. Mike and the rest of the team are assembled behind Sam, like a small army.

I nearly bump into Chase’s back when he suddenly stops. My hand lands on his hard frame to steady myself. I lean up on my toes and shift my palm to his shoulder to angle closer to his ear.

“Who is that?” I whisper.

“Some of the guys from Flescher Hall’s hockey team,” he says over his shoulder.

The team we just played.

The team we just *beat*.

That’s not good.

“Stay here,” Chase orders, moving farther into the room.

He steps beside Sam to face the new arrivals.

“We were invited,” the tall, dark-haired guy at the front insists.

Adams.

He’s wearing his school colors with the number thirty-three on his jacket.

“Well, now, you’re uninvited,” Chase quips.

Adams scoffs out a humorless laugh. “Matthews.” He tips his chin at Chase. “I’m still pissed at you for that cheap shot in the third.”

“That was a clean hit,” Chase argues. “And well deserved after your hit on Anderson.”

Adams smirks. “If Anderson can’t take a shot, he’ll never make it at the college level.”

Sam takes a step forward, stopping when Chase puts the back of his hand on his chest.

We all know if Sam gets into a fight tonight—or any of the guys—and Coach catches wind of it, there’ll be consequences. I’m sure Adams knows that too. It’s probably why he’s goading him right now.

“Leave,” Chase says, nodding toward the front door. “Or we’ll show you out.”

He laughs again, shaking his head. Then, he glances over at Bethany, one of our classmates. “Are you coming?”

Bethany walks closer to one of the guys standing with Adams. He throws an arm over her shoulders with a smirk.

Bethany was talking to Kenny over the summer. I wonder if that’s what this is really about. A pissing contest between guys at rival schools over a girl.

Adams and his teammates turn to leave. I catch his eye as he’s passing by on his way to the front door and he stops in front of me.

“You’re Burnham’s little sister, right?”

Most of the hockey world has heard of my brother. At least the leagues around here.

I nod.

His eyes flit down to my jersey, lingering on the twenty-one.

I watch his eyes heat as the corner of his mouth lifts into a smirk.

“If I had known you were such a hot little number,” he murmurs, leaning closer, “I would’ve looked you up a long time ago.”

I flinch when he reaches out to touch my cheek.

For a brief moment, it's like time stands still.

But in the next second, a fist comes across, striking Adams in the face. He stumbles, taking me with him as my shoulder rams into the opposite wall. Then, Adams pounces on the aggressor.

Before I know it, Samantha is standing at my back, and Adams and Chase are punching each other while Sam and Mike and Kenny are trying to pull them apart.

Adams has a gash across his cheek, and Chase has a red streak on his temple. Both guys are breathing hard as they face each other, glaring after being separated. Chase is still wrapped up in Kenny's arms as the winger holds him back.

Adams spits bloody sputum on the hardwood floor, wiping the carnage from his cheek. He points at Chase and then at Sam. "I'll see you two on the ice in a few weeks."

"You can count on it," Sam growls.

Adams turns to leave, making a show of winking at me in the process. "I'll see you soon too, sweetheart."

Sam's nostrils flare, and Chase looks feral. Mike steps in between them as Adams retreats, trying to prevent any further melee.

The party is quiet for a minute after the door shuts behind the intruders. I breathe out a sigh of relief, relaxing my shoulders. Sam steps in front of me.

"Are you okay?" he asks, his fingers and eyes tracing my face and body to make sure I wasn't injured.

"I'm fine."

Chase walks up, and Samantha touches his face, where the red mark is now bruising.

He turns his head away. "Don't baby me, Samantha."

Her eyes dim, and her mouth drops into an unhappy line. She stares at him for a moment before moving away.

Sam chuckles, shaking his head over at Chase. "Adams is such an ass." He strokes a fingertip down my cheek, turning his

attention back to me. “You wanna get out of here?”

I nod, suddenly tired.

“I’ll take her,” Chase says, meeting Sam’s eyes when they shift. “You’ve been drinking.”

“I’ve only had one,” Sam argues.

Chase raises his brow. “One, huh? If you get pulled over tonight, you can kiss the rest of the season goodbye.”

They have a silent conversation between the two of them for a few seconds before Sam gives in.

“Fine,” the blond center says. “But will you drop me off too?”

Chase nods.

The three of us gather our things. Madison decides to stay since her curfew isn’t until midnight.

We end up grabbing something to eat before going home. I watch as the guys dive in ravenously. It’s likely their fourth or fifth meal of the day, but they consume food like they’re starving. My brother always did too. It’s irritating that they can eat like that without an ounce of fat on either one of them. I guess that’s what skating all day does for you.

Sam insists that Chase drop me off first, so he does. Sam walks me to the door.

He brushes my hair behind my shoulder. “I like the way this looks on you,” he murmurs, standing close and eyeing the jersey.

I’ve never fully understood the appeal of wearing a guy’s clothes. Until now. There’s a possessiveness that goes along with it. A branding of sorts. It’s like I’m announcing to the world that I’m his. And I like the way it feels.

“Keep all those other assholes away from you,” he continues.

I stroke the side of his face. “I’m glad you didn’t get hit tonight.”

He chuckles. “I was going for Adams the minute he touched you, but Matthews pushed me out of the way.”

I glance back at the truck idling in my driveway. Chase is in the driver's seat with his eyes on his lap. The glow of his phone is illuminating his face and stealing his attention.

"Chase has always felt this need to protect me when Ollie isn't around. I guess old habits die hard."

"He's a good guy," Sam admits. "But he stole my thunder a bit. That should've been me defending you."

"That douchebag doesn't care about me," I insist. "He was just trying to get a rise out of you."

Sam slides his hand around the back of my neck, inching closer. "Well, it worked."

When he kisses me, I feel that same tingling in my lower stomach I experience every time he's near. We're still devouring each other a couple of minutes later, and I guess Chase grows impatient because he flicks his headlights on and off twice.

Sam chuckles against the side of my face, lifting his middle finger in Chase's direction.

"I'll call you tomorrow," he promises.

Then, he kisses the side of my head and walks back to the truck.

Chapter Five

Oakley

“Hold still,” Madison commands, grabbing another strand of dark hair.

We’re in my bathroom, facing the mirror, while my bestie layers soft waves in my hair.

“I can’t believe prom is already here,” I whine, wondering where the time has gone.

It’s May, the end of our senior year of high school.

The guys had a great hockey season, capping it off with a state championship win in March. They met Flescher Hall in the finals and beat them four goals to one to claim the title. Sam and Chase managed to avoid getting into any more fights with Adams, though there’s been plenty of trash-talking along the way. Most of our classes are winding down, and we graduate in three short weeks. Now, the last major dance of our high school lives is here. Prom.

“Don’t get sentimental on me,” Madison says, unwinding my hair from the hot rod.

She runs her fingers through my strands a few times and then finishes it with setting spray.

I cough, waving my hand in front of my face to clear the fumes. “I can’t help it. It’s all coming to an end.”

She rolls her eyes, leaning closer to her reflection to apply a coat of lip gloss to her plump lips. “It’s not the end. It’s the beginning.” She turns until we’re facing, placing her hands on my shoulders to give me an enthusiastic shake. “We’ll be in college next year! Together! No curfews. New boys. Freedom. It can’t come fast enough as far as I’m concerned.”

Sam, Chase, Mike, Madison, and I are all attending the same university next fall. Sinclair University, where Ollie goes. All three guys clinched hockey scholarships. Sam and Chase had their choice of multiple programs but chose the in-state option because of the elite hockey program there. And I secretly think Chase wants to play on the same team as my brother again. The college is about two hours away from home. Just far enough to get plenty of freedom, but close enough that we can come back whenever we want, according to Madison.

“I can just feel it all changing,” I lament.

“Yeah,” she scoffs, “for the better.” She moves into my bedroom. “Let’s get dressed. Mike texted me a few minutes ago. He said they’d be here in ten.”

Madison is going to the dance with Mike, and I’m going with Sam.

Sam and I have been going strong all year. My fears that the night of our first kiss was a chance encounter were all for nothing. Sam stepped up big time, proving me and all the haters wrong. He’s been committed and loving. He’s claimed me repeatedly in front of all our friends, much to the disappointment of most of the female population at our school.

I’m his first official girlfriend, though he’s dated plenty before me.

And he’s my first boyfriend.

Last week, Sam told me he loved me for the first time. Things are good. Better than good. I’m the happiest I’ve ever been. It’s like all my dreams are coming true. I’ve landed my Prince Charming. We’re in love. We’re attending the same college in a few months. All the pieces are coming together, better than if I had conjured them up on my own.

I finally let my guard down completely a few months ago and stopped waiting for it to all fall apart. Now, I’m just enjoying the ride.

“You look amazing,” I say to Madison when we’re standing in front of the full-length mirror in my room, scrutinizing our final appearances.

“*We* look amazing,” she amends. “That color does crazy things to your eyes.”

Our makeup is on point, our hair perfectly tamed. Madison is wearing hers up to highlight her rounded shoulders and delicate collarbone in her strapless pink dress. Mine is cascading down my back. I’m wearing a strapless dress, too, the same style as hers, but in an emerald-green color that makes my teal eyes pop. And Madison used smoky shades to highlight them even more.

I reach down to adjust the strap on my heels. “Mike’s jaw is gonna hit the floor when he sees you. You look hot, Mads.”

“You know Mike and I are going as friends,” she insists.

Maybe Madison and Mike haven’t taken the next step in their friendship. But I’ve seen the way he’s been looking at her lately. And the way his eyes linger on my girl is way more than just friendly.

We hear the doorbell chime downstairs.

My stomach somersaults with nervous energy.

Madison traipses over, throwing her arms around my shoulders. We rest our foreheads against one another.

“Let’s have the best time tonight,” she says tenderly.

“The best,” I agree.

“I love you, Oakley.”

“Love you too, Madison.”

My mom calls us from downstairs.

Madison and I give one final squeeze to each other before we part.

“Now, who’s getting sentimental?” I joke as we walk to the bedroom door.

My parents and Madison’s mom are waiting on the first floor. They’re all congregated in the living room and foyer, their eyes pointing up the stairs to catch the first glimpse of us in our dresses.

But all I see when I look down is Sam.

He's standing there in his black tux, his dirty-blond hair smoothed back from his face. He looks so handsome; my breath is momentarily stolen. His eyes are lasered on me. He's holding a plastic container with a red corsage. His mouth drops open as he takes in my body draped in this dress.

And it's exactly the reaction I was hoping for.

I make my way down the stairs, careful not to trip in my high heels, and stop in front of him.

"Hi," I whisper.

His eyes trail the features of my face and head south, landing on my painted toenails in the open-toed heels I'm wearing.

"You look so fucking good," he murmurs, keeping his voice low so the words stay between us.

I smile.

He places the corsage on my wrist.

We pose through the requisite pictures taken by our parents to memorialize the night—first as a couple, then as a group. Twenty minutes have elapsed before we make our way out of the house and into the limo the guys rented.

As soon as the door is closed and prying eyes are removed, Sam dives into my neck, licking and sucking on my skin. His palm grazes the side of my breast.

"You look so hot, Oak."

His pupils are dilated. He's wearing the same cologne from the first night we met.

"Down, tiger," Mike jokes from his seat.

I pull back so I can study Sam. My eyes linger on the features of his face. His strong jaw and thin lips. His gray eyes that become nearly black every time we start kissing or touching. I didn't think it was possible to love him more than I did when we were just a dream. Because he was perfect in my head back then. But reality has trumped that image time and time again.

We stop to pick up more of our friends along the way. Mike pulls out a flask, and the four of us take a shot from it before heading into the dance. We sit at a table with most of the senior hockey guys, including Chase. He brought Samantha as his date. No surprise there.

Chase never has acknowledged that he and Samantha are an item, but he usually brings her to functions requiring a plus-one. And I guess she's okay with their status, whatever it is. Because she's always willing to be on his arm when he asks.

The food isn't good, but I'm not here for the meal. Sam and I dance to the fast and slow songs even though Sam usually isn't much of a dancer. But he's the life of the party, as usual. A circle forms around him as he puts on a show more than once. A couple of different girls ask him to dance—including Cassie—but he declines, pulling me into his arms instead.

He chooses me.

He's always choosing me.

Making me feel like the most envied girl in the world.

We stay for hours, enjoying our friends. When it's time to leave for the after-party at Mike's house, Sam pulls me to the side. He flashes a key card from his pocket.

"I got us a room for the night," he says carefully, watching my face.

He looks uncertain, which is unusual for Sam. He's typically so full of confidence that it oozes into his words and demeanor.

"If you want," he adds.

His stormy eyes shift between both of mine.

"You don't want to go to the after-party?" I ask.

I was sure he'd want to be with his friends tonight. His teammates.

He shakes his head slowly, never removing his gaze from me. "I'd rather be alone ... with you."

My stomach flips.

I know what this means.

Sam and I have grown closer over the months. We've taken the physical part of our relationship further, too, touching in ways I haven't with other guys before him. But our time and places are limited. There always seems to be someone at both of our houses, making our encounters stolen and fleeting. I'm a virgin. Sam isn't. But he's been patient with me so far, letting me take the lead and create the boundaries for this part of our relationship.

"We don't have to do anything," he insists. "I just want to spend an entire night with you."

I don't have a curfew tonight. Neither does he. We were planning to stay at the after-party with the rest of our friends.

"I want that too," I admit.

His lips tilt into a sexy smile.

"Yeah?" he asks.

"Yeah." I nod.

He leans in to kiss me. This time, there's something lingering in his touch that hasn't been there before.

Anticipation?

Longing?

Excitement?

Maybe a combination of all three.

My nerves flare, but it feels right at the same time. Sam should be my first. I want it to be him. When I look at him, I see forever. And I want to give him a piece of myself that no one else has had. We're in love. And this seems like the logical next step.

I'm quiet when we enter the limo.

Madison leans over. "Are you good?" she asks, mistaking my silence for unhappiness. There is concern shining in her gaze.

My smile is small but sure. "I won't be at the after-party."

Her brow furrows.

“Sam got a hotel room for us.” I keep my voice low so no one overhears.

Her features relax as her smile grows. “Yeah?”

I nod.

Madison and I are in our own little world as the party rages on around us inside the limousine.

“You want to stay with him?”

I nod again.

She reaches over to squeeze her fingers around my hand.

Last year, Madison slept with Jared Ackerman, a guy she dated for a few months. He was older than us by a couple of years. She told me every detail of the encounter. How it hurt, then felt good. How she wished she had waited a little longer because Jared’s family moved away shortly afterward and they haven’t spoken much since.

“If you change your mind when you get there, you can always say no,” she insists.

“I know.”

But I won’t want to.

When the vehicle pulls up in front of Mike’s house, Sam and I get out with everyone else. He runs inside to get the overnight bags that we stashed here earlier in anticipation of spending the night while I stand next to the long black car.

Madison and I hug goodbye. She gives me a knowing wink and a coy smile.

I laugh as I watch her disappear into the house.

I lean against the side of the limo.

Chase and Samantha are the last two to enter Mike’s house. But Chase pauses on the porch, glancing over his shoulder at me.

“Did you forget something, Oakley?” he asks, raising his voice to be heard across the yard.

I shake my head.

He spins on his heel and walks back down the steps and across the driveway. Samantha follows him, lacing her arm through his and resting against his shoulder when they both stop in front of me.

“What are you doing?” Chase asks with a frown.

“Waiting for Sam,” I say, not wanting to announce to the world that we’re staying in a hotel tonight. I especially don’t want Chase to know because he’ll likely run and tell Ollie.

“I saw him go inside.”

“I know,” I say, shifting on my feet.

My heels are pinching my toes. I reach down to pull them off, one at a time, my soles hitting the coarse pavement as the shoes dangle from the ends of my fingers.

I shift my attention to Samantha. “You look beautiful tonight. I meant to tell you that earlier.”

“My hair’s a mess now.” She laughs, pushing a few loose strands behind her ear. “And so do you.” She flashes a tired smile and gives a lazy yawn. “That color looks amazing with your eyes and dark hair.”

“Thanks.”

Chase is still studying me with a furrow between his brows.

“Come inside,” he demands. “I don’t like you standing out here alone.”

I roll my eyes.

“Always trying to protect me,” I murmur. “I’m a big girl, Chase. I can take care of myself.”

“I know you can,” he says, glowering at me.

“Do you?” I tilt my head.

The front door to Mike’s house creaks open, and Sam emerges with two bags, one slung over each shoulder.

“Hey, Matthews.” Sam nods in Chase’s direction, tossing the bags into the limo when he reaches the open door.

“You’re not staying?” Chase asks my boyfriend this time.

“Nah, man,” Sam says, pulling his suit jacket off and draping it over my shoulders.

It’s like a heated blanket on my bare skin, radiating the warmth from Sam’s body. And it smells like his cologne.

“I got us a room for the night.” Sam starts rolling the long sleeves of his shirt up his forearms, his attention on the task.

He sounds like he’s bragging, and I don’t like it.

Chase shoots his eyes to mine. I can see all the questions rolling through his mind, but he doesn’t voice them.

I brace myself, waiting for him to protest. Waiting for him to threaten me with my brother. But it’s like a curtain falls over his features, masking them. His stormy eyes bore into me, shouting something from their depths. Something I don’t understand. But through it all, he remains silent.

“Ready, babe?” Sam asks, sliding an arm across my shoulders while kissing the side of my head.

“Ready,” I say.

“Let’s go inside,” Samantha whines, pulling on Chase’s arm. “I’m cold.” She glances over at us. “See you later, Oakley.”

I wave goodbye and climb into the limo, scooting across the seat to make room for Sam.

He shuts the door as Chase turns to walk up to Mike’s house, not glancing back at us again.

“What was that about?” Sam asks, pulling me into his side.

“What? Chase?”

“Yeah.” He nods. “He was acting weird.”

I shrug. “He always acts weird where I’m concerned. I think he promised Ollie he’d watch out for me.”

“He doesn’t need to watch out for you. I’ve got you,” Sam insists.

Ten minutes pass before we pull up to the front of the hotel. Sam grabs our bags again, and we check in at the front desk. I lean against him inside the elevator, nervous butterflies

swirling in my stomach. And then we walk down the hall and through the door of room 512.

I glance around. It's a typical hotel room. There's a bathroom to the immediate right when we enter with a closet across from it, shielded by mirrored doors. A television is mounted on the wall, and a circular table is in the corner. Sliding doors lead to a small balcony across the room with thick curtains on either side. And then the king-size bed sits in the center of the space, like the main attraction.

It's stuffy inside, so I cross the room to turn on the air-conditioning. The soft hum follows as the machine starts to cool the space. Sam drops our bags in the corner. There's a lamp already on by the bed.

I'm standing at the sliding glass doors, gazing out into the midnight sky, which is full of stars and a half-moon, when I feel Sam come up behind me. His hands land softly on my shoulders, tugging on his coat until it's abandoned on the chair next to me. He pulls the curtains shut.

His palms are warm when they start rubbing up and down my upper arms. He pushes my hair to the side, his lips landing on my neck. I shiver from the touch, and I can feel his smile against my skin.

"Are you cold?" he asks, his voice thick with need.

I shake my head, turning around until I'm facing him.

I trace his mouth with my fingertip. He nips at the tip, capturing it and sucking on the end before letting go. I can feel the heat start to build in my lower stomach and between my legs as the anticipation grows.

Sam kisses me. It starts off soft, gaining intensity as the seconds tick by. His tongue tangos with mine, stroking and playing with me. The fire in my belly ignites. His hands drop to my chest, and he fondles me, sweeping his fingers across my nipples over my dress until they're hard points. I feel his cock growing rigid against my stomach.

Sam reaches behind me and starts to lower the zipper of my dress. The air-conditioning is blowing cold air on my newly

exposed skin, but it doesn't cool me down. I'm on fire everywhere Sam touches me and everywhere he doesn't.

My dress is the only thing covering my braless breasts, so my chest is exposed as it drops to the floor. I step out of the material and my shoes at the same time. Sam stares at me for a few moments as I stand there in only my thong. His gaze is hungry, his pupils dilated. He starts to unbutton his shirt. I help, working the notches at the bottom. He fumbles with the top half, and we meet in the middle until his chest is bare and his shirt is lying next to my dress on the floor.

He's broad and smooth. His skin feels like silk beneath my fingers when I reach for him, but the softness contrasts with his hard muscles beneath. His hands are on my breasts again, playing and molding the pliable tissue, like he can't stand not to touch me. We're both breathing harder.

I follow the trail of dark blond hair from his navel down to his trousers, pausing to flick the button open and lower the zipper. His pants join the rest of our clothes. He's wearing gray boxer briefs, and his hard length is straining against the material. When I hesitate, he removes the underwear himself, tugging mine down my legs next.

And then we're standing in front of each other, completely naked for the first time.

I cross my arms over my chest self-consciously.

"No," he says assuredly, moving them back to my sides. "Let me see you."

The lighting is dim in the room, but it's like there's a spotlight on me. He's memorizing every inch of my skin with his dark, stormy eyes. The gray color is completely swallowed by lust at this point. I can feel the apex of my legs growing wetter.

Sam kisses me again, his hands holding my face. It's hungrier now. His cock is throbbing between our bodies. He's so warm.

He lays me down on the mattress and follows until all I can feel is the weight of him on top of me and the cool cotton of the comforter on my back. His hands are everywhere at once, and he's grinding against me.

I open my legs wider, and Sam angles his hips eagerly until his cock is lodged inside my slit. When he moves this time, he slides against my clit, and I moan at the sensation. The friction causes a delicious pressure from our skin-on-skin contact. My heels go to the mattress and push until I'm able to elevate my hips in time with his, chasing after the high.

I get lost in the feeling, panting as the pleasure grows. I'm not sure where to touch him, my inexperience showing. So, I let him take the lead. I try to enjoy the way the pleasure builds as we're grinding on each other rather than getting lost in my head. My hands automatically drift to his muscular back.

I groan in protest when he shifts his hips away, and the fire between my legs disappears. But his fingers take the place of his length, rubbing me up and down until he sinks into my opening. Prepping me. He's eager, and his fingers are clumsy as they glide across my wet skin. Then, I feel his cock at my entrance.

He pushes with light pressure, the flared head sinking into me.

"Wait." I freeze, my palms against his chest to stop him. "Condom."

Sam's face and chest are pink with want, his features contorted, like he's in pain.

"I'll pull out," he promises, his voice thick with need, begging to keep going.

"No." I shake my head.

A flash of hurt crosses his face. "Do you not trust me? I'm clean."

"It isn't that," I insist, my voice a sultry sound I don't recognize. "I don't want to get pregnant."

Sam is my first. I know I'm not his. But I do trust him. I also know that mistakes happen in the heat of the moment.

He watches me for a beat before his warm body is gone. He moves to his luggage, opening a side pocket. I stare at the contoured muscles of his back and ass. He's a work of art. I have the Statue of David in the room with me. After rustling

around in the bag for a moment, he emerges with a box of condoms in his hand. Removing one from the package, he sheathes himself while I watch. Then, he tosses the rest of the box and the empty wrapper on the side table.

He climbs back on top of me. The heat of his body engulfs me once again. He's sucking on my neck and licking my nipples. And suddenly, without warning, he's sliding his cock inside of me.

I tense.

"Relax," he coaxes, pushing the hair back from my face. "Spread your legs a little more."

I follow his instructions and try to loosen my muscles as the pressure between my legs increases. He seems big to me, but I have nothing to compare him to.

Sam reaches between us to rub my clit while he continues to push further in. He's taking it slow, but I can tell it's a struggle when his jaw tics a few times and his chest heaves. There's a pinching sensation deep inside of me as he penetrates even deeper. Finally, after a few short pulses, he's completely seated, and he stills.

We're as connected as two people can be. I feel full with him inside of me.

Lifting on his elbows, his hands falling to the sides of my face, he watches me.

"Are you okay?" His voice is intimate, barely above a whisper. He kisses my cheeks and forehead. Brushing my lips.

I nod.

"Does it hurt?"

"A little," I admit.

"Just relax," he coaches, stroking my cheek. "It'll feel good in a minute."

And then he starts to move, tentatively at first. He pulls back an inch and pushes back in, moving easily with my lubrication. He retracts a little further, regaining the ground he

lost with a gentle thrust of his hips and taking the rest of my virginity in the process. Slowly, the stretch inside starts to ease. And after a minute or two, he slides all the way out and in without resistance, and I moan as pleasure overtakes the pain. That same feeling I had when he was grinding against my clit earlier starts to build all over again.

There's a throbbing inside, but it's no longer painful. I don't recognize the sounds escaping from my mouth. Sam kisses me as he moves, but my mouth is frozen in a gaped position. I'm too overcome by the sensations he's creating to focus on anything else.

"Are you close?" he asks, gritting his teeth.

"I'm getting there," I say, concentrating on the way the pressure is building in my lower stomach.

"I can't hold off for much longer. It's too good," he growls.

I feel powerful for a moment, like I control his pleasure.

His movements become jerky and faster.

"Put your legs around me," he commands.

I do, and he hikes one side up higher on his hip. His pelvis starts to hit my clit with the new angle as he slides even deeper than before. He moans. My head falls back, and my eyelids close as a spark turns into an earthquake. I start to contract around him as he thrusts hard one last time, dropping his head between my shoulder and neck and groaning out his release.

His body jerks as he comes.

I'm clinging to him as I start to come down from the high.

We're both breathing hard.

And just like that, I fall even deeper into Sam.

We stay wrapped in each other's arms for a few minutes. The air conditioner continues to pump out cool air, humming from a few feet away. All I can smell is our intermingled sweat and sex and Sam's cologne.

He finally lifts his head and tips one side of his mouth into that sexy smirk.

I laugh, running a hand through his hair. I feel closer to him in this moment than I ever have before.

He brushes my lips with his own before pulling out of me.

I cringe at the soreness between my legs when we part—it's a new sensation that I've never experienced before. But there's something about the pain that's also sweet.

The condom is tinged with my blood—physical evidence that my innocence is now gone.

Sam disappears inside the bathroom to dispose of it.

When he returns, we climb under the covers together with me in his arms. We talk for a while, until we can no longer keep our eyes open.

And the next morning, we wake up and do it all over again.

It's the best experience of my life.

And if I wasn't sure before, I'm certain now.

I'm one hundred percent in love with Sam Anderson.

And I'm completely his.

Chapter Six

Oakley

College

“It’s hot as hell outside,” Sam complains as he lugs the last box into the room, dropping it on top of my desk.

“How do you know how hot hell is?” Mike quips, wiping the sweat off his brow with the bottom of his T-shirt as he leans against the wall.

“Well, I’m in hell, living with you every day, so I know what it feels like.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Mike smirks before tipping a bottle of water, draining every last drop. “I’m the perfect roommate.”

Sam turns to me. “Have you seen that movie *Single White Female*?”

“Fuck you,” Mike growls with a laugh.

Sam, Mike, and Chase moved into a rental house recently. No matter what Sam is saying right now, I know they all love living together. Most of the hockey guys pair up and rent houses. At one point in time, the team had a huge mansion with multiple rooms for the players, similar to a frat. But it turned into an *Animal House* situation with nonstop parties and people. So, the coaches shut it down about five years ago, encouraging the guys to split up into smaller groups to keep the chaos under control and the partying to a minimum. It hasn’t worked. They still have ragers on the regular from what I hear.

“I’ll turn the AC down,” I say, walking into the other room to lower the thermostat.

“Let’s get something to eat,” Madison exhales, crashing down onto the sofa in the living room, “and finish unpacking later.”

It’s move-in day at college. Madison and I are sharing a two-bedroom dorm suite at the edge of campus. The main living room, bathroom, and small kitchen are common spaces. And we have separate bedrooms.

“I’ll order a couple of pizzas,” I announce, pulling my phone from the back pocket of my shorts.

“Better make it three larges,” Mike orders in that bossy way of his, walking into the room and flopping down next to Madison. “And make one of them a meat lovers. I’m hungry today.”

“When are you not hungry?” Madison rolls her eyes.

“You promised us pizza and beer if we helped you move in,” Mike reminds her. “Where’s my beer?”

He extends his neck, making a production out of glancing into the kitchen, looking for refreshments.

“I promised pizza,” my roommate amends. “You added the beer part.” She glares at him. “And you know I can’t buy beer.”

“When are you going to get a fake ID?” he asks, tipping his chin arrogantly.

“*You* don’t have one,” she counters.

“I don’t need one.” He smirks gloatingly.

The hockey guys can get into most twenty-one-and-over clubs, even as incoming freshmen. They can probably buy alcohol, too, at one or two of the local convenience stores. Those places are either owned by former hockey players or fans of the sport. Perks of being part of the team, I guess. The rules don’t apply to them. It’s annoying.

“Done!” I say. “Pizza will be here in twenty minutes.”

Sam takes my phone out of my hand, setting it on a side table, then pushes me up against the wall. His hot and sweaty body traps me there as his hands slide around my hips, and his lips crash into mine. He moans into the kiss when I open for him.

“Get a room!” Mike yells, tossing a pillow into Sam’s back.

I laugh, pushing against Sam’s chest for some space. But I’ll admit, it’s a half-hearted attempt on my part.

“It’s a good thing we have separate bedrooms.” Madison smirks.

“Yeah ... because Madison talks in her sleep,” I add, teasing her with my eyes.

“No, I don’t,” she protests.

“You do,” Mike agrees.

My eyebrows lift as I glance from him to her. Madison’s cheeks flush with heat. And she *never* blushes.

“How would you know, Hoarst?” Sam asks, tucking a hand under the bottom of my shirt possessively as he leans a shoulder against the wall beside me.

He acts like he owns my body. And at this point, I think he does.

A sneaky grin colors Mike’s expression. “I never kiss and tell.”

Madison rolls her eyes again, but she won’t look at me.

Interesting.

If the two of them hooked up at some point, it’s news to me. Madison hasn’t said a word, always insisting there’s nothing more than friendship between her and Mike. And Madison tells me everything. At least, I thought she did.

“I don’t want to hear the two of them going at it all night long,” Madison scoffs, turning things back around to Sam and me.

Sam dives into my neck unapologetically again, leaving a red mark as he suctions my skin for a few moments.

Since that first night we slept together, Sam and I have been insatiable. We can't get enough of each other. And now that we're living on our own, it's bound to get worse. Because we have unrestricted access to one another and no parents or curfews in the way.

"Oh, please," Mike scoffs. "We all know Anderson can't last more than a few minutes."

Sam lifts his middle finger, his attention still on the sensitive skin of my neck. I'm panting at this point.

"There's a reason they call me the marathon man," my boyfriend brags.

"Excuse me," I say, pushing him away as my jealousy soars.

I *hate* when he mentions his past conquests. That's a surefire way to fire me up.

"Oh, babe," he groans. "I was talking about me and you."

"You'd better be."

A knock on the door interrupts our banter as Sam's hands start to slip beneath my shirt again. He chuckles when I escape from his grip.

"Don't act like you don't like it," he growls with a wink.

Sam leans against the wall, watching me as I walk across the room to answer the door.

"Chase," I say after flinging it open.

I take a moment to observe the way he crowds the hallway. I haven't seen our friend much this summer. He's filled out more. His shoulders are broader, and his muscles are straining against the material of his white T-shirt—evidence of his training regimen the past few months. The thick chocolate locks on his head are longer on top but a clean fade at the bottom of his neck, like he's had a fresh cut recently. His skin is a golden-tan color. And I think he must've grown another inch because my neck is forced further upward so I can meet his eyes.

"Hi." I smile, stepping aside so he can enter the room.

He pauses once inside to glance around the space. “This is bigger than I thought it would be.”

“Matthews,” Sam greets. “Leave it to you to show up when all the heavy lifting is done.”

Chase snickers, reminding me of the boy I grew up with. He runs a hand through his hair. “I think I timed it just right. You’re the chumps with sweat stains all over your shirts, panting like dogs in heat.”

Sam’s pupils dilate as he looks over at me, his eyes scanning from my head to my legs with a lascivious expression. “You got the *dog in heat* part right.”

“Anderson can’t keep his hands off Oakley today,” Mike confirms.

“That’s every day,” Madison chimes in.

Chase doesn’t say anything as he grabs one of the last seats around our small living space.

“Ollie got out of the moving-in part too,” I tell Chase. “He went home this weekend to help my dad with something.”

Chase glances over at Sam. “I would watch how handsy you get when Ollie’s around if I were you. He’s not as tolerant as the rest of us.”

Ollie is in his junior year here at Sinclair University now. He’s also on the hockey team with these guys again, so they’ll be seeing a lot of each other.

“Where’ve you been, Chase?” Madison asks. “Already got a girl you’re sneaking around with on campus or something?”

“Or something,” he quips.

“If Chase does have a girl,” Sam adds, “you’ll never know about it. He’s like a vault with that shit.”

“Maybe you could learn something about keeping your mouth shut,” Chase says with a pointed look at my boyfriend.

I frown, wondering if Sam has been detailing our sex life to all his teammates and friends. It’s not that I expect him to keep everything to himself—I give Madison plenty of particulars—

but I would hope he's discriminating about who he tells and discreet about it.

"I can't help it if I have the hottest girlfriend on campus." Sam pulls me into him again.

I lean with my back against his chest as he balances our weight against the wall.

Mike flips on the television, finding a football game he wants to watch.

I disentangle myself from Sam after a few minutes and grab drinks from the kitchen as everyone settles around the living room to watch the game. A few minutes later, the pizza arrives. I ordered four specialty pizzas, breadsticks, and fried mozzarella sticks with dipping sauces. I'm aware of how much these guys can eat.

"I'm sorry I couldn't make it sooner," Chase says to me as we fill our plates, side by side. "My mom was up here. She didn't leave until about an hour ago."

"How is your mom?" I ask.

I take a bite of cheesy bread, the cheese on top stretching until I break it and pop it into my mouth.

Chase shrugs. "She's okay, I guess."

I heard from my parents last week that Chase's mom and dad are having problems. I got the impression that they're separating.

I study Chase for a moment, wondering if I should push him to tell me more. But I decide not to. He'll talk about it with me if and when he's ready.

The guys end up sticking around for the entire game. Toward the end, I wander back into my bedroom to organize the space. After a few minutes, I glance up to see Sam in the doorway, watching me unpack the boxes he carried inside. His arms are crossed over his chest as he leans against the doorframe.

"There's a party tonight at McMann's place," he explains.

McMann is one of his new teammates. He's the starting goalie, I think.

"Yeah?" I say, smoothing the fitted sheet over the corners of my mattress.

Sam drops his arms and crosses the room to help me make the bed. I pause for a moment to watch him. I really like having him in my space, doing normal, everyday domestic stuff. I could picture us doing this very thing for years to come. That thought alone is enough to terrify me. But everything with Sam just feels right. It always has.

"You're coming, aren't you?" he asks.

He sits on the edge of my bed, pulling me between his open legs and resting his chin on my chest.

"I don't know ..." I drawl, pretending to consider it. "I'll have to check my calendar and see if I have a better offer first."

Sam growls and tosses me on the bed. I bounce twice when I hit the mattress springs. And then my hockey stud is on top of me, pinning me to the sheets. He kisses me once. Then twice, lingering with our tongues sliding together.

"Anderson," Chase yells from the other room. "We're heading out."

Sam drops his head to my neck, groaning in the process.

"Your ass had better be there," he orders me in that sexy, bossy way of his as he leans back to look at my face.

"I wouldn't miss it."

"We're leaving, Sam. With or without you," Mike hollers in warning.

"I'm coming, assholes."

I laugh as he grumbles the entire time he's standing and walking toward the door.

"I'll see you in a couple of hours," I promise.

"I'll text you the address." He winks at me on his way out the door.

Madison appears once the front door shuts and the place is quiet.

“I thought they’d never leave,” she jokes, throwing herself into the chair at my desk. She glances around my room. “You’ve got a lot of work to do ...”

I narrow my eyes at her as I continue to put things away. “Thanks ... that’s really helpful. I bet your room isn’t any better.”

“Oh, but it is, sweet friend. Because I haven’t been making out with my boyfriend all day long rather than unpacking.”

“No ...” I say, glancing over at her. “But you have been hooking up with Mike behind my back, apparently.”

Her eyes hit the floor, and they don’t return to mine.

“Why didn’t you tell me something happened between you two?”

She sighs loudly. “Because it didn’t mean anything. And I didn’t want everyone teasing me about it.”

My eyebrow lifts. “It seemed to mean something to Mike.”

Madison rolls her cerulean eyes. “It didn’t. It was a one-night thing. It just happened. I don’t plan on it happening again.”

“Why not?” I ask. “Mike’s a good guy.”

“Maybe.” She shrugs. “But I don’t see him like that.”

“You obviously saw him like that the night you hooked up.”

I laugh when she glares at me for calling her out.

“Okay,” she says, standing. “New subject. Are we going to the party at the hockey house tonight?”

“That’s the plan,” I say.

She nods. “Good. I’m single and ready to mingle.” Her blue eyes twinkle as she wrinkles her nose excitedly. “I’m going to jump in the shower.”

“I’m gonna keep working on this room. I’ll jump in when you’re done.”

Madison pauses when she's standing next to me. Her arm slips over my shoulders, and she leans her head against mine, like she's taking it all in for a moment. "Our first night in the new place. We've been talking about it for so long ... it's weird that it's finally happening."

"A good weird?" I ask.

"Nope." She shakes her head, smacking me on the butt before leaving my room. "A *great* weird."

I smile as I watch her go.

I turn on some music and keep unpacking the place until Madison forces me into the shower. We take another hour to get ready before leaving for the party.

After mapping out the route on Madison's phone, we start walking. Luckily, the house is only a few streets away from our dorm, which is nice since parking is always difficult around campus.

Sam and the guys live two short blocks from our building too. It'll be convenient for Sam and me. It's going to be hard enough for us to make time for one another once classes start. With his intense training schedule, practices, games, and then classwork on top of it, time will be at a premium. I know it won't be easy, but I'm confident we can make it work.

Madison winds her arm through mine as we walk down the sidewalk in the darkness. Campus is alive right now. There are people everywhere. I can see the party house lit up in the distance, people standing around the front yard. It looks like the typical frat scene I've watched in movies and on television. And I can feel the butterflies start swirling as we approach the place.

Madison is chattering on about nothing beside me.

Meanwhile, I can't stop the thrumming in my veins.

This is it.

Our first college party.

The beginning of some of the best years of our lives.

Chapter Seven

Sam

“This place is already trashed,” I say, glancing around the first floor of the house with a frown. “Remind me not to throw a party anytime soon.”

Chase chuckles at my side. He knows I come from a house of neat freaks.

My parents are almost OCD about everything being clean and in its place. Even though I grew up in that environment, I’m not that extreme. But I don’t like living in filth either.

I take a sip of lukewarm beer and glance around at the two dozen or so people inside, carrying around red or blue Solo cups. There’s already been at least two spills and one lamp broken. And that’s just what I’ve personally witnessed so far.

The house keeps filling up with more bodies. I guess where the hockey team goes, the people will follow.

It was the same way in high school. But this is another level. I’ve already had my lunch comped twice in town and was told by the guy behind the counter at the gas station yesterday that the first case of beer was on him. The fact that I’m eighteen didn’t seem to matter to him. I took him up on it too.

People treat us like celebrities here. For every spot on the team, there’s at least a dozen or more guys who weren’t talented enough to make the transition to the college level. Those guys would die to be in our positions. I realize that. And I’m grateful for the opportunities I’ve been given. But that isn’t enough for me. I don’t just want to play on the team. I want to be on the first line. I’m hungry for it. And then I want to shine until the pro scouts are clamoring for me, begging me to be the next star in their lineup. I want the glitz and the glam and all that comes with it.

“That girl in the corner has been eyeing you for the past twenty minutes,” Mike says to me, sauntering up. He points to a redhead across the room, not attempting to be discreet about it, before taking a drink of his beer.

Sure enough, she’s staring in my direction when I look over at her. When our eyes meet, the temptress doesn’t look away, giving me an open invitation to approach her. And last year at this time, I would’ve. It’s enticing when I notice the naughty look in her eyes. But things have changed. I’ve changed. I have Oakley now, and everything is great between us. I can’t mess that up for a casual fuck.

I shift my eyes back to Mike and Chase. “Not interested.”

Chase seems oblivious to our conversation.

Mike lifts his eyebrows. “Two words I never thought I’d hear from your mouth.”

I scoff out a laugh, knowing he’s right.

I had a reputation in high school. A well-earned status for jumping from one girl to the next, avoiding all commitment, simply because I could. But I took one look at Oakley that night at Mike’s house, almost a year ago now, and something in me shifted. I’d always thought she was beautiful. I’d wanted to get to know her better for years. But she’s Ollie’s little sis, and there’s an unspoken rule that you don’t touch a teammate’s sister.

I just couldn’t help myself. It wasn’t until I kissed her for the first time on his back porch that I became truly addicted, bypassing all the unspoken rules of the team. Then, when I sank into her warm body on prom night, I officially became a simp. Now, I can’t get enough of her. It’s a borderline obsession. I keep waiting for the day when things will become stale between us. But it hasn’t happened yet. Maybe it never will.

I take another drink of beer, searching the room for my girlfriend’s raven hair and willowy body but coming up empty. She isn’t here yet.

We've been at the party for about two hours now. We came early to help set up the keg, among other things. Three of our teammates are renting this house. Charlie McMann, our starting goalie. And Will Richter and Ben Sims, both upperclassmen. Ben is a winger. Will plays center—the same position as me. It's the spot I want to claim as my own on this new team. And I won't stop until I have it.

I spot Will across the room. He has two women crawling all over him. That conceited smirk he always wears is plastered on his face. I don't look away quick enough, and I snag his attention.

Will navigates through the crowd, making his way to Chase, Mike, and me as we stand against the wall while the party swirls around us. He brings the women with him, one perched under each arm.

“What's up, rookies?” Will asks, nodding his chin arrogantly.

If there is one thing I noticed about Will right away, it's his ego. It's huge. Much bigger than his six-foot-one-inch frame. That ego overshadows his scoring average on the ice too.

Will and I are both conceited assholes. The only difference between us is that I can back it up.

I haven't had many interactions with the starting center so far. Just a team meeting. But it was enough for me to determine that Will isn't my favorite comrade on the ice. We're on the same team, but we're far from teammates. And I'm quickly learning that he enjoys talking down to me.

“This is Allison.” He nods to the blonde under his right arm, gloating, though none of us care. “And ...” He trails off as he glances at the brunette.

“Cindy,” she fills in with a small scowl.

“Right,” he drawls with a lazy, unapologetic grin. “Cindy.”

Will's eyes are glazed. I bet he's been drinking more than beer tonight.

“Anderson,” he says, turning his attention to me. “Why don't you go get the ladies something to drink.”

There's no question mark at the end of his sentence. He's not asking me. He's telling me to do it. And I'm no one's errand boy, rookie or not.

"Ladies," I say, not glancing away from Will as I speak, "the keg is right through there." I raise my arm and point across the room.

"I said, get it for them, not tell them where it is," Will demands, standing a little taller.

"You're entertaining them," I counter, not backing down. "You get it for them."

His eyes narrow, and the easygoing persona he was attempting to portray is lost. He drops his arms from around their shoulders and takes a step closer to me. We're similar in height. I can smell the alcohol on his breath. We're standing nearly chest to chest now, but I don't move an inch. If he wants a fight, I'm ready to go.

"And I'm telling you to do it. *Rookie.*"

"I'm not your bitch," I spit, my jaw clenching as I try to maintain control.

I see Chase and Mike tense next to me, the relaxed postures both held a second ago dissolving as they witness the scene.

I know if I back down to this guy now, he'll ride my ass the entire year.

"You're not my bitch, huh?" he mocks with a bitter laugh. "Well, you will be once we get on the ice."

I smirk. "I guess we'll see, won't we?"

There's a pulse of silence that accentuates the tension brewing between Will and me. It's interrupted when another teammate steps into the circle.

"Hey, Richter," Charlie says. He slaps his hands on his roommate's shoulders. "There's a beer pong game with your name on it outside."

Charlie steers Will away from me without another word, glancing back once or twice, which tells me he witnessed the

standoff, too, even if he's choosing not to acknowledge it out loud. The two women follow behind them.

"Well, fuck," Chase says, blowing out a mirthless laugh as they walk away. "Welcome to college."

Mike takes another drink of beer, his posture relaxing once again.

"He's definitely not my biggest fan," I say with a smirk.

"He's threatened by you," Chase says.

I nod once, my eyes shifting to the kitchen, where Richter is being led out the back door.

There's been a lot of hype surrounding Chase and me over the past year. We both had outstanding senior seasons and multiple offers from renowned college hockey programs. And that buzz has only grown over the last few months. I guess that fanfare managed to make it into the ears of our new teammates.

"He should be threatened," I say with a cocky grin. "Because I plan to take his spot sooner rather than later. Him being a dick only makes it more fun."

Chase and Mike chuckle.

"This is already so different from high school," Mike mumbles.

And it is. Everything is heightened now. Practices and our training schedules are more intense. The expectations are greater. The pressure is looming. We'll play thirty-four games in five months, from November through April.

But the biggest difference so far between high school and college is the competition. Everyone we're playing with and against now is bigger and better. Faster and stronger.

Even though we were all striving to be the best player on the ice the past four years, our team in high school was close. We always had each other's backs. I didn't realize how lucky we were at the time. We didn't have the infighting that some hockey clubs experience. It doesn't seem like we're going to be as fortunate here at Sinclair U. But that's okay. A little

competition has never hurt anyone. And I'm ready to rise to the challenge.

"There's Oakley and Madison," Chase says, tipping his chin toward the front door.

My head whips in that direction. I watch as Oakley walks in, her raven hair shining beneath the living room lights. She's wearing a tank top that curls around her luscious curves and a pair of cutoff jean shorts so tiny that they should be illegal.

They haven't spotted us yet. I watch as Madison leans over to say something in Oakley's ear. My girlfriend nods and starts following her friend across the crowded room, her eyes sweeping from side to side as she looks for someone.

As she looks for me.

Sims stops them midway through the room. He says something that makes them laugh, his eyes sweeping across my girl's body in a way that makes my jaw clench. His gaze gets stuck on her tits as I make my way toward them.

"I'm looking for a beer pong partner." I overhear Sims flirting with Oakley as I approach, gracing her with his best fuckboy grin.

I slide my hands around her waist as soon as I'm within reaching distance and then dip my mouth to hers before she's even registered that I'm standing there. Her lavender smell engulfs me. It's from the shampoo she always uses and I love the scent.

"She's already got a partner," I say once we part.

I'm smug when I notice the flush across Oakley's cheeks. It's the color that I paint on her from my touch alone. I love that I can make her breathless. It makes me feel powerful, even as I watch my other teammates drooling over her luscious body and beautiful face. Desiring her.

While all she notices ... is me.

I nestle her under my arm as I turn my attention to the left winger.

Sims chuckles, a knowing gleam in his eyes. “All right, Anderson. I see you.”

“This is Burnham’s sister,” I say, introducing my girl.

His eyebrows lift in surprise. “No shit.” He leans back as he studies her. “Now, I see the resemblance.”

“Oakley,” she says with a smile.

“It’s nice to meet you, Little Burnham. I’m going to move it along before your brother gets here and kicks my ass.”

Oakley laughs.

Sims pauses for a moment, glancing at me. “How did you avoid the ass-kicking?”

“I don’t know that I have,” I admit.

Ollie was away last year at college and most of this summer, but he knew I was dating his sister. He’s had time to get used to the idea of her and me together. But I’m not sure if he’s fully accepted it.

Sims walks away, moving on to the next group of girls.

“Hi,” I say, glancing down at my woman.

“Hi,” she breathes out. “That was quite the welcome.”

“I thought Sims needed to know who you belong to.”

“Is that right?” she asks while toying with the collar of my shirt.

I think she secretly likes this possessive side of me. She’s definitely not pushing me away.

“I’m not coming to any more parties if you two are going to drool over each other the entire time,” Madison complains in a bored tone. “Save it for later.”

“Oh, I’ve got plenty of things planned for later,” I rumble, picturing all the things I want to do to her body when we’re alone in my room tonight. “Mouths are just a small part of it.”

Madison groans, and Oakley laughs.

“If you’re lucky,” my girl purrs, watching me beneath hooded lids.

“I was born lucky, Oak.”

She rolls her eyes but does it with a coy smile on her face.

I know she finds my confidence attractive. She’s told me so more than once.

“Let’s get something to drink,” Madison says, tugging on my girlfriend’s hand.

Oakley glances at me as she pulls away. “I’ll be right back.”

I point to the back wall, where Mike and Chase are still standing, watching us from across the room. “I’ll be right over there.”

I steal one more quick kiss before she follows Madison through the crowd, moving toward the kitchen.

When I turn back to my friends, the redhead from before steps into my path. She’s wearing a tight shirt with thin straps. Her top dips low, showcasing her tits. She forgot a bra tonight, as evidenced by her erect nipples protruding through the thin fabric. Calling for attention. There’s red gloss on her lips, drawing my eyes to them. She’s watching me from beneath long black lashes through light-brown irises.

“You’re Sam, right?” she asks.

“I am,” I say, watching her.

Someone bumps her from behind, causing her to stumble forward and press her tits against me. She doesn’t move back, placing her palms on my chest as well.

“I’m Alexis,” she says. “I’ve seen you play hockey. You’re really good.”

I know I should pull away and not encourage the attention. But it feels nice, having a stranger come on to me, even when I’m unavailable. It feeds the egocentric beast inside, making him grow stronger and larger from the praise.

“When did you see me play, Alexis?” I tilt my head, waiting for her answer while resisting the sudden urge to touch her.

“I went to Flescher Hall. I’ve watched you on the ice for years.”

“Are you a freshman?” I ask.

She shakes her head. “Junior. But my sister just graduated from high school last year, like you. I went to a few games with her when I was back home. Mostly to watch you play.”

“Is that right?” I ask with a smirk, indulging her.

A little harmless flirting has never hurt anyone. Plus, I can’t completely reject a fan. That wouldn’t be very neighborly of me.

She nods, stroking her fingers across the ridges of my chest.

I’m pretty sure Alexis saw me with Oakley a few minutes ago. I would bet money that she watched me kissing and holding her. But she doesn’t seem to care. It’s the same way Cassie and some of the other girls in high school never cared when Oakley and I got together. I had an open invitation to cheat with any one of them anytime I wanted.

I never did.

It was tempting at times though.

Like right now.

The attention is nice regardless of my circumstances. I fed into it back then, nurturing the adoration of other girls from time to time. While staying just far enough away to become untouchable. It’s proven to drive the women wild.

And I like them wanting me.

Even if they can’t have me.

“Well, I plan to be on the ice a lot this year. You’ll have to come to the games and cheer for me.”

“I’ll be there,” she promises, her voice breathy and low. “Front and center.”

I shift until I’m moving around her, turning to walk backward for a couple of steps. “It was nice meeting you ... Alexis.”

“You too, Sam. I’m sure I’ll see you around.”

“I look forward to it.” I give her a parting smirk and turn my back.

“You’re playing with fire there, Anderson,” Chase warns when I approach.

“What?” I ask innocently. “She’s just a fan who wanted to wish me luck on the season.”

“From what I hear,” he says, keeping his voice low, “she’s wished a lot of the guys luck at one time or another.”

I chuckle. “I’m not surprised.”

“I bet Oakley will cut off your balls if you mess around with another girl,” Mike predicts.

“If she doesn’t, I might,” Chase growls.

I narrow my eyes at my friend. “What do you care if I fuck the whole freshman class?”

“I don’t,” he counters. “But I do care about you disrespecting Oakley. She’s one of the good ones. And she doesn’t deserve that bullshit. From you or anyone else.”

I watch him for a beat or two, searching for his motivation.

“Do you have a thing for her?” I finally ask the question I’ve often wondered.

He’s overprotective when it comes to Oakley, watching or warning her about situations and guys over the years. I’m curious if he’s ever warned her away from me in the past.

Chase scoffs, looking away. “We grew up together.”

That’s not exactly an answer to my question.

“I know you’re still good friends with her brother. But you’re way too overprotective of that girl. She’s mine to worry about now. Not your problem. And what happens between Oakley and me is just that ... between us.”

“She might be your girlfriend,” Chase says, taking an aggressive step toward me, “but she’s been my friend for my entire life. And I don’t want to see her hurt because you can’t keep your dick in your pants.”

“Hey,” Mike says, stepping between the two of us to defuse the situation. “He hasn’t done anything more than a little harmless flirting. No harm done. Besides, the three of us need to stick together. Especially with all these upperclassmen gunning for us on the ice.”

Chase and I are still locked in a stare down.

“Not that I owe you anything, but I haven’t cheated on Oak. I actually love her,” I say.

His jaw tics once or twice before he exhales long and loud. He gives me a stiff nod, and just like that, our standoff is over. But I don’t miss the warning still glowing in his eyes.

“I need a refill,” Mike mumbles. “This party was supposed to be fun. A night to let loose and relax before classes start and practice really ramps up.”

We follow when he starts moving toward the kitchen.

“You guys are driving me to drink,” he mutters as we walk.

We find Oakley and Madison filling their cups up at the keg. The heat and humidity inside the house are nearly stifling now with so many bodies packed inside the space. Mike and I refill our cups before heading outside for some air. Chase sticks with soda.

There’s a beer pong game happening on the deck. The crowd erupts as Will sinks the last shot, winning the table for him and his partner.

“Who’s next?” he yells, scanning the crowd.

His eyes narrow when they land on me. “Anderson. Come on, freshman. Step up to the table. I’m the reigning beer pong champ around here. See if you can beat me.”

I can feel the adrenaline start to course through my veins with the challenge. I step closer to the table, the competitive beast inside of me taking full control.

“You’re on,” I answer.

My head swivels to the left and right until I find Chase standing there.

“Come on, Matthews,” I say.

Will has Charlie by his side. I need someone that can outmatch his partner, and Chase is as competitive as I am.

“I want to play,” Oakley says, her teal eyes appearing darker in the muted light on the deck.

“Next time,” I promise.

This won't be a recreational game for me. I'm out for blood. I want to start proving here and now that I'm the better athlete. Even if it is just a game of beer pong.

“Let her play,” Chase says, taking a step back.

“Yeah”—Will smirks—“let the woman play.”

Will shifts his eyes to Oakley, taking in her soft curves and slim waist.

“We could always change the rules. You strip if you miss rather than drink.”

He chuckles as his pupils dilate, his eyes stuck on my girl's tits.

“I don't fucking think so,” I spit, my hands fisting at my sides.

Will's eyes shoot to me, and he elevates an eyebrow knowingly. He just discovered one of my weak spots. And I can't afford for him to know those. He'll try to make me bleed any way he can.

“No one wants to see Charlie's ass,” Mike quips from a few steps away, dispelling some of the tension between Will and me as a few people chuckle.

Oakley shakes her head, her long black hair shifting around her face with the movement. “I'm not taking off my clothes.”

Will smirks. “That's a shame.”

Oakley rolls her eyes and walks to the opposite side of the table from Charlie and Will.

“Let's play,” she says, cracking her knuckles.

Chase chuckles. “Show 'em how it's done, Oak.”

“Let’s go, Oakley,” Madison adds, cheering from her spot beside Chase.

The cups are reassembled into a triangle on each end of the table and filled with beer from the keg.

“Ladies first,” Charlie says once the setup is complete.

Oakley snags one of the ping-pong balls and studies the cups on the other side with her lower lip caught between her teeth.

“Aim for just over the rim,” I coach.

She nods, waving me off. “I know how to play, Sam.”

She shoots, but it bounces off the side of the cup.

Will takes his turn, making one in the middle.

He glances at Oakley. “Drink up, sweetheart.”

She grimaces as she drains the beer, placing the cup off to the side when she’s done.

I hit my shot, forcing Charlie to drink, and he returns the favor.

We go back and forth like this for the next fifteen minutes, until we’re down to three cups to their two.

Oakley is concentrating on her throw again when Charlie starts shimmying around on the other side of the table to distract her.

Oakley stops, tilting her head at him. “Are you dancing, Charlie, or having a seizure?”

Everyone laughs.

Charlie stops moving, narrows his eyes, and lifts his middle finger slowly, scratching his cheek with it. But he chuckles and smiles, reducing the blow good-naturedly.

Oakley laughs with a smirk on her face.

“Come on, baby. Sink this in,” I say, my competitive juices flowing.

My girl drills her shot. She blows on her finger and shoots an imaginary gun at Charlie.

He grabs his chest and stumbles back, as if he’d been shot.

“Drink up, big boy,” she says.

Charlie winks at her before emptying the beer from the cup.

Will takes his turn, missing by an inch.

“Oh,” I quip, shaking my head. “So close.”

I knock out our second to last one, forcing Will to drink. Then, Charlie makes the shot, tying us up with one cup each left.

I can smell the victory as Oakley takes aim. She releases the ball, and everyone waits, watching as it hits the side of the rim and bounces off.

“Oh.” There’s a collective gasp from the spectators around the table, who are invested in our match.

Chase and Mike are leaning against the house, watching with relaxed smiles on their faces. Madison is right next to them, sipping on her beer.

“This is it.” Will smirks, glancing from Oakley to me. “Prepare to lose, Anderson.”

My shoulders are tense.

He sinks the shot, his obnoxious smile growing.

“Nothing but net,” he says.

I try to appear unbothered as Will walks around the table.

He leans in close when he reaches me. “Get used to second place when you go against me,” he murmurs, lowering his voice, “*freshman*.”

I scoff, clenching my jaw and watching him with a blank expression, trying my best to appear unbothered.

I *hate* losing.

I hate losing to Will even more.

“The ice is a much different place, my friend,” I retort.

He stares at me, his eyes cold and hard. “Losing is losing, Anderson. Whether it’s at beer pong or in the arena. You’re gonna need to get used to it. Because you aren’t taking my

spot. I don't care what everyone says about you. This ain't high school anymore."

He walks away before I can pop off.

Oakley's hand lands on my arm. Instead of feeling comforting, it irritates me. I shrug her off and walk inside the house. I'm at the keg, filling a cup with beer when she steps up beside me.

"Are you mad at me?" she asks incredulously, keeping her voice low so no one overhears.

I don't answer, focusing on the spout as cold beer spills into my cup.

"Are you kidding me?" she whispers angrily. "You're mad that I missed that last shot?"

I'm not mad at her. I'm just pissed at the situation. Richter is getting under my skin, and I'm letting him. Losing didn't help things, especially when that guy is such a shitty winner. And Oakley isn't helping matters either. Right now—unfortunately for her—she's an easy target for my foul mood.

"Is this a joke?" she scoffs, not letting up. "It was a *freaking beer pong game*, Sam. Not the Stanley Cup."

I move out of the way when I'm finished at the keg so that the next person in line can help themselves. Then, I tip my cup back, drinking the entire thing in a few gulps, hoping it will numb my nerves and settle my temper.

It feels like Richter got the best of me tonight.

"Are you just going to ignore me?" Oakley keeps pushing.

I finally meet her gaze. Her eyes are narrowed in irritation.

"I'm not mad at you," I grumble, but it doesn't sound very convincing, even to my ears.

She tilts her head and glares at me.

"I'm not," I insist, pulling her into my arms.

She doesn't soften, like I was hoping she would. Instead, she stiffens and pushes away until I'm no longer touching her.

“This was supposed to be a fun night,” she says. “Our first college party together. And you’re ruining it.”

“That guy ... he just gets under my skin.”

“So, don’t let him,” she answers, like it’s that simple.

I bite out a mirthless laugh. “Right. That’s so easy for you to say.”

The kitchen becomes more crowded. Oakley tugs my arm until we’re sequestered in the pantry, the space giving us a little more privacy.

“Why is that easy for me to say?” she asks, challenging me.

I know I should step away and take a few seconds to collect myself. I should pull Oakley into my arms and tell her I love her and that it doesn’t matter that she missed the shot. That it doesn’t matter that we lost to that douchebag Will because the game was pointless and just for fun. That my pride is making a mountain out of a molehill. But I can’t bring myself to do it. Because right now, I do care. I care too much.

“Because you don’t have a competitive bone in your body,” I say instead, digging myself into an even deeper hole. “You’ve always been content to sit on the sidelines, watching your brother compete. Watching me. I mean, you quit soccer after junior high, right? And I heard you were good at it. You should’ve let Chase play with me.”

“Oh ... I see,” she retorts without hesitation. “So, I’m lazy and uncompetitive. And don’t forget, unathletic. It’s good to know how you really feel about me.”

I don’t correct her. Her shoulders fall after a few moments of silence.

“From the moment I saw you, I’ve loved watching you compete. You are ruthless at times, but so ambitious. You get lost in the ice when you’re out there, where all you can see is the puck and the goal and the players standing in the way of a score. And I’ve always thought it was beautiful. But right now, I think your *competitiveness*”—she spits the word—“is the ugliest thing about you.”

She spins on her heel, stopping to glance over her shoulder at me. “Screw you, Sam. Thanks for ruining the party for me.”

It’s our first big fight, which is uncharted territory for me. I don’t chase after her as she winds her way through the crowd, in search of Madison. When she finds her friend, they have a heated exchange. Madison flits her eyes over Oakley’s shoulder until she locates me, spitting venom from across the room in solidarity. And then I watch as they leave through the front door.

It’s the first Saturday night that both Oakley and I are in college together.

Our initial taste of freedom—without parents breathing down our necks, dictating the rules, instilling curfews.

And I end up spending it alone.

Chapter Eight

Oakley

“Hi,” I say, stepping across the threshold of my brother’s apartment after he opens the door.

“Hey,” he greets, leaning down to give me a side hug.

I walk into his place, looking around as I move forward. Ollie rented a one-bedroom apartment this year, wanting his own space and privacy. He had roommates the previous two years of college. But I think he was tired of all the partying and craziness. He has his sights set on the draft this year. Word around the street is that he’s projected to go high. Then, he and the coaches will decide if he wants to finish his senior year here at Sinclair University or move on up to the big leagues early.

“Did you get moved in?” he asks. “Sorry I couldn’t be there. Dad guilted me until I came home and helped him fix the riding lawn mower.”

I walk into the kitchen and help myself to a bottle of water.

“He doesn’t really need your help, you know.” I crack the top and take a drink. “He just misses you.”

“I know.” He smirks.

Since Ollie’s been at college, he rarely comes home. Once he moved out, he’s been gone. He’s spent summers at camps or training for the next hockey season. I think my dad really misses having him around. Both my parents do. And now, they really have an empty nest since I’m gone too.

“But, yes, I’m all moved in. Sam and Mike helped me.”

I don’t miss the scowl that appears on his face.

“Don’t give me that look,” I say, pointing at my brother’s face. “You’ve had months to get used to the idea of me dating one of your teammates.”

“But Sam Anderson,” he grumbles.

“What’s wrong with Sam?” I ask.

Even though Sam and I aren’t in the best place after last night, I don’t want my brother to know it. He doesn’t need an excuse to dislike my boyfriend more.

“He’s a cocky bastard.”

“Aren’t all hockey players?”

Ollie scoffs.

I plop down on his couch, rolling my eyes when I see ESPN on the television screen.

“Do guys ever watch anything other than sports or shows talking about sports?” I barb.

“Nope,” he answers unapologetically. “My house, my rules.”

He takes the seat next to me. “Did you get your schedule for fall classes?”

I nod, pulling it up on my phone. I hand it over to him.

He scrolls through the courses listed.

“You’re gonna regret that eight thirty class on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday mornings,” he says with a raised eyebrow.

“I already do,” I admit. “But I registered late, and it was the only time slot left if I wanted to take statistics this semester.”

“Do you want to take statistics?” He raises an eyebrow.

The course is required, but my brother knows math and I don’t always get along.

“I want to get it over with. Plus, you’re here this semester.”

Lucky for me, Ollie’s great at math. So is Chase, meaning I’ll have a free tutor anytime I need one.

I glance around the apartment. “Are you going to get lonely, living here all by yourself?”

“Hell no,” he says resolutely. “The guys from the team are here more often than not. And I’m sure you’re going to be around some.”

I narrow my eyes. “More than some.”

“You can come over anytime, Oak—you know that.”

I smile.

“But the good thing about living alone? I can kick people out when I want some solitude.”

“Anyone other than me, right?” I ask, batting my eyelashes at him.

“Especially you.”

He laughs when I punch him in the shoulder.

I’m excited to be at the same college as my brother. I loved it when we were both attending high school together. We’re two years apart. The age difference is enough to give us each separate lives and friend groups, but allows us to come together anytime we want as well. Ollie and I have always been close.

“You ready for me to show you around campus?” he asks.

I nod, rising from the couch. “Let’s do it.”

I know I could find my classes on my own or with Madison. But it’s nice, spending time with my brother. We don’t get to hang out just the two of us very often anymore. So, when he asked to show me around and map out my schedule together the day before lectures started, I jumped at the suggestion. It’s a good excuse to hang out with my brother on a Sunday afternoon.

Ollie grabs his keys and his phone, following me out the door.

We spend the afternoon walking around. He points out all the important buildings. My classes, the commons area, and all the good food places. He takes me by the gym and the athletic center. We breeze by the library and past fraternity and

sorority row. The last stop on the tour is the hockey arena. Ollie needs to pop inside and grab something from one of his coaches.

When we enter the arena, the cool temperature is a nice reprieve from the stifling heat outside. Ollie leaves me standing next to the ice while he walks toward the locker room, where the coaches' offices also are. It's cold and dark inside the building. The main overhead lights are turned off, but the ice has a soft blue glow to it. Even though the stadium is hollow and deserted with hundreds of empty seats, it doesn't make me uneasy. Maybe because I've always equated the smell of the ice and the feel of the hockey arena with my brother. This is where he loves to be, playing or practicing. And so I automatically love it too. It feels and smells like my childhood memories.

I'm leaning against the wall, staring inside the rink, when I hear voices and footsteps echoing down the hall. I stand up straighter when Chase and Mike come into view.

"Hey, guys," I say when our eyes meet.

"Oakley!" Mike says in his normal voice, which is always two times louder than the rest of us. "Are you stalking me?"

I roll my eyes. "Yes, Mike. You caught me. I've always had a secret thing for you."

He points at me with a coy grin. "I knew it!" He leans in closer. "Who's gonna tell Sam ... me or you?"

I pat Mike's chest twice. "Let me break it to him."

"Let him down easy," he jokes. He turns toward Chase. "I've got to run by the bookstore before it closes. You coming?"

"Nah," he says. "I'll see you back at the house."

"Later then," he says, glancing over at me. "Bye, girlfriend."

We both watch as Mike walks across the foyer and pushes the front door open, leaving the building.

"What are you doing here?" Chase asks.

"Waiting for Ollie."

He glances to the left and right. “Ollie’s here?” There’s a note of excitement in his tone.

Ollie and Chase used to be really close. But then Ollie left for college. With busy hockey schedules and two years of age difference in between them, their friendship diminished a bit. I know they’re still good friends, but I don’t think they’re as tight as they used to be.

“He was giving me a tour of campus and needed to grab something here.”

Chase nods. “Mapping out the schedule?”

“Yep.”

“What’s up, Matthews?” my brother says when he emerges from the tunnel and sees Chase standing next to me.

Chase’s smile grows, and he walks a few steps to meet my brother. They clasp their hands and lean in for a bro hug.

“Welcome to Sinclair’s hockey team.” My brother widens his arms and spins around in a slow circle.

“I can’t wait to play here when the stadium is packed,” Chase admits.

I wish I could package the enthusiasm and love they both have for the game. It radiates from them. It’s contagious. I guess they would have to love it for all the time and commitment the sport requires. I only hope I can find something I enjoy that much in the future.

“How was the party last night?” Ollie asks Chase.

Our old friend glances over at me. “Why don’t you ask Oakley? She was tearing up the beer pong table. Had Richter on the ropes for a minute there.”

“How much beer did you drink?” Ollie asks in that overprotective, judgmental big-brother voice.

“I practically finished the keg,” I lie, keeping a straight face when his eyes narrow. “After I played Hour of Power with vodka shots to warm up.”

Ollie blows out a loud exhale while shaking his head. Then, he looks over at Chase, who's watching quietly with a small smirk. "She's gonna be a handful here."

Chase nods, the two of them having a conversation about me like I'm not standing right here. "She always has been."

I slug Chase in the stomach, and his torso collapses into itself, absorbing the blow. Then, he laughs.

"We're gonna grab some food. You free?" Ollie asks Chase.

"I could eat," Chase says.

The three of us leave the stadium, walking side by side. I'm listening to Ollie and Chase talk about hockey, noticing how small I am, standing between these two giants. It reminds me of when we were kids, playing in the neighborhood streets at home. Only then, there wasn't such a noticeable size difference between them and me.

Chase drove his truck here, so we jump in with him and end up at a Mexican food restaurant not far from campus.

"This place has the best tacos," my brother promises, rubbing his hands together while practically salivating as we exit the truck.

If the smells emanating from the restaurant are any indication, the food is going to be amazing. And we've only made it across the parking lot. When my stomach growls, I realize I haven't eaten since breakfast.

Ollie opens the door and allows Chase and me to enter before him. In a matter of minutes, we're seated next to the window in a booth. Chase slides in next to me while Ollie sits across from us.

The waitress brings three waters and an order of chips and salsa. I dive right in. The chips are warm, and the salsa is spicy, just how I like it.

"Are you hungry, Oak?" my brother asks with a teasing lilt to his voice.

He's watching me devour the complimentary appetizer.

“Starving,” I admit.

Chase smirks, reaching his hand into the basket and fighting me for the next chip.

We glance at the menu for a few minutes while feasting on the free food but end up copying my brother, ordering three taco dinners. Before our food arrives, the waitress brings out a fresh order of chips and salsa after we devoured the first batch within minutes.

My brother starts detailing the team—the good, the bad, and the ugly with all the guys. Chase fills him in on the confrontation Sam had with Will. One that happened before I arrived at the party, I guess. Hearing the details helps me understand Sam’s state of mind a little better after losing at beer pong. Not that I’ll excuse his bad attitude toward me, but at least I get it now. Will Richter sounds like a real prick.

“I’m not surprised,” my brother comments between bites. “There’s been a lot of talk about you and Anderson coming here. It’s not too often that freshmen upstage the upperclassmen on the team.”

“We’re not trying to,” Chase says before taking a drink of water. “I just want to play to win. We all have a common goal here.”

“Maybe you do,” Ollie says, “but Sam has a big mouth. And he doesn’t have enough sense to keep it shut at times.” He glances across the table at me.

I drop my eyes to my plate.

“He won’t make any friends that way,” Ollie continues.

“Sam probably won’t make any friends regardless,” Chase adds. “And I don’t think he cares. Love him or hate him ... Sam’s the real deal. He was good when you were playing with us back in high school. He’s a beast now. He’s faster, he can stop and turn on a dime on skates, and he can handle the puck.”

“I hope he’s learned how to take a hit,” my brother quips. “Because the other guys in the league will be gunning for him.”

“Who? Richter and his friends?” Chase asks after washing down a forkful of food with a drink of water.

“Richter and every other opponent we play. Sam might be good, but everything at the college level is bigger and faster. That includes the blows.”

Chase nods, shoveling a bite of beans and rice into his mouth.

“You’ve bulked up.” Ollie raises his eyebrows with respect.

“I worked with a trainer all summer. Lifted weights and worked on agility and speed.”

At the mention of his physique, I reach over and squeeze Chase’s biceps. I was kidding around when I initially reached for him, but my mouth gapes when I feel how hard and contoured the muscles of his arm are now. I slide my hand up until I’m touching his deltoid.

“Stop feeling him up,” Ollie growls from across the table. “He’s trying to eat. *I’m* trying to eat.”

Chase side-eyes me with a smirk on his lips, but he doesn’t stop me.

“Hold on,” I say, dropping to his chest with probing fingers. His skin is warm beneath his shirt. “Let me feel his pecs first.”

“For fuck’s sake, Oakley.” Ollie’s fork drops to his plate with a loud clink.

Chase barks out a laugh.

I just smile and finally drop my hand. I was goading my brother at first, but I have to admit, Chase’s body is impressive. The hard lines and bulkiness of his muscles felt nice under my hand.

I push my plate away, gripping my stomach. “I’m so full.”

Ollie slides my leftovers in front of him. He finishes my food and the rest of his.

We pay the bill a few minutes later, and Chase drives us home, dropping me off first.

“I can meet you for coffee tomorrow after your English class,” Ollie offers like a good brother, his head hanging out the passenger window as I walk toward the front door of the dorms.

I see more than a few appreciative glances from my fellow female students when they see the two hockey studs sitting in the truck. My chest swells with pride. These are my guys.

“Okay,” I agree.

“Call me if you need anything,” Ollie says.

“I will. Love you.”

“Love you,” he replies.

Chase tips his chin at me when our eyes meet through the windshield.

And I can feel both of them watching me the entire way into the building.

Chapter Nine

Oakley

“I can barely walk in these shoes,” I complain as we traipse down the sidewalk.

“Totally worth it,” Madison says from beside me. “Because you’re on fire tonight.”

I glance down at my Wonder Woman costume—what there is of it—and high-heeled boots. No superhero I’ve ever seen would be able to maneuver in this short skirt and dipping neckline, let alone fight crime. Not without flashing everyone in the process. But it is showing off my best assets. And I’m guessing Sam is going to like it. At least, I hope he will.

“The only reason I’m getting away with this outfit tonight is because my brother isn’t coming to this party.”

“Fact,” Madison agrees.

“You look great too, by the way,” I say while glancing over at my best friend.

She’s dressed in a Barbie costume with heels just as high as mine. Her blonde hair is teased and in a glowing halo around her head, cascading down her back.

“Are you looking for your Ken tonight?” I tease her.

She smirks. “I’m looking for *a* Ken for the night. But not necessarily anything longer than that.”

“Commitment phobe,” I joke.

“Well, listening to you and Sam argue recently is enough to turn anyone off of relationships.”

I sigh, my mind automatically shifting from lighthearted to heavy.

She's right. And since Madison is my roommate, she's had a front row seat to all our bickering over the past few weeks. It started the night of that first hockey party. And it hasn't let up since.

Sam apologized for acting like an ass that night. Getting mad because we had lost at beer pong was ridiculous at best. He admitted he's been butting heads with Will over their competing positions on the hockey team and that the guy just gets under his skin. But he'd had no right to take it out on me, and I wasn't going to let that fly. I might love Sam, but I'll never let him—or anyone else—walk all over me.

I don't know why we always treat the ones we love the most the worst.

"I'm sorry, Mads. It's been a tough time for us lately. College has turned out to be a harder transition than I thought it would be for Sam and me."

I naively thought being here together would bring us closer. But all it's done so far is pull us further apart. He's always busy. If he isn't on the ice, he's lifting or doing some sort of meeting with the team. And when he's free from hockey, one of us is in class or studying for an exam. It's been hard to make time for each other. And if I'm being honest, I no longer feel like a priority to him. On top of that, he's been cranky all the time lately. I'm not sure if he's just feeling the pressure of being a full-time athlete and student or if he's simply irritated with me.

The sound of our heels clicking along the concrete as we walk is muted by the approaching party. It's being held at another teammate's house. I forget which one. And true to form, the front yard is full of people talking and drinking as we approach.

"We'd better not be the only ones dressed up," I say when I spot a few people in regular clothes.

We will look ridiculous if we show up in costume while everyone else is dressed normally.

“Who cares?” Madison waves me off. “We both look good. That’s all that matters.”

Sometimes, I wish I could bottle my friend’s confidence. Just to give myself a boost occasionally.

The music gets louder as we walk up the stairs of the front porch. There are a mix of people who are dressed up and some who aren’t. But enough are embracing the Halloween tradition to make me feel more comfortable in my outfit. Most of the guys aren’t in costume. I know Sam wasn’t planning to wear one even though I pleaded with him to match my superhero theme.

When we step across the threshold, the place is already brimming with people. My fears are unwarranted because I see action figures, cartoon characters, and sexy nurses filling the space. I scan the room, looking for Sam. He’s standing over in the corner, surrounded by three or four scantily clad women. Halloween gives everyone an excuse to dress as sexy as possible. As if most of these women need a reason.

I try to swallow the knot in my throat as I watch them openly flirt with my man.

Sam is gorgeous. And he has a killer personality on top of those good looks. It’s a lethal combination, one most women can’t resist. His allure is magnified by his performance on the ice. He’s usually one of the best players out there—he always has been. And that only makes his stock rise even higher. I realize these girls don’t really know the man beneath the image, not like I do. And they only want him for what he represents. He’s a hot, young athlete who’s likely headed straight into the NHL.

The problem is, I’m not sure he realizes that’s why he gets all this female attention. And if he does know it, I’m not sure he cares. I think he simply likes all those kohl-lined eyes centered on him.

Women have always flocked to Sam, ever since I’ve known him. And he’s a natural-born flirt, which doesn’t help matters if you happen to be dating him. Even though he doesn’t run them off, he’s never sought out the attention either. Not since

we've been together. Which is why what I'm seeing right now is bothering me.

There's a sexy redhead in front of him, standing way too close, with one hand on his chest and the other running through his hair in an intimate touch.

And he isn't pushing her off.

"I don't know what he thinks he's doing." Madison seethes angrily from beside me. Her eyes are focused on my boyfriend too. "But you can't encourage the vultures like that. He needs to set some boundaries with those girls and fast. That's not okay." She turns toward me. "And if he won't set the boundaries, you need to."

I just stand there and watch him. He doesn't know I'm here yet. He doesn't know because he's otherwise engaged. And as the dread grows inside my gut, so does the fire in my belly. The one controlled by my pride that's spiteful and wants to get even.

I don't have Madison's confidence, but I'm far from a troll. I've seen the way the guys look at me with lust in their eyes. My body is sinfully curvy, and my face isn't bad.

If I wasn't with Sam, I'm pretty sure I'd have other offers.

When the redhead lifts on her toes to whisper in my boyfriend's ear and he rewards her with his signature, panty-melting smirk, my resolve strengthens to even the score. Then, fate steps in.

Will, Sam's biggest rival, moves in front of me, blocking my view across the room. He's looking at my body in a way that makes my skin crawl, but I don't react. And I don't move away.

Two can play this game.

Will catches my eye and then swivels his head until he's looking over his shoulder at Sam. He moves closer. Everything about him screams cool, calm, and collected. But I can feel the underlying tension in his body. He's a snake, waiting to strike.

"Hey, Oakley. You look hot tonight."

“Thanks,” I answer.

I’m under no illusion that Will is interested in me. He’s using this as an opportunity to get under Sam’s skin. And I let him—for the moment. Because I’m using him for the same reason. I just want my boyfriend’s attention back on me, the way it was before. And I want to punish him for flirting with other women.

Will leans an elbow on the wall above my head and starts fingering a piece of my hair. He scans the features of my face, then drops again to my breasts. They’re more than a handful on a normal night. But tonight, my top fits like a corset. And my breasts are high and tight, the cleavage plentiful and on full display. Sam hasn’t noticed, but Will sure has.

“Why are you with that freshman anyway?” Will murmurs close to my ear, taking a shot at my boyfriend. “You should be with an older guy, one who can spoil you.”

I want to roll my eyes, but I don’t. Will couldn’t be any more transparent right now. Or any more of a douche.

“Sam treats me good,” I argue, unable to help myself.

I might want to torture my guy a little, but I don’t want anyone else talking bad about him.

Will glances back over at Sam, where he’s still engaged with the other women, oblivious to the party raging around him.

Oblivious to *me*.

“If he was treating you so good,” Will argues in a soft, smooth voice, “then he’d be over here with you. Not all over Alexis.”

Alexis.

A searing pain stabs my chest again, and I’m certain my skin turns a darker shade of green—the color of jealousy. Somehow, putting a name to the person makes it more real. It makes her real.

“Alexis is one of the bunnies.”

Will’s tone is smooth, like he’s murmuring sweet nothings into my ear, as he draws my attention to her. When every word is

like poison, infiltrating my veins and rotting my insides.

“She’s welcomed most of the guys to the team at one time or another. Some of the new guys—the ones with girlfriends—can’t handle the attention. The *temptation*.”

I haven’t had a sip of alcohol tonight, but my stomach is sour. I start to feel nauseous.

“I think this isn’t the first time I’ve seen her with Sam. In fact —”

But he doesn’t get another word out because he’s ripped away from me. Sam has Will pushed up against the wall with his forearm lodged against Will’s throat before I can blink. There’s pure hatred on my man’s face, a feral look I haven’t seen before in his expression.

Will chuckles, only adding fuel to the fire.

“Keep your fucking hands off my girl, Richter.”

Will pushes against Sam’s chest until his hold loosens. Sam moves back, but just a step.

“You didn’t seem to care a minute ago,” Will accuses, glancing over at me again with an arrogant smirk. “I was just keeping Oakley company while you ... *entertained* Alexis. You should be thanking me.”

Sam’s nostrils flare.

But he doesn’t engage Will any further. His fingers collapse around mine, and he tugs me behind him, leaving his teammate behind.

“You’re hurting my arm,” I complain, snatching my hand away as we push through the crowd.

He spins on his heel. “And you’re pissing me off, Oakley.” He runs a hand through his hair angrily, glancing away for a second.

All I can picture is Alexis’s red fingernails sinking into his locks a few minutes ago.

“Well, you’re pissing me off too,” I counter, shoving his chest.

“What did I do?”

“You let that redhead climb you like a tree in front of everyone. I walk in here, and that’s the first thing I see. You. Flirting with another girl.”

“I wasn’t flirting,” he argues.

I tilt my head and glare at him knowingly. I wasn’t born yesterday. And I’ve witnessed him in action for over four years now. I’ve been the direct target of that flirtation on many occasions too.

“She was flirting with me,” he insists irritably.

“And you were letting her,” I accuse.

“I don’t know when this jealous thing started with you,” he says, motioning between the two of us, as if I were the problem, “but it’s not attractive.”

I scoff as he tries to flip things around on me. “This *jealousy thing* happened when you started giving every other girl all the attention you used to give me. So, maybe you should look in the mirror, Anderson.”

He’s glaring at me.

I’m glaring at him.

I never call him by his last name.

And suddenly, I can’t stand to be around him any longer. I spent hours getting ready tonight, excited to see his reaction when he first laid eyes on me. I pictured everything happening so differently. The disappointment billows around me like smoke, suffocating my lungs. Swallowing my eager anticipation for the night.

I don’t want to fight. And I don’t want to feel small and diminished, the way he’s making me feel right now.

I pivot and wander aimlessly through the crowd until I spot Madison. Then, I drag her into the kitchen, in search of a drink. When we first enter the room, Madison is pulled into a conversation with a guy in her English class. I forge ahead anyway. Bypassing the beer options, I head straight to the

liquor bottles on the table, pouring a generous amount into a cup. I need something—anything—to distract me.

“What are you doing, Oakley?” Chase’s deep voice interrupts my bartending.

He startles me at first. In my fit of rage, I didn’t notice him standing nearby.

“Go away, Chase,” I say irritably. “I don’t need a babysitter tonight.”

He’s watching me with those fierce olive eyes.

“You might not think you do,” he answers stubbornly, “but judging by the amount of vodka you just poured into that cup, I think a babysitter is exactly what you need.”

“Leave me alone.”

I keep my attention on the preparations. Adding ice and then topping the vodka off with orange juice I find in the fridge. I stir it with a plastic knife—hoping it’s clean—and then swallow down several large gulps, grimacing from the bitter taste. But I don’t add any more juice. I don’t want to dilute the alcohol. I’m just praying it takes effect soon, numbing me as I spiral.

Chase is still watching me. I don’t know what he’s looking for when he stares at me like this. It’s like he’s trying to discover all my deep, dark, hidden secrets. I hate to break it to him, but I’m not that complicated. I don’t have a lot of lingering hidden shit beneath the surface.

“Why are you always so intense?” I ask, leaning back against the counter and eyeing him predatorily over the rim of my cup.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, blatantly disregarding my question.

He’s ignoring mine, so I’m going to ignore his.

“The hockey, the *no drinking* thing during the season ... the way you are with me. You’re always so serious. Why?”

My tone phrases each attribute I’m listing about him like they are negative qualities, not admirable ones. I’m being a bitch, but I want him to feel as bad as I do right now. That’s his

punishment for approaching me when I just want to be left alone.

“Are you going to tell me what happened? Something has you downing liquor,” he pushes, not allowing my bitterness to sink beneath his skin.

“Nope,” I say, popping the P and taking another swig of my vodka with a splash of OJ. My lips pucker automatically. It tastes like I’m drinking straight ethanol—or what I imagine straight ethanol tastes like. “But we can continue having two separate conversations if you want.”

I see his lip twitch.

“Okay,” he sighs, crossing his arms over his chest. He’s humoring me. “I’m focused because all I’ve ever wanted to do was play hockey. I love it so much; I’d live on the ice if I could. My goals were to play in high school and then make it onto a college team, and now, it’s to enter the league. I won’t let anything get in the way of that. Not partying, not *girls* ...” He tilts his head, looking me directly in the eye when he says that last word, like he’s placing me in that category along with all the other females on the planet. “Nothing.”

It’s my turn to study him for a few seconds.

“What is it like to love something that much?” I mumble, more to myself than to him.

My major is undecided. I enjoyed sports in the past, but not enough to put all my time and effort into playing. I envy him, knowing what he wants and going for it.

“It’s everything,” Chase admits, obviously overhearing me. “It gives me purpose.”

There are a few beats of silence as the party rages around us. It’s strange to be having such a deep conversation while surrounded by Flintstones costumes, sexy angels, and devils. Most of the hockey guys are wearing everyday street clothes. Chase has a T-shirt and jeans on. He never was one to participate in costume parties. He’s too cool, I guess. All the hockey guys are.

Chase moves beside me when someone new steps up to the makeshift bar to assemble a drink.

“Your turn,” he says, bumping my shoulder with his.

“My turn for what?” I take another sip. Two-thirds of my drink is already gone, and the rest is swiftly disappearing.

“I answered you ... now, you answer me. Maybe you’re new to this. It’s called having a conversation.”

I roll my eyes but give in to his demand after another few beats of stubborn silence. “Sam pissed me off.”

Chase doesn’t respond at first. I can feel his gaze on the side of my face.

“You guys have been fighting a lot lately,” he finally observes.

“I know.” My voice is barely above a whisper now.

“What did he do?”

I shrug and tip the cup again, buying time.

Chase stands there, waiting for my answer. He’s just as bullheaded as I am.

“Some girl was all over him when I walked in, and he wasn’t pushing her away.”

I don’t know what I expect Chase to say in response to that. Maybe I’m waiting for him to tell me to stop being insecure, that those groupies mean nothing. Or that I’m weak for putting up with Sam’s flirting in the first place. Or maybe he’ll live by bro code and defend Sam, saying his boy was doing nothing wrong and I’m overreacting. What I don’t expect is the words that come out of his mouth next.

“You don’t deserve that, Oak.”

My eyes rise until they’re connected with his across the short space between us. I can feel the alcohol surging through my veins now, warming my skin and clouding my head. Or maybe it’s his murky-green eyes that are causing all that—I can’t be sure. But I feel like I’m floating. And I like the way it feels.

“You deserve to be treated with respect, whether you’re standing right in front of Sam or you’re not in the same room with him. For everyone to know that you’re his number one woman, even when you aren’t around. You have a right to ask for boundaries and to expect those boundaries to be kept at all times—by others and by him. You deserve everything, Oakley. And don’t settle for anything less.”

I’m speechless. All I can do is stare at the boy I’ve known for most of my life, who’s now becoming a man. I start to absorb the way his features are changing, characteristics I haven’t noticed before. His jaw is square and peppered with dark stubble. His eyes are intense, like usual, but it’s the color that strikes me tonight. It’s this mesmerizing shade, somewhere between emerald and sage with hints of gray interwoven. His lips are full, but they don’t look feminine. Chase is all masculinity and hard lines. I no longer see the kid I went to elementary school with. Or even the high school boy I knew.

It’s like I’m noticing my old friend for the first time. He almost seems like a stranger, standing next to me.

“Why?” I whisper.

He tilts his head, eyebrows furrowed. “Why what? Why do you deserve that? You should know you deserve those things, Oakley. I shouldn’t have to tell you.”

I shake my head slowly. “That’s not what I meant. Why are you always looking out for me? Is it for Ollie?”

He stares at me without answering, like there’s a battle going on behind the walls he’s built to keep everyone out.

Someone bumps into me from the side. The liquid in my cup sloshes, but doesn’t spill because there isn’t much left. Chase’s torso cushions my fall. His hand is on my forearm, steadying me.

The party is becoming rowdier around us, people laughing loudly and talking. Dancing in and out of the room. Congregating on the back deck and coming in to grab another drink.

But Chase and I are immune to all of it.

“I—” he starts to answer, but doesn’t get the chance to finish.

“There you are,” Sam interrupts, his sole focus on me.

Sam’s warm hand lands on my waist as Chase relinquishes his hold on my forearm. Sam starts pressing me against the counter with his body. He steals my cup and tips it back, drinking what’s left of my mixed drink. His throat bobs as he swallows. After discarding it behind me, Sam leans into my neck.

His lips move against my skin as he speaks. “Don’t be mad at me, babe.”

Not really an apology, but Sam has never been good at accepting blame.

“Those other girls don’t mean anything to me. I was just passing the time, talking to them, waiting for you to get here. It feels like we haven’t seen each other ...”

Sam keeps talking, but my head is a mess of confusion. I can feel Chase beside us, watching. Waiting. Like he always is. And I want to know what he was about to say.

“Are you still mad at me?” Sam asks, interrupting my thoughts.

“No,” I say honestly.

Because I’m not. I’m tired of arguing. I just want things to be easy again. Easy and straightforward.

“Let’s get out of here,” Sam says, taking my hand and leading me away.

He tips his chin at Chase, saying he’ll see him later at home.

My unanswered question echoes inside my head. *Why are you always looking out for me? Is it for Ollie?*

Sam is in front of me, pulling me away.

As I’m walking out of the room, Chase murmurs so low that I have to strain to hear it over the noise of the party, “If only it were for Ollie and it was that simple ...”

It's almost like it was never meant for my ears in the first place.

I don't understand what Chase means.

I don't understand how his words make me feel.

When I glance back one last time before exiting the kitchen, Chase is no longer standing there. And I wonder if I imagined it in the first place.

Chapter Ten

Oakley

We make it to Sam's place in record time. I don't really remember the walk home. The vodka traveled straight to my brain, bypassing my empty stomach. Sam has been talking the entire way, but I have no idea what he's saying. And he seems content to be holding a one-sided conversation.

I can't seem to focus on anything.

But I feel good.

Almost euphoric.

I'm in that sweet spot, where my inhibitions are lowered, but my faculties haven't been stolen by the alcohol yet.

We walk straight through the front door, across the living room, and up the stairs to Sam's bedroom. The place is quiet; no one else is home. As soon as the door shuts, my back is pressed against it. Sam's hands and lips are on my skin, his tongue licking along my cleavage as he gropes me. He loosens the zipper at the back of my costume enough so he can extract my tits, but he stops me when I try to lower it further.

"No," he murmurs, his voice thick with lust. "Leave it on."

His pupils dilate when he takes in my costume. It's the look of lust I pictured when I was getting ready earlier tonight. Sam becomes almost frantic in his movements. His shirt comes off as he kicks his shoes and socks to the floor. Then, he slides his underwear and pants down in one swipe.

My fingers fall to his abdomen, tracing the hard lines there. The muscles of his six-pack have become more pronounced since we came to college. He's lifting more, and I've heard him talk about how intense the workouts are.

He kisses me hard, and my head bangs against the door.

“Sorry.” He laughs.

But I’m feeling no pain right now. The alcohol is like an anesthetic, numbing my body to thoughts and feelings and hurt. It seems the only time my boyfriend and I can communicate lately is when we’re doing the talking with our bodies. But right now, I don’t care.

Sam slows to watch my face as his fingers dip into the sides of my panties. They’re more like boy short underwear, meant to cover me where the tiny, loose skirt stops high on my thighs. He pulls them down my legs, struggling to get them over my boots, and stops to lick his way from the bottom to the top of my wet slit. He moans in the process.

His fingers plunge into my opening as he stands.

“You look so fucking hot tonight, babe.” Two fingers glide up and down my slit. “You’re driving me crazy in this outfit.”

That was the whole goal of my costume initially—to drive him mad with desire. And part of me loves that I turn him on, making him lose his mind. But achieving that goal no longer feels as rewarding as I thought it would.

His erection is poking me in the stomach. I wrap my hand around him, stroking once and then twice in the way I know he likes as he reaches into a desk drawer beside us to remove a condom.

I’m surprised he’s taking the initiative with birth control tonight. We usually argue about it first. Sam keeps trying to go bareback when we have sex, insisting he’ll pull out. But I’m not on the pill yet, and I don’t want to chance it. I guess he’s eager to get this show on the road because he’s suiting up all on his own.

He bites my neck after he sheathes himself with the rubber. I’m sure he’s going to leave a mark on my skin when he starts sucking the delicate tissue there.

Sam lifts me by my thighs. I wind my legs around his waist, locking my ankles behind him as his hands slide to my ass. He squeezes me, raising my joke of a skirt in the process. I’m

pinned against the door, his body weight holding me in place. He's rotating his hips, running his cock up and down my slit, like his fingers just were, as he kisses me everywhere. My face, my lips, my neck, my tits ...

Lifting me up an inch or two more, he positions himself at my opening. Then, he plunges inside in one solid motion. He isn't gentle about it, but I don't want him to be tonight. He's taking what he wants. And I want to be taken.

My back slides up and down the door as he pounds into me, the zipper digging into my skin. He's breathing hard from the exertion, and sweat starts to form along his brow. Our mouths are fighting a war of dirty, broken kisses as we move together. He tastes like the vodka and orange juice I was drinking before.

Sam keeps going at this pace, withdrawing and thrusting forward. His movements aren't tender, and he isn't slow. I'm circling my hips, chasing my own release when he groans loudly, throwing his head back and freezing when he's buried to the hilt inside of me. The pleasure I was seeking fades abruptly as he stops moving. A few seconds later, it disappears altogether. A slow, unrelieved ache takes its place between my legs.

"Sorry," Sam says, grinning wryly. "I couldn't help myself. You felt too good."

He says the words, but he doesn't really sound sorry. He sounds satisfied while I'm left throbbing.

He lowers me to the ground and then starts moving around the room. After dropping the used condom in the trash can, he collects a towel and clean underwear.

"I'm going to take a shower," he announces, no longer looking at me.

I nod, but I don't speak, feeling oddly empty.

The room is quiet when the door shuts behind Sam. I guess Mike and Chase are still at the party. The pipes in the wall shift as the water starts up across the hall.

I peel out of the boots and costume until I'm left in nothing, and I grab Sam's shirt off the floor. I'm sexually frustrated, but too tired to do anything about it. Lifting the collar to my nose, I inhale deeply. The smell of his cologne infiltrates my senses. The familiarity of it is comforting to me. My head is still foggy from the vodka I drank earlier. I climb into his bed to wait for him.

When I open my eyes again, the sun is peeking through the blinds across the room. Sam is snoring beside me. And I realize I must've fallen asleep while he was showering. The clock says it's after ten in the morning.

I stretch and untangle my legs from the covers. Sam stirs beside me.

"Morning," he says, his voice thick and groggy.

He reaches over and squeezes my breast playfully, smiling with his eyes closed when he feels the stiff peak of my nipple poking his palm through his T-shirt.

"Morning."

Our fight last night weighs heavily in the space between us without alcohol and lust to camouflage it. I'm trying to decide if I want to bring it up or just let it go. Sam removes the decision from my hands.

"I'm sorry about last night," he murmurs.

I hold my breath, waiting for the rest ...

"But I can't help it if other women approach me."

And there it is ... the *but*. I knew it was coming.

"You know," I say, my eyes on the ceiling, "if you apologize and follow it with a *but*, it isn't really an apology. It's an excuse."

He frowns, his eyes finally popping open. "I'm just trying to defend myself." He scowls. "Tell my side of it."

"All right," I acquiesce. "But just know that all those bunnies approaching you are a lot different from other women hitting on you. They're hockey groupies. And all they want is a piece

of you.” I slide my hand down to his semi-rigid cock, squeezing once. “This piece.”

“Other women want that too,” he argues.

I sigh irritably. “You aren’t helping.”

He smirks, then wraps his arm around me, pulling me closer to his side.

“The next time you’re flirting with them”—I give him a look to shut him down when he tries to interject—“and encouraging the attention ... just remember how you felt when you saw Will doing the same to me.”

His expression turns stormy.

I feel a slight twinge of guilt over using his enemy to get his attention. Maybe it wasn’t the most mature thing I could do. It doesn’t seem to have accomplished anything productive anyway. I still don’t think Sam understands where I’m coming from. At least not enough to change his behavior.

Sam throws the covers off and leaves the bed. He angrily shoves his legs into a pair of shorts. I don’t know if I made my point or just pissed him off. But any thoughts I had of us fooling around this morning disappear with his stiff movements.

“I’m hungry,” he announces suddenly, looking at me pointedly.

I guess that’s my cue to get up.

I steal a pair of his nylon shorts, rolling the waistband several times so they won’t fall off. Then, we walk down the stairs and through the living room. There’s still no sign of his roommates.

I locate a bowl in the kitchen cabinet and find some eggs in the refrigerator. My eyebrows lift in surprise when I see Sam remove a package of bacon. I’m not surprised he’s cooking—he’s prepared food for us before. I’m just surprised he has the supplies.

“I went to the store yesterday,” he explains.

Sam, Chase, and Mike don't have the normal diet of eighteen-year-old guys in college, living off pizza, beer, and junk food. They attempt to eat relatively healthy most of the time. I think Sam and Mike have been influenced by Chase in that regard. Chase is as regimented with his diet as he is with his training.

Chase.

Images of the night flash through my memory, tainted some by the screwdriver I was drinking. I don't have the full picture in my brain, rather a blurry version of broken events.

But it feels like something shifted between Chase and me yesterday. Something I don't fully understand. I'm a little nervous to see him this morning.

The bacon starts to sizzle in the pan. I inhale deeply when the aroma enters my nose. It's one of my favorite scents in the world.

"Mmm." I smile. "I don't think anything smells as good as bacon cooking in the morning."

Sam doesn't answer. Instead, he keeps shifting the strips around in the skillet so they cook evenly. He's grumpy, and I don't think it's because of our conversation earlier. I discovered long ago that he's not a morning person.

"Make mine crispy, okay?"

He nods, not bothering to grunt out a reply.

I whip the eggs in a bowl with a fork after cracking open the shells, adding salt, pepper, a splash of milk, and some cheese I find in the refrigerator.

A pot of coffee is about halfway done brewing when Mike comes sauntering into the kitchen. His dark hair is sticking up in all different directions. He's wearing a pair of basketball shorts and a T-shirt with the sleeves cut out.

"Is that coffee?" he asks. His voice is gravelly from sleep.

I nod, removing another mug from the cabinet for him.

"How do you take it?" I ask, silently offering to pour him a cup.

He takes a seat at the table.

“Black. Thanks, Oak.” He runs a hand across his tired face, rubbing sleep from the corners of his eyes. “Please say there’s enough food for me?”

I nod again.

I made enough eggs for myself and all three guys, anticipating the smell of bacon frying would bring them all to the table sooner or later.

“We’ve got enough for you and Chase,” I say.

Mike chuckles, a mischievous smirk appearing on his boyish face.

“What?” I ask.

“I don’t think you have to worry about Chase.” He accepts the cup of coffee I hand to him. “He was talking to Ana Warner last night.”

My ears perk up.

“Again?” Sam asks, his back still turned to us as he mans the stove.

Again?

I concentrate on assembling my coffee.

“Who’s Ana?” I ask Mike as nonchalantly as I can.

“This hot chick in our economics class. She wanted to partner up with Chase and me on this project we have due in a couple of weeks. And she’s been on Chase’s jock ever since. She showed up at the party last night after you two left.”

“Is she finally wearing him down?” Sam asks, a hint of humor in his voice.

“Seems so. He left with her. And he hasn’t been home since.”

“Chase isn’t here?” I ask before I can stop myself.

“Nope,” Mike says with a smirk.

It’s been a while since Chase was with a woman. The last one I remember seeing him with was Samantha in high school. But

he never seemed very serious about her.

“Why doesn’t he like her?” I finally ask, wanting to know more about this Ana girl.

“Well, apparently, he does like her”—Sam chuckles as he moves around the kitchen—“or he’d be home right now.”

“You know Chase,” Mike says, glancing at me over the rim of his mug. “He’s so focused on the upcoming hockey season that girls practically have to hit him over the head to get him to notice them. Even smokeshows like Ana.”

Smokeshows.

The guys chuckle again.

“Well, I hope they hit it off,” I say, meaning it, even though something about it feels weird to me for the first time. “Chase deserves someone good.”

Sam slides his arms around me from behind, pulling my back into his chest. He rests his chin on my shoulder. “Someone like I have,” he murmurs.

A warmth permeates my chest, and my skin pebbles where his breath floats across my neck. I pull him closer.

I enjoy the familiarity of his arms around me for a few moments. But the unresolved feelings between Sam and me from last night are still sitting on my chest like a dead weight. Before I can stop them, they’re bubbling to the surface.

“Don’t do that to me again,” I warn Sam.

I glance over at Mike, but his attention is on his phone as he sips his coffee.

Sam tenses, but doesn’t drop his hold on me. “I told you, Oak ... I didn’t do anything last night.”

“You did,” I insist, pulling away so I can meet his eyes over my shoulder. I want him to know I’m serious about this. That I’m not going to brush it under the rug. “You embarrassed me.”

The bacon is popping and sizzling in the skillet behind us as we search one another’s faces.

“I want to be with you, Sam. I can’t remember a time when I didn’t want to be with you. But I won’t turn a blind eye if you cheat on me. Or make a fool out of me in front of everyone.”

He sighs in obvious frustration. “I’ve never cheated on you, Oakley.” He turns my body and pulls me back into his arms, this time chest to chest. “And I have no plans to.”

“Good,” I say, reaching up for a quick peck on his lips. “Let’s keep it that way.”

Sam turns back to the stove. “Same rules apply to you. I don’t want you even looking in Richter’s direction when he’s around.”

“Will isn’t interested in me,” I insist. “He’s just trying to get back at you.”

“Hey, Oakley,” Mike says, rejoining the conversation while putting his phone down. “When are you going to wear that Wonder Woman costume again?” He’s wearing a smirk as he wiggles his eyebrows.

Sam wads up a paper towel and launches it at Mike’s head, the tension in the kitchen dissolving instantly.

We all laugh.

I leave an hour later.

And Chase still isn’t home.

Chapter Eleven

Oakley

My hands grip the nylon straps of the backpack I have draped across my shoulders as I walk the final block to Sam's house. I slow my steps to look around. It's nice out today, cool, crisp fall weather. My thin sweater was the perfect choice. The sun is shining in a cloudless sky, and it warms my face as I saunter along. When the rays hit the tree on the corner, the leaves that remain on the branches are painted in a golden hue so brilliant that the color momentarily takes my breath away. They shimmer when the wind blows, adding to the magnificence. And for a moment, I wonder if this is what heaven will look like. This scene is similar across campus, only the shades of color differ from place to place. Nature paints in crimson and orange, gold and deep greens this time of year. I'm normally in such a hurry to get from one place to another that I don't take the time to admire it. But I'm not in a rush today.

I've always loved the fall season. If the days were longer, it would be utter perfection in my opinion.

It's Sunday, and the campus is relatively quiet. Madison went to the library to study for an exam she has in her history class tomorrow. I think she really went to study Ethan, one of the guys in the group meeting to prepare for the test. He caught her eye about a week ago. If I know Madison—and I know her better than practically anyone else—Ethan will be asking her out or meeting her somewhere by the end of the week. She just has that effect on the opposite sex, especially when they capture her attention.

I made plans to study with my boyfriend this afternoon. Actually, I invited myself over to hang out with him. But I don't need a formal invitation. We passed the point of

formality months ago. And I'm craving time with him, however I can get it.

It's a ten-minute walk from my dorm room to Sam's place, so I'm almost there now. He's been even busier lately with the hockey season finally in full swing, adding to his already-full schedule of practices, lifting, and recovery sessions. Not to mention classes and exams. We haven't talked much or seen each other a lot, so I'm looking forward to spending the afternoon with him.

The hockey team played an away game on Friday night and didn't arrive back in town until late yesterday afternoon. Sam was tired, so we didn't go out last night.

There are three vehicles in the driveway when I walk across the front yard. It looks like Sam, Mike, and Chase are all here. I knock on the front door, twisting the doorknob to let myself in. But it's locked, so I wait. It swings open a second later.

"Hey, babe," Sam says distractedly, leaving the door ajar and walking back into the living room in the next breath.

I frown at the lackluster greeting, shutting the door behind me as I follow him inside. Sam's already plopped down on the couch, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees and his attention on the television screen by the time I make it into the living room. I glance over to see a hockey game playing.

As I stand beside the couch, my eyes bore into the side of Sam's head. When he doesn't acknowledge my existence or even glance in my direction, I sigh loudly and shift my feet.

"Hi, Oakley. How are you, Oakley? It's good to see you, Oakley," I say mockingly, reaching for a greeting I'm apparently not going to get from him.

Sam's eyebrows furrow as he finally pulls his attention from the screen.

"I said hi to you when I opened the door." His voice sounds normal, but his face is colored in annoyance.

I slide the straps down my arms and let my heavy backpack land on the floor with a thud. Then, I sit on the couch beside Sam, purposely leaving a good amount of space between the

two of us. He doesn't seem to notice. His eyes are back on the game, where two teams are in the middle of a face-off.

"What's the score?" Mike yells from the kitchen area.

"Still tied," Sam answers back.

"Hi, Oakley," Mike shouts.

I smile even though we can't see each other. "Hi, Mike. My *favorite* roommate."

"Hey," Chase says with mock indignation. "I thought I was your favorite."

He must be in the other room with Mike.

"You thought wrong," Mike says smugly.

I glance over at Sam, my grin fading. Nothing. No reaction. His eyes are still glued to the game.

Giving up, I pull my statistics textbook and a pad of paper out of my backpack and get settled into my space. Five minutes later, I'm deep into a math problem when Sam groans in frustration beside me.

My eyes flash to the screen to see the replay. I recognize the Bruins uniform. One of their guys had a shot on goal that missed by inches, hitting the post and flying into the crowd of spectators. The announcers dissect every move as they view it in slow motion. The camera shifts back to live play. The Bruins lose the face-off, and twenty seconds after that, the period ends with the score still deadlocked.

My eyes drop back to my notepad as I feel Sam's attention shift to me when the television goes to a commercial.

"Hey," he says, edging closer. His thigh is now touching my knee, where my legs sit crossed beneath me.

"Hey," I parrot distractedly, not removing my eyes from the paper in my lap.

I'm not really focusing on my work right now, but I'm not going to swoon as soon as Sam decides to throw some attention my way either.

“What are you working on?” he asks, leaning his chin on my shoulder.

“Stats.”

One-worded answers. That’s all he’s getting. That’s more than he deserves.

“Do you need some help?”

That does get my attention. Sam hates math more than I do.

“*You* want to help me with my stats homework?”

He chuckles. “Nope. But Chase is in the other room.”

I roll my eyes, but his playful grin dissolves some of the ice between us. It’s hard to stay mad at his handsome face.

Sam grabs everything in my lap and tosses it to the floor while I protest. Then, he pulls my legs until I’m lying flat on the couch and he’s pinning me to the cushions.

“Now, I’ve got your attention,” he teases.

“You had my attention from the beginning. I just didn’t have yours.”

“Ahh,” he croons, tickling my side. “Does Oakley need some love and affection? Are you pouting?”

“No,” I lie.

I squirm, trying to free myself, but it’s no use. He’s too strong.

He stops moving, his elbows bent on either side of my head while his hands smooth the hair from my face. “Don’t be mad at me.” His voice is low, the words just between us.

I’ve heard that statement a lot lately. More than I care to admit. But his body is deliciously heavy on top of mine.

“I haven’t seen you in almost a week,” I complain, my eyes held prisoner by his. I hate the way my voice sounds whiny.

“I know,” he whispers, leaning closer to kiss the tip of my nose. “Did you miss me?”

“You know I did.”

“I missed you too,” he murmurs.

I almost ask why he hasn't responded to my texts if he's missed me so much, but he's already kissing me, making me forget why I was frustrated with him in the first place.

I want to scream at Sam to wake him up. Tell him I've felt invisible and forgotten since we've been at college. That I'm trying to be understanding and give him plenty of space because I know he has a lot of pressure on his shoulders right now. And I know his focus needs to be on hockey and his team. But I want us to be a unit and shoulder some of the stress for him. I want him to confide in me and make me a priority. He's at the top of my list. I don't feel like I've even been in second place on his over the past few weeks.

But I say nothing. I know he'll just get defensive if I bring it up.

I let his kisses sweep me away. I let the heat of his body and the smell of his skin remind me of why I'm in love with him, even on the days I want to wring his neck.

I can hear Mike and Chase talking in the background. They must be working on something for one of their classes as Sam and I continue to make out on the couch. Sam's hand is beneath my shirt, palming one of my breasts when there's a knock at the front door. I try to shove him off me, but he won't budge. Sam doesn't care if we get caught. Public displays never bother him. I do manage to remove his hand and straighten my clothes as a chair scrapes across the kitchen floor. I hear footsteps approaching. Chase appears a moment later.

Sam finally sits up, allowing me to do the same. Chase barely glances at us as he walks by on his way to the entrance.

I hear a soft, high-pitched voice say, "Hello."

Chase greets her back.

I can't see the front foyer from my spot on the couch, but there's a moment of silence, where I assume they are hugging—the way my boyfriend should've greeted me not long ago when I first arrived.

My eyes dart to the two forms when they enter the space. Chase is flanked by a leggy blonde woman. She's stunning, so beautiful that I simply stare at her for a few moments while running my fingers through my disheveled hair.

I smile when my eyes meet her soft brown orbs. They almost look golden in the sunlight streaming through the windows. Her lips are full as she returns my grin, and it seems genuine. Her skin is flawless, and the features of her face are symmetrical. She's tall and thin with soft curves. Looking at her, I imagine that she's a photographer's dream. And I wonder if she's ever modeled. She should be in magazines, not here, going to college.

My gaze shifts to Chase as he starts to speak. His eyes are watching me.

"This is Ana."

Ana.

Mike severely downplayed her beauty when he described her as the "hot chick" in their economics class.

Chase introduces Sam and me, but my boyfriend's attention is back on the announcers as they discuss the last period of play. He waves distractedly at the twosome, and I roll my eyes, mumbling apologies for him, but I'm secretly glad he hasn't noticed how gorgeous Ana is.

"When hockey's on," I say honestly, "nothing else exists."

Not even me.

She laughs, unbothered by Sam's lack of attention.

"I get it." She waves a perfect hand in the air. "I'm the same way when I'm watching *Love Is Blind*."

I hate that show, but I don't say so. I tried watching it once but was bored stiff within the first ten minutes. Instead, I give a subtle laugh to be friendly.

Chase starts moving toward the other room, glancing over his shoulder at Ana. "We're set up in the kitchen."

"Nice to meet you, Ana," I say as they walk away.

“You too, Oakley.”

I watch them disappear into the other room, my eyes stuck to the spot after they’re gone.

How did Chase land a woman who looks like that?

But I know how. It’s because Chase is amazing. He’s wicked smart, though he doesn’t brag about it. He’s always been at the top of the class. He’s kind and considerate. Brooding and quiet most of the time, which only give him that edge of mystery that drives women crazy. It makes them want to conquer the unconquerable. He’s moody and hot-tempered occasionally, which should be annoying but seems to only increase his sex appeal. He’s a protector. He’s looked out for me practically my entire life. And we’re just friends. The cherry on top is ... he’s easy on the eyes.

I watch part of the second period with Sam—even though he continues to ignore me in favor of the game—until I start actually working on my stats homework again. But thirty minutes in, and my frustration level maxes out. I slam my book shut when I can’t figure out an equation and drop it to the ground. Then, I head into the kitchen to find something to drink.

Chase, Mike, and Ana are sitting around the table, working. They have computer tablets out, and Ana is leaning into Chase with her finger pointing at the screen as they discuss something. All three glance up when I walk into the room.

“Taking a break, Oak?” Mike asks.

I walk to the refrigerator and stick my head inside. Nothing catches my eye, so I shut the door with a sigh.

“I guess,” I grumble in response to his question.

“There’s Pepsi in the cabinet over the washing machine,” Chase says, like he’s reading my mind.

My face lights up. Pepsi is my favorite. I start walking to the utility room, which is off to the side of the kitchen.

Mike furrows his brows. “I didn’t know we had Pepsi.”

“That’s because I hid it from you,” Chase says, causing me to giggle.

I grab two cans and return to the room, handing one to Mike.

Chase scowls at me for including his roommate, but I don’t think he’s serious.

“Thanks,” I say to him.

Chase nods his chin.

“What are you guys working on?” I ask, filling a cup with ice before dumping the can of soda in it.

“Our project for economics,” Mike says. “What are you working on? Other than sucking face with Anderson on the couch. Human anatomy perhaps?”

I feel the heat seeping into my cheeks as I narrow my eyes at my friend. He smirks, realizing he caught me red-handed.

“We haven’t been making out,” I lie. “The game’s on.”

Mike snickers, and Chase looks back at his computer screen.

“I was trying to do my statistics homework. But I’m stuck.”

“Is Sam not helping you?” Mike asks, laughing when he sees my expression.

His roommates know as well as I do that Sam can’t help me with my math homework. In fact, he’d be the last one I’d ask if I had trouble with any schoolwork.

I sigh and take a sip of my Pepsi.

“Do you need help?” Chase asks.

I glance over to see his olive eyes studying me.

“I don’t want to bother you,” I say.

“That’s not an answer,” Chase replies, leaning back in his chair.

He’s wearing a hat today, the bill pulled down low on his forehead. He has a T-shirt on with two hockey sticks crossed on the front and a puck in between them. The material hugs his

contoured chest and broad shoulders even more when he crosses his arms.

“I’ll figure it out, Chase.” I motion to the table. “You guys keep working.”

“My part is practically finished,” he says, standing from his chair. “Go get your stuff.”

He reaches out and steals the cup of Pepsi from my hand, tipping it back for a drink. I can see Ana watching us from the corner of my eye. There’s a familiarity between Chase and me from knowing each other for years. But if she’s interested in him, I could see how our banter and ease with one another could be misconstrued as something more. Something threatening to another woman who wants to date him.

“Are you sure?” I ask, giving him plenty of chances to back out.

“Yes,” he insists, a hint of impatience creeping into his tone.

I walk into the other room and collect my things. When I return, Chase has moved to the empty end of the table. He uses his bare foot to scoot the chair out for me. He’s wearing sweatpants with his T-shirt, but no shoes or socks.

I give Ana a small smile when I see her still studying me. She smiles back, but it looks forced this time, not as genuine as when she first arrived.

“This doesn’t seem like a good time,” I protest again, glancing at Mike and the goddess sitting across from him. “I feel like I’m imposing.”

“When has that ever stopped you before?” Chase quips.

Mike snorts.

My brows slant with worry.

“Oakley,” he says, grabbing my attention. His tone is gentler now and reassuring. “It’s fine. Show me what you’re working on.”

I pull out my homework, waiting for him to laugh when he sees my sad attempt at completing it. But he doesn’t. He just

pulls out a fresh piece of notebook paper, and we start over, walking through the problems from beginning to end. He explains everything as we go, making it seem so simple that I'm not sure where I got tripped up in the first place.

"I don't think I'll ever get this stuff," I groan when we finish the assignment.

"You will," he encourages, tapping my paper with the tip of his finger. "Just go through the steps."

"It just feels like a foreign language to me. I think it's because I hate it so much, so it's hard to force myself to learn it."

"I feel that way about English," he admits, pulling the cap off his head to run a hand through his hair before replacing it.

"You're nuts. English is my favorite subject," I protest, my eyes narrowing in on his ball cap. "Is that Ollie's hat?"

The material is tattered and well worn. It's navy blue with a USA Hockey logo across the front. My brother has one just like it. I know because I've stolen it a time or two.

"Well, next time I need help on an English paper, you'd better return the favor. And, no, this isn't Ollie's hat. We probably have the same one. It wouldn't be the first time."

I lean in closer, fingering an area on the bill that's ragged and torn. "This *is* Ollie's. I borrowed it from him and tore it in that exact same spot. I know because he was pissed at me for days."

"Maybe he borrowed it from me," Chase insists. "It's not his."

"Is too," I argue like a two-year-old.

It's too big of a coincidence that Chase's hat has a tear in the fabric right where I tore Ollie's years ago. This hat has to be my brother's.

So, I swipe it from his head and shoot up from the table, laughing as he jumps up in hot pursuit. He catches me with his arm around my waist before I make it into the living room. I'm still cackling as he swings me around, trying desperately to extend my arm far enough so it's out of his reach. But he reclaims it anyway. Damn him and his long wingspan.

“Thief,” I joke when he lets me go.

“Can’t steal something that’s already mine,” he retorts, placing the hat back on his head in the backward position this time.

I’m momentarily struck by how handsome he looks in it. I’ve always loved a guy in a backward ball cap. Something about the aesthetic epitomizes athleticism and masculinity in my eyes.

“Besides, this is broken in just perfectly. I’ve got it just the way I want it,” Chase adds.

We stare each other down playfully. My eyes are narrowed, and he’s smirking. The challenge in his gaze is unmistakable.

“I’m gonna wait until you’re gone and sneak into your room the next time I’m here and confiscate it,” I warn.

“You do that, Oak, and there’ll be consequences.”

“What kind of consequences?” I ask, tilting my head.

“Do it and find out,” he says cryptically.

He’s daring me to defy him. And something in his expression seems to want me to push him, just so he can dole out the punishment.

“Are you threatening me, Chase Matthews?” I poke the tip of my finger into his chest with mock aggression.

His palm collapses around my finger, holding it hostage against his chest. “It’s a threat and a promise, Oakley. Go ahead ... test me and see what happens.”

Our stares hold like there’s a string connecting us. The Bruins game is on in the living room behind me. And I can hear Mike and Ana talking in the kitchen behind Chase. But the longer we stand there with my finger caught in his hand and our eyes locked in a stare down, the more aware of him I become. The air grows heavier in the small space between us. Our lighthearted grins fade, as if they were synchronized, and my heart begins pounding in my chest. I start to notice Chase in a way I never have before.

He drops my hand suddenly, as if I burned him. As if he couldn't stand to touch me any longer. And he takes one step back, placing space between our bodies.

"Chase," Ana calls out from the other room, "I think we figured out how to segue from your part into mine."

His murky eyes are still on my face as he stands there, not answering her for a few beats, but his face is an impenetrable mask that I can't read. Then, he seems to shake himself out of whatever haze he was in.

"Coming," he answers.

The moment is over when he spins on his bare feet and walks away.

Chase doesn't look at me again when I enter the kitchen to gather my homework and confiscate my drink. Not even a glance. I collect my things and walk out of the room without a word.

Sam is still engrossed in the Bruins game, and for once, I'm thankful for his distraction. It gives me a moment alone with my thoughts.

In the past, I heard the way girls talked about Chase, noticing how hot he was. A few of them even asked me to put in a good word for them since they knew we were friends. And it wasn't like I thought he was unattractive. But I've never truly noticed just how handsome Chase is or the spicy scent of his skin from his cologne or whatever soap he uses. I've never seen the specks of gold and gray in his green eyes before even though they've been there all along.

For the first time in my life, I'm seeing Chase in a way I haven't before.

And I don't know how to feel about it.

Chapter Twelve

Sam

The score is tied. We're in the final period of the game. Sweat pours down my forehead as my line jumps the short wall separating the bench from the ice, subbing out our teammates. The clock is ticking.

Chase intercepts a pass while defending our side of the blue line and bounces the puck off the side wall. It lands perfectly in my path as I break away from the defense. I can feel the defender at my back, racing to beat me to the goal. But he made the mistake of hesitating, and now, he won't see anything, except the numbers on the back of my jersey. I'm faster than most of these guys in a head-to-head race. But when I'm given the advantage of a second or two ... there aren't many in the league who can catch me.

Look on the bright side, number two. You'll have a front row seat as I shove the puck into your net.

Am I conceited?

Yes.

I make a move, and the goalie lurches, opening the upper-right corner of the goal. I take the shot, watching as the puck hits the top of the pole and ricochets past the line. The buzzer goes off, and the arena erupts.

Can I back up my arrogance?

Abso-fucking-lutely.

My teammates swarm me as the timer runs down to zero, and we win the game 4–3.

I glance over at the bench to see Richter scowling at me in the midst of the celebration. My smirk widens, and I nod my head

a few times when we make eye contact.

I'm coming for you, Richter. Don't ever sleep on me.

“One score away from a hat trick, Anderson,” Chase says from beside me, his cheeks ruddy from exertion.

We skate off the ice and start walking along the hallway leading to the locker room.

I scored two goals today. One more, and I would've had that coveted third. Regardless, we're leaving the stadium with the W.

“I'll get the hats before the season is over,” I promise brazenly.

“I'll hold you to that,” Chase says as the noise of the stadium fades into the background.

“Nice apple, by the way,” I tell him, giving well-deserved props for the assist that led to the goal.

We knock gloves.

If Chase's pass hadn't been perfectly placed, that last score never would've happened. I know it. Chase knows it. And anyone who knows hockey knows it.

“That's my job,” he says, always humble. Then, he smirks, glancing over at me. “But it's damn hard work, trying to make you look good.”

“Screw you,” I say, my smile not dimming.

Chase was born with the deferential gene. He's just as talented as I am and even harder working. But his position gets less acclaim. My modesty is missing. It always has been, even when I was a kid, playing the sport. I'm as ostentatious as they come—I'll be the first to admit it. Maybe that's why I've always gravitated to the center position—it gets most of the glory. That and I've always been able to put the puck in the goal. But no one seems to criticize my ego when my performance backs it up on the ice. I've been able to outperform a majority of these guys for most of my life. That's just a fact.

The coaches congratulate us on a hard-won game in the locker room, highlighting the good and bad things we did as a team. They give a shout-out to Chase and me for that last score, deepening the wrinkles on Richter's forehead. This is only the fifth game of the season. Richter will look twenty years older by the end of the year if I keep having success. *When* I keep having success.

We shower and I dress, everyone in a good mood after another victory. The team was projected to be in the middle of the pack preseason. But with our stellar performances in the first five games, we've already moved up into the top ten on the rankings, surprising people and exceeding expectations. Our coaches are pleased, though you'd never know it with the ass-kicking's we get at practice most days.

Once I'm clean, I sit on the bench in the locker room, waiting for Chase and Mike to finish getting ready, and glance at my phone to pass the time. There's a text from my parents, who made the drive down today to watch the game but they're already on their way back home. There are a couple of messages from random girls. I have no idea how they got my number, but they figured it out somehow. And this isn't the first time. Then there's one from Oakley, wanting to know where to meet me out later.

I hesitate, staring at her words on the screen. Things have been better between us again after the Halloween party. Although most of my focus has been on the start of hockey season, in between practices and training and games, our time together has been basically good. She hasn't been as needy for attention, understanding that my focus needs to be on my sport for now.

I can admit, Oakley is a great girlfriend. She's patient and kind. Gorgeous. The sex is amazing, and getting it on the regular doesn't suck either. But the more time that passes, the more I've been thinking about this relationship stuff. When we started seeing each other last year, I didn't consider the strings and the commitment it would require of me. I just wanted to be with Oakley, so I was. But I've been feeling stuck lately. Trapped. She's been talking about the future and planning

stuff. Christmastime. Next spring. Next summer. I can feel the noose around my neck tightening with each mention. Things with us have started to feel like an expectation rather than a choice. And it's making me realize how young I am. And how I have my whole life ahead of me. College, the pros. Do I really want to be connected to the same girl I started dating in high school when there are so many options out there?

I have too much ahead of me to think about forever with someone.

With any girl.

Even Oakley.

I shove my phone into my back pocket, leaving Oakley's message unanswered, when Mike shouts at me, and I decide to go out with the guys alone tonight to celebrate.

We end up at a local sports bar not far from the stadium that caters to the hockey team. It's a place called Cheerz. Most of our teammates come here on the nights after home games. And because of that, most of the fans make their way to the sports bar as well. It's a hole-in-the-wall, but they have good food and a tendency to serve the guys on the team complimentary beer. Even the underaged ones. I guess they figure whatever they lose in revenue from serving us, they gain back tenfold from all the people we bring in simply by showing up.

Twenty minutes later, I have a burger, fries, and a frosty mug of beer sitting in front of me. Chase, Mike, and I are at one end of a table full of our teammates.

"Coach will kill you if he knows you're drinking tonight," Chase says, setting his water down after taking a drink.

I take several large gulps from my glass just to be an asshole. "What Coach doesn't know won't hurt him."

We have another game in a couple of days, so the coaches warned us about partying too hard. They want us in tip-top shape when we face our crosstown rivals. It's an away game, but it's so close to the university that we'll have a huge home crowd anyway.

“Plus, a couple of beers has never hurt anyone.” I pause, smiling at a blonde across the room when we make eye contact.

Chase swivels his head around to see who I’m looking at. He frowns.

“I’m not talking about having a beer or two,” he insists. “I’m talking about the underage drinking in public.”

We stare at each other in silence for a few beats.

“Is Oakley coming out tonight?”

I shrug. “I haven’t talked to her.”

“Are the two of you fighting again?” Mike mumbles around a mouthful of burger. “I thought you’d been getting along better the past few weeks. I haven’t heard any loud makeup sex or screaming lately.” He starts spanking the air with his hand.

Mike ducks when I toss a wet napkin at him.

“You’ve never heard us having sex,” I say. Then, I pause. “Have you?”

“Those walls in our house are really thin,” Mike says cryptically. He laughs when my eyebrows pull in.

I glance at Chase.

“Don’t look at me,” Chase says, dipping a few fries in some ketchup. “I don’t want to know anything about your sex life.”

“Is it me in general,” I ask, “or me and Oakley together that you don’t want to think about?”

“I’ve pictured Oakley naked many times,” Mike admits, staring off into the distance with a ghost of a smile on his face.

Chase chucks a fry at Mike’s head.

“I mean, I know she’s like a sister to you.” I continue talking to Chase, ignoring Mike in the process.

Chase glares at me. “She’s not my fucking sister.”

“Well, you’re tight with Ollie.” I glance down at the other end of the table, where Oakley’s older brother sits, surrounded by the upperclassmen on our team.

“And?” Chase asks, looking at me pointedly, as if that proves nothing.

“What’s the deal with you and that Ana chick?” I ask, changing the direction of the conversation right before I drain the last of my beer.

I lift my burger, devouring a third of it with one bite.

He shrugs, as noncommittal as ever. “She’s cool.”

“How cool?” Mike asks with a smirk.

Chase scowls. “You have class with her too, Hoarst. You know her just as well as I do. Why are you asking me that?”

“I don’t know her quite as well.” Mike’s eyebrows lift and lower a few times suggestively. “I’m just wondering how ... *close* you’ve gotten lately. And ... she just walked through the door,” Mike adds.

We all glance back to see Ana pausing right inside the main entrance to Cheerz. She’s with a few other people, but she stands out with her long legs and pretty face.

Chase turns back around to his food and starts eating. “I didn’t invite her here if that’s what you’re asking. But it’s not like this place isn’t a popular hangout for students. I’m sure she’s just out with friends.”

“Right,” I deadpan. “Because none of the girls on campus know that the entire hockey team hangs out here after most games.”

“Why are you two so invested in my love life?” Chase grumbles as he shoves his last bite of burger into his mouth. “It’s fucking annoying.”

“Because you’re so secretive about it,” Mike answers honestly.

“And because it’s fun to bust your balls,” I add, laughing when Chase rolls his eyes.

“I’m gonna get another beer,” I announce, rising from my seat to go to the bar.

I hand over my empty glass to the bartender when I arrive and lean against the mahogany surface as I wait for a refill,

glancing around the room. The place is packed. There are a few hockey games on the televisions mounted on the walls, along with a couple of football games and preseason basketball. I spot Chase's woman, Ana, over in a corner booth, staring across the room at the table I just vacated. Her eyes are glued to the back of Chase's head. My roommate can say whatever he wants, but that girl is definitely here for him tonight. And he should jump on the opportunity. She's a smokeshow.

I make eye contact with several women as I look around, noticing quite a few have their attention already centered on me. I give a chin nod to a couple and a hint of a smile to a few more.

"Hey," a soft voice says to my right.

I glance over to see a petite brunette wearing my jersey over a short jean skirt. She has the loose top tied into a knot at the side of her waist, cinching the material across her chest and displaying just a hint of skin above her waistband.

"Hey." I dip my head in response, playing it cool.

"You were great in the game tonight," she compliments, sliding onto the empty stool next to me.

She has thick brown hair and full lips. My eyes are drawn to her mouth when she runs her tongue across the bottom one.

"You a hockey fan?" I ask, thanking the bartender when he sets down a freshly poured beer for me. I take a sip.

"I like hockey," she says, watching me beneath hooded eyelids. "But I'm a bigger fan of you."

My eyebrow lifts, along with one side of my mouth. "Is that so?"

"I'm Susie." She reaches a hand across, waiting for me to take it.

I slide my palm over hers. "Sam."

"I know," she says, inflating my ego further.

She squeezes my fingers before slowly releasing her hold.

When my new friend turns her attention to the bartender to place a drink order, I scan the crowd again. My stomach drops when I notice a familiar head of raven-colored hair snaking through the sea of people.

Oakley.

A sliver of guilt filters into my conscience, but I shove it down until it disappears.

I've done nothing wrong. I don't have to jump every time she texts me.

As soon as our eyes meet, she looks away, leaning over to say something to Madison. She doesn't glance in my direction again, walking toward the table of my teammates rather than over to me at the bar. That one move tells me two things at once. That I fucked up by not answering her text and that I'm sure to be in the doghouse because of it.

I tip my glass until half my beer is down my throat, watching as Oakley pauses to greet Chase and Mike. Her smile is wide and genuine as she talks to my boys. Her exuberance is almost overblown, like she's exaggerating things for my benefit rather than theirs.

Ollie yells her name, and she makes her way down the table to her brother. She has the attention of most of my teammates while wearing her tight jeans and loose top with a sweater draped across her arm as she stands next to Ollie. My fist tightens around my glass as I watch them notice her hourglass shape and that round ass when her brother isn't looking. All those luscious curves that I've spent the past year exploring. Ollie drags an empty chair closer so she can sit at his side. Madison shares half of the seat with her.

Other than the passing glance when she first arrived, Oakley still hasn't acknowledged me. My jaw clenches at the blatant disrespect. She's playing games I don't feel like playing tonight.

But you made the first move when you ignored her text.

I brush aside that little voice inside my conscience that's pointing the finger in my direction and instead focus on how

I've been wronged by Oakley.

"Sam?" the brunette next to me says, placing her hand on my arm to gain my attention.

I guess she's been talking this entire time, but I haven't heard a word she said.

"Yeah?" I ask, glancing at her before my eyes automatically zone in on Oakley again.

"I was asking if you wanted to get out of here. Maybe go back to my place?"

Her hopeful tone catches my attention. I glance down at the stranger by my side.

Susie's attractive with a pretty face and a good body, from what I can tell. The baggy jersey is hiding her full shape, making me wonder what's beneath it. But the mystery doesn't deter me. Rather, it intrigues me. She's watching me with adoration, like I literally hung the moon. I like the way it feels. Oakley hasn't looked at me like that in a while now.

Is this what I'm missing by being in a relationship? The excitement of meeting someone new. The anticipation of hooking up with a stranger for the first time. A new girl every night. Not having rules and expectations thrown at me. Consequences. Just pure freedom to do whatever I want, whenever I want.

"Tempting," I say to Susie, "but I'm here with my boys."

I tip my glass over at the table, using them as an excuse rather than tell her the truth ... that I have a girlfriend sitting across the room. One who's already pissed at me and currently avoiding my eyes.

"Your loss," she murmurs.

For the first time in a while, I feel like it *is* my loss as I watch her walk away. But Susie only makes it a few steps before she stops and spins, bringing herself right back to the bar. I watch as she grabs a cocktail napkin and a pen that was left lying on top of a signed credit card receipt. She writes her name and number down on it in blue ink. Glancing at me beneath those

long, dark lashes, she folds the napkin once and slides it into the front pocket of my jeans, shoving it down deep until it's nestled right beside my awakening dick. She leaves her hand there for a few seconds for emphasis, then slowly removes it.

“Just in case you change your mind.” Her voice is sultry and low.

I trail her every move as she walks back to the front of the bar, where some of her friends are sitting. She glances over her shoulder more than once to see if she still has my attention.

She does.

But when Oakley stands and moves to the center of the room, the movement caught from the corner of my eye, Susie is forgotten once again.

The jukebox is playing. There's space in front of a small stage area, where people are dancing. The stage is empty with no promise of live music tonight. But that hasn't stopped the small crowd of mostly women from dancing to the music. Oakley and Madison stop in the middle of the group, rolling their hips seductively to the bass. It isn't long before they're joined by a couple of guys.

I snarl my lip at the frat boys with their polo shirts and slicked-back hair. One of them has his hands low on Oakley's hips, pulling her body back into his. I glance over at our table, waiting for Ollie to notice and shut this down, but he isn't paying attention. He's lost in conversation with a few of our teammates.

I take a few seconds to drain the rest of my beer, the cold temperature of the liquid going straight to my brain momentarily. I shake it off, stalking across the floor like a heat-seeking missile. My target is the asshole currently groping my girlfriend.

Regardless of my doubts about being in a relationship, that girl is still mine. And I won't stand for any other guy touching her.

I walk in between the pair and put a palm on the douchebag's chest, shoving him backward. He stumbles into the person behind him, and they both stare daggers at me.

“What the fuck, man?” Frat Boy snarls.

I take another step, placing my body in between Oakley and this stranger. My fists are flexing and relaxing, itching for some action tonight.

In the back of my head, I know there’ll be consequences if I get into a fight tonight. It’ll likely get back to Coach, and if he finds out, I’ll be warming the bench more than I’m accustomed to for the next few games. That is, if he lets me suit up at all.

But right now, I’m not feeling rational. Coach and hockey are the furthest things from my brain. I feel like brawling. I want this guy to push me. I’m aching for him to take a swing. Not only because he’s disrespecting me by placing his hands on my girl, but also because I’m confused about what I’m doing with a girlfriend in the first place. And I think a good, old-fashioned bare-knuckles fight might help me dissolve some of the indecision running through my body right now. Maybe it will help me see more clearly. Or maybe it’ll simply feel good to smash my fist into this guy’s face.

“That’s my girl you put your hands on,” I snap, tipping my chin toward Oakley. I throw my arm out when she attempts to step around me, ignoring the way she huffs when I block her movement.

He smirks, and I grow anxious, waiting to hear the smart-ass remark he’s about to make. I don’t need much of an excuse to throw fists tonight.

Please make a comment. Please pop off. Just give me a reason to come at you.

“She didn’t seem like your girl a minute ago.” He tilts his head, baiting me. “And if she is yours, you must be doing something wrong. ’Cause girls that are satisfied don’t look at other guys like *your girl* was looking at me.”

And that’s all the invitation I need.

I arch back, my right fist swinging across my body and straight into his nose. I can feel the crunch beneath my knuckles as the bone breaks. Blood gushes from his nostrils as

his head whips backward from the blow, his hands flying up to try and stanch the flow. He uses his preppy collared shirt to absorb some of the liquid. It transforms from a baby-blue shade into a rustic red in the blink of an eye. My feet are squared as I wait to see if he wants to keep going or if this is a one-and-done situation.

The crowd lurched as soon as I struck him, most of the girls moving away from the violence. Some of the guys have formed a circle around us, waiting to see a full-fledged fight. They're practically begging for it. And I'm ready to deliver.

Two of Frat Boy's buddies step up, both with hands on each of his shoulders. They're glaring at me. The new odds don't faze me at all.

"I will fucking kill you," Frat Boy warns me, his words muffled as he pinches the bridge of his nose. Blood is still gushing down his face.

One of his friends leans in, talking in a rushed whisper next to his ear. I catch the word *hockey* and see my victim's eyes flick back to the table I was sitting at a few minutes ago. Half a dozen of my teammates are rising and making their way across the floor, even as we stand here. The others are waiting at the table to see if they are needed. That's the thing about a hockey team—when you're on one, you never fight alone. I even think Richter would step in if needed.

Well ... maybe.

Nah, scratch that. Richter would rather see me get my ass kicked.

The guy I hit is still glaring daggers at me.

"I'll see you around, Anderson," he threatens while retreating, realizing he's outmanned.

I laugh, finding his warning and the fact that he knows who I am humorous.

"I look forward to it, whatever the fuck your name is," I mock.

Then, I watch as his friends lead him away.

"You good?" Chase says, coming up to my side.

Mike is flanking him, along with four of my other teammates.

“I’m good. I just didn’t like the way he was touching my girl,” I add.

The crowd around me settles. The music takes over, and people start dancing again. The guys make their way back to the table. Oakley steps in front of me. Her face is red with anger. She’s fuming when she should be thanking me.

“A word,” she says, like she’s some authority figure and I’m about to get reprimanded.

It pisses me off, but I hold it inside for the time being. I follow her out the front door when she stomps away until it’s just the two of us. She leads me around the side of the building, where we’re hidden from the masses and shrouded by the darkness. When she turns to face me, I get a sinking feeling in my stomach. I try to ignore her beautiful face and the way her features practically glow in the soft moonlight. I don’t want to be distracted by her appeal. I’ve been distracted by it for too long.

I focus on a strong resolve instead. I remind myself that I’m tired of this shit between us. I don’t want to fight anymore. I don’t want every outing and every party to turn into an argument over something stupid. I don’t want her—or anyone else—telling me what to do.

I’m over it.

I think I’ve finally had enough.

I brace myself for what I know I have to do.

Chapter Thirteen

Oakley

Do you ever have one of those days that starts off shitty and just keeps getting worse? The kind you wish you could have avoided altogether by pulling the covers over your head in bed and staying there, never living through it at all? That's the kind of day I'm having today.

My morning started when I got a call from my mother that my grandmother fell and broke her hip overnight. She's my last living grandparent. My dad's parents died years ago from age-related illnesses. And my mom's dad had a massive heart attack that took him from us suddenly when I was sixteen. So, Granny is it for my family. She's all we have left. She's in the hospital right this minute with emergency surgery scheduled either later tonight, if they can work her in, or early tomorrow morning.

I know enough about broken hips in the elderly to know those types of injuries are usually the beginning of the end. A lot of people don't recover from them—the injury, the surgery, and the rehab. So, I drove the two hours it took to get home earlier today, spent time with my family in Granny's hospital room, and then was convinced by my parents to head back to school to watch Ollie's game. I only agreed to leave if they promised to call me if she went into surgery or if anything changed.

We didn't tell Ollie the news. My dad didn't want him distracted before his game. He couldn't do anything to help anyway. I didn't share the news with Sam either for the same reason. I didn't want to burden him.

I left the hospital in plenty of time to make it to the hockey arena for tonight's match. But about an hour into the trip back, one of my tires blew, leaving me stranded on the side of the road. I'm not one of those helpless damsels in distress. My dad had taught me how to change a tire years ago. But I couldn't

get the lug nuts off, no matter how hard I tried. So, dirty and tired and depressed, I called for roadside assistance. I waited thirty minutes for them to arrive and then another thirty for the spare to be put on my car before I was on my way again.

By the time I dropped the car at a garage, took a rideshare home, and stopped off at the dorms to shower and change, the game was in the last period. I decided to skip the entire thing and just catch up with Sam and the team afterward. Maybe have a drink and drown my sorrows.

Madison had gone to the arena with some of our other friends. She filled me in on everything happening in the game, including the assist from Chase and Sam's last-minute goal that secured the win. Finally, a bright light at the end of a truly awful day. I was looking forward to seeing my boyfriend. I was happy that they'd won. I knew the guys would be in good moods, and I wanted to drink and dance and laugh for a few hours. Just forget about the bad parts of my day.

So, I sent Sam a text, asking where we could meet up.

No response.

Then, I sent him another message, telling him how proud I was of his performance even though I wasn't there to see it.

Crickets.

At first, I thought he must be busy with the team. I know the coaches like to talk to them afterward. And I knew the guys needed to shower and change.

He must not be checking his phone ... right?

I mean, he wouldn't ignore me on purpose.

But then the clock kept ticking. The more seconds that elapsed, the more pathetic I felt. Picture me, sitting on my couch in my empty dorm room, dressed to go out for a night on the town, waiting for a call or a text or a carrier pigeon ... something to make me feel included and wanted and loved by the person who was supposed to be doing all those things for me. Filling my cup. An invitation to celebrate and have a good time. Because a boyfriend would want me there with him, right? He should want to revel in his successes *with* me.

I'm not clingy. I don't expect to be the center of attention all the time. I don't even expect to be included every time Sam goes out. I know there are days and nights the guys want to do their own thing. There are days and nights I want to do my own thing with Madison or other friends. But I'm up front about it. I communicate it to my partner because that's what we're supposed to be—partners.

And Sam and I had talked about going out tonight after their game. We'd planned on it. *I* had planned on it.

Now, I was getting nothing but radio silence.

Lately, I haven't felt like an equal partner in this relationship. I feel like a woman who's giving and giving more and receiving nothing in return. I feel like a burden. A nuisance. An afterthought. Because Sam is treating me like one. I'm young, and this is my first real, long-term relationship. But I don't think this is how things are supposed to be.

Sam is pulling away. And he's pushing me aside simultaneously. The more he moves, the harder I'm reaching for him. But all I'm grasping is empty air because I think he might already be gone.

I find myself becoming more frustrated than happy. It always seems like I'm doing something wrong in Sam's eyes. And my emotions are rarely validated by him. Red flags are popping up all around me. Around us.

I've been explaining it away for weeks, thinking relationships ebb and flow. That there will be good times and bad. Times apart and times together. But things are getting worse. I have this sinking feeling in the bottom of my gut. I think it might be time to face the facts. Before, when he looked at me, I felt like the center of the world. The center of *his* world. Now, when he looks at me—if he even glances in my direction in the first place—I feel cold. He's taken his light away and left me in the dark. And I don't understand why.

Madison came home to get me before going out tonight since I never heard from Sam. She ran into Mike after the game, and he said the team was going to Cheerz to celebrate. *Everyone* on the team was going. Even my boyfriend, the star of the

game. The one who had scored the last goal to lead the team to victory. The same guy I'd put my heart and soul and time into over the past year. The one I'd been there for, unconditionally, trying to be supportive while working hard not to be suffocating or needy. Even as my needs were not being met. The one I had given my body to. The one I had given my heart to.

The same guy who couldn't be bothered to answer my texts and tell me where he was going to be tonight. And today, more than any other day, I'd needed him to be there for me. But he wasn't.

So, now, here we stand, face-to-face, in this dingy alleyway, staring at each other. Our mouths are set in grim lines, and Sam's knuckles are swollen on his right hand from breaking that guy's nose. It's dark out. The only light in this area of the parking lot is provided by the moon, and even that's interrupted momentarily by the passing clouds. There's a chill in the air—I left my sweater inside in the heat of the moment—but my blood is running hot anyway. I'm angry. I'm mad about so many different things that I don't know where to begin. But the hurt that aches deep inside like a living, breathing thing overshadows the bulk of my anger. I leave my expression blank, determined not to let the pain show. I'd rather give him my wrath.

I cross my arms over my chest. Not to ward off the cold, but to protect myself from the man in front of me. Because even though he's said nothing, I can feel it coming. It's like the calm before the storm when there's a tornado about to strike. The air becomes so still in that moment before it hits. Eerily calm and quiet. Nothing's moving. And then, boom ... the winds kick up, and the tornado drops down, destroying everything in its path.

"Well?" I finally say when he doesn't speak first.

Sam shifts his weight to his other foot, leaning back against the brick like he doesn't have a care in the world. I almost don't recognize him right now.

"Well what?" he says callously. "That guy had it coming."

“Why?” I ask. “Just because he was dancing with me?”

“Yeah, actually. He put his hands on what’s mine. I won’t tolerate that. I don’t care who the fuck he is.”

I scoff bitterly. “What do you care if he puts his hands on me? You’ve barely even looked at me in days. And you obviously didn’t want me here, or you would’ve answered my texts.”

His eyes flash with anger. “Are we back to this again? What’s wrong, Oakley? You not getting enough attention? All eyes aren’t on Little Burnham, so you’re mad about it?” He leans his head back and angles his face to the sky. “I’m so sick of this shit.”

The harshness of his words hurt, hitting me in the center of my chest. I’m glad he’s looking upward so he misses it when I flinch. I reassemble my armor as his eyes—those catastrophic grays—slowly return to me. He takes his time, like he can’t be bothered to spare me another glance. His irises look almost black in the dim lighting. The ache inside grows larger at his empty expression.

And I wonder how we got here in the first place.

Was it something I did?

Was it something I said?

But I know all those questions show weakness, so I don’t vocalize them. I’ll probably never get answers to the issues plaguing me the most anyway. And I have no idea how to fix things between us. I’ve been racking my brain for solutions and keep coming up empty. A person could drown in the search for the whys. And at the end of the day, it doesn’t really matter how we arrived at this place. I just need to accept that this is where we are. And I’m not going to stay mired in the muck any longer, no matter how much I love him. And no matter how much it hurts to let him go. Because I can see it in every glance, feel it in every touch, and sense it in his mood. He’s been leaving little by little.

And now, I think he’s finally gone.

“Yeah,” I sigh, “well, that makes two of us.”

We stare at each other in the small space, saying so much in the silence. He's frustrated and angry. I'm exhausted and hurt.

"Why don't you just say it?" I challenge him.

"Say what?" Sam's brows slant.

"Say what you're really thinking," I push, taking a step forward.

I shove at his chest. He barely moves an inch. I blink away the tears in my eyes, determined not to let him see me cry. We're in that space I hate. The one where the person who cares the most is the loser. And I'm coming in last place. I know it. And he knows it regardless of how much I'm pretending.

I've always cared the most out of the two of us.

I just didn't see it as a weakness until right at this moment.

"You've been pushing me away for weeks now," I accuse.

He looks to the side, but the hardness in his eyes remains. His jaw tics. Nothing I say is breaking through his armor.

"Don't be a coward. Just say it, Sam. Say what it is you really want. Don't sugarcoat it. Give it to me straight."

When our eyes connect, I see a moment of hesitation inside of his. A flicker of emotion and maybe a hint of pain. I clench my teeth. I don't want to see this from him. I don't want anything but the uncaring asshole side. I think it's the only thing I can bear right now. I know he's going to break my heart. I don't want one ounce of love or caring out of him while he's doing it.

If he won't speak the words I need to hear, I'll force it out of him. If there's anything I've learned over the past year of getting to know Sam, it's how to push his buttons.

I lean closer until I'm only a breath away from his ear. The tips of my breasts press against his arm and his chest. He tenses from the contact.

My voice drops to a deadly murmur. "Be a man and say what you came out here to say, Sam." I lean in a fraction more when

he stays silent. “Can’t do it? I never knew you were such a *pussy*.”

Shots fired.

I watch as all the emotion and any pain I saw reflected in Sam’s eyes dissolve into a fiery rage. His eyes are hard again and latch on to mine, holding them prisoner.

I widen my stance, readying for the assault. I’m trying to prepare myself for the words that are sure to slice me in half.

And Sam doesn’t disappoint me.

“I didn’t want you to come tonight. I left you on read because I didn’t want you here. You’re suffocating me. I can’t breathe when you’re around. The life is being sucked out of me. All we do is fight. It isn’t fun anymore. You’re talking about Christmas and next summer like we’re going to be together forever. I’m eighteen fucking years old. I don’t know what’s happening next week, let alone next year. And when I look at the future, all I see is hockey. I don’t picture you there with me.” He pauses once to take a breath. “I can’t do this. I don’t want to be in this relationship anymore.” His voice is low and menacing, each word concise and sharp. Pointed arrows, piercing my skin and slicing my heart.

Sam never looks down or away as he delivers each blow. He stares me straight in the face with a hard resolve as he destroys us. Destroys me. Each confession breaks me down, part by part, until I’m lying in that dark alleyway in pieces.

I suffocate him while he’s the air I breathe.

I suck the life out of him while he gives me viability.

I plan on a future with him because I see us together. He sees a future without me.

He loves hockey.

I love him.

We’re living in opposite realities.

Maybe we always were.

I don't say anything as he walks away. I just watch as he goes. And I'm not sure how long I stand in that spot, all alone in the middle of the night outside of a bar. I'm not even sure when I sink to the ground, sitting on the dirty asphalt with my knees bent and my head angled down. I don't know when the first tear falls, but it's the beginning of a torrential downpour. I do know not one tear fell while Sam was standing in front of me. I wouldn't allow it. I'm at least proud of myself for that.

Over a year ago, I walked into a party at Mike Hoarst's house with hearts in my eyes for the man who was standing in front of me a few minutes ago. He was all I wanted. He was all I'd dreamed about for years. He was all I saw. I thought all my dreams were coming true when he chose me. Now, those hearts have cracks running down the center of them, allowing me to see the truth—even if it hurts. Maybe he never really cared about me. Maybe he was never the man I thought he was.

A big part of me hates Sam for what he just did. But the other part of me—the treacherous part—still loves him. If only Sam's rejection could somehow mollify the love I carry until it dissolved into nothing, freeing me from its clutches. It would be so much easier then.

But he's gone.

And the love for him remains inside of me.

The pain feels like it's ripping me apart.

It's making me weak and broken.

It's making me feel small.

This is how Madison finds me sometime later, sitting on the uneven gravel, in a dark alleyway behind a bar, all alone. I'm in the ugly-crying stage—the one where my makeup is smeared, my eyes are nearly swollen shut, and I can't catch my breath.

She picks me up, and she takes me home, shouldering some of my pain in the way a best friend does. She sends a message to Ollie, letting him know I left so he doesn't break down our

front door in search of me later. And she sits with me on my bed as I continue to shatter throughout the night.

Because that's what you do when you're a true friend. That's what you do when you genuinely love someone.

You hold them up when they don't have the strength to do it on their own.

Chapter Fourteen

Oakley

“Get dressed,” Madison says as my door whips open and she barrels into my bedroom like a gust of wind.

I look up from my spot on my bed. My textbook is open in my lap, and my notes are scattered around the mattress in a chaotic mess, but one that makes perfect sense to me.

“I can’t,” I reply resolutely. “I have to study.”

Madison bounds over to my desk and leans her hip against the end of it until she’s facing me, crossing her arms with a stern look on her face. She’s trying to bully me. Intimidate me.

It isn’t working.

“It’s Friday night. No one studies on Friday nights. Not even on the weekend before final exams.”

I shrug, glancing down at the passage I just highlighted. “I do.”

She’s quiet for a few beats, but I can feel her concerned eyes on me. Surveying. Watching.

“Since when?” she asks.

I glance up to see her chewing on her bottom lip.

“Since I have three exams and a paper due next week,” I lie, hoping it’s enough to convince her. I’m not lying about the workload; all those things are upcoming. But I’ve been preparing for a while now, and the paper is already finished. It just needs a final proofread.

Madison uncrosses her arms and runs a hand through her blonde waves.

I pull my attention back to my lap when I can't stand to meet her worried gaze any longer.

"Oakley ..." she practically whispers. My name is laced with fret and frustration. "You can't keep doing this. It isn't healthy."

"Doing what?" I answer.

I think I'd prefer her consternation to the pity emanating from her now.

"It isn't healthy to want to do well in my classes?" I challenge.

We both know that's not what she's talking about. And we both are very aware that's not what I'm doing right now.

I'm avoiding, plain and simple. Like I have been for the past four weeks.

"I know you're sad about Sam. But it's time to pick yourself back up. Rejoin the land of the living."

My eyes stay downcast.

"Come out with me tonight. There's a party at the Sigma Chi house. No hockey players will be there."

She's pleading with me. She's making a good case.

But I can't bring myself to do what she's asking.

"I'm just not in the mood," I admit, finally looking at her again. "I'd just be a buzzkill."

"You wouldn't," she insists.

Madison always thinks her good mood is enough to mask my bad disposition. But I don't think even my best friend can do that right now.

"I will soon," I insist, saying what's needed to get her off my back for the moment.

"Promise?" She stands up straight and takes the few short steps to my doorway, pausing for my answer.

I can feel the defeat in her countenance.

I nod, not wanting to say the words. I don't want to lie to her if I back out again next time.

She leaves my bedroom door open as she walks into the living room. I hear her shuffling around for the next ten minutes before the front door latches behind her. And then the dorm suite is quiet.

I slump against my headboard, moving my textbook to the mattress and stretching out my legs. I know Madison is right. This isn't healthy. I'm depressed, but I can't seem to pull myself from the depths of my despair. I'm wallowing in it. It's like I've forgotten how to be happy. Or even how to pretend to be.

Sam and I breaking up was like a death. It happened fast that night outside of Cheerz, a Band-Aid ripping off quickly. It took a layer of skin with it. But the implications of everything are sinking in slowly, a little at a time. I feel like I'm living in a nightmare I can't escape from. My days are an endless, empty cycle. I awaken from a restless sleep—because I'm not resting well anymore—and it hits me all over again as awareness creeps in. Sam isn't here, and he isn't coming back. And the pain strikes, just like when it first happened. I spend my days going through the motions, haunted by the memories of better times that I'm aching to relive. Everywhere I go, something reminds me of things we did together or places we went. Dreams I had about forever. With him. Dreams that are now dead.

And all I feel is alone and broken.

I avoid my friends and parties because I'm afraid of running into Sam. I've become reclusive. I've even been dodging my brother, but I sense his tolerance is growing thin. Ollie knows Sam and I broke up, but he doesn't know how hard I've taken it. Or maybe he does. I'm terrible at hiding things from him, which is probably why I'm in full avoidance mode. I know he'll see right through me.

The few times I've spotted Sam across campus unexpectedly, it's like I get sucked beneath the current and start drowning all over again. He looks happy, making me wonder if he ever

cared about me at all. I went to a hockey game to support Ollie, but left before the second period.

I feel broken and pathetic. I don't want to subject Madison to that. To me. I can't stand myself right now. How can I expect anyone else to tolerate me?

Suddenly, the air inside this dorm is stifling. The silence is strangling me.

I scoot to the side of the bed and pull my socks and shoes onto my feet. I gather my books and notes and shove them into my backpack. I glance in the mirror across the room at my reflection. I'm wearing jeans and a sweatshirt with the Sinclair University hockey logo across the front. My dark hair is up in a messy bun, and I have little to no makeup on. I barely recognize the shell of a girl staring back at me.

I lift the strap of my backpack over one shoulder, grab my keys, and leave the dorm. I see a few girls walking out of a room down the hall, dressed in tight outfits, their faces painted and hair primed. There's excited anticipation in their expressions as they face a night out. Boys and booze. Fun. Potential for new friendships. New relationships.

I walk down the staircase behind them, my sneakered footsteps quiet and hidden beneath the click of their heels on the concrete surface and their animated chatter. I take a left when they take a right outside of the building. My path moves me across campus to a coffee shop I know is open until midnight tonight.

The air is chilly, and the sky is dark, but it fits my mood. I tuck my hands into the pocket of my hoodie to warm them and keep moving. The pathway is clear. Most people are off campus, escaping the daily grind of classes. They're celebrating a night of freedom, whereas I'm just hoping to survive it.

The coffee shop is cozy when I walk inside. They have a fireplace in the corner with a crackling fire blazing. The whole scene is romantic, if you're in that mindset. I'm not.

The smell of freshly ground coffee beans overwhelms the air. It's surprisingly full of people for late on a Friday night, but I manage to snag a small table in the corner. I place my backpack on the chair to stake my claim and then walk over to the counter to order, glancing around the space as I wait. There are couches and comfy chairs scattered about and more than a dozen tables of various sizes, most of them occupied. A few people are quietly reading, sipping on coffee. There are some die-hard students studying at tables or working on laptops. I wonder if they're serious students or nursing broken hearts like me. The rest of the place is filled with couples, probably on dates.

I wish bitterness didn't fill my veins at that thought. I hope, someday soon, it won't.

I order a chai latte, wanting something different than my normal order—a vanilla latte with a dash of cinnamon. They prepare it in a large mug, and I take it over to my table, arranging my study materials before taking my first sip. Chord Overstreet strums his guitar softly through the speakers filtering overhead.

After opening my textbook, I peruse the last paragraph I was on before Madison barreled into my room earlier, but I'm having trouble concentrating on it. I give up after reading the same sentence for the tenth time and stare out the window instead.

My mind starts to drift to Sam, wondering what he's doing right now. Is he at a party somewhere across campus? Maybe he's playing beer pong. Maybe he's found a better partner, one who won't miss that last shot. Is he flirting with the bunnies that were chasing him before? Is he hooking up with one of them? The bold one with red hair who always seemed to have her sights set on him ...

The searing pain I feel at that thought is second nature at this point, but the familiarity doesn't lessen the hurt. I'm starting to wonder if it ever will. Every time I picture someone else touching him, it breaks me open all over again. Sam touching them back ... wanting them.

I swallow down the nausea that threatens to rise and shift my eyes to the front door as it opens, the little bell attached to it jingling in the process. I recognize the stunning blonde who comes across the threshold first, followed by a familiar brown-haired, olive-eyed boy I've known for most of my life.

Chase's eyes capture mine before I can look away and pretend not to see them. Ana is walking in front of him, unaware that I'm sitting here. Chase has his hand on the small of her back as they move together, making me think they're on a date. If he's surprised to see me, he doesn't show it. But then I always did have trouble reading Chase. I can never tell what he's thinking or feeling.

The ache inside my chest deepens, shifting into something like curiosity. Or maybe it's jealousy. Envy. I've been having trouble lately identifying how I really feel. Whatever it is, it's churning inside, fueling my self-pity. I know it's selfish, but I don't want a front row seat to the blossoming relationship of one of my longtime friends amid my downward spiral. Seeing other people happy together highlights the fact that I'm unhappy and alone. I resent them for showing up here in the first place. This is my safe space tonight. I claimed it first. And I can't hide inside this café late on a Friday when Chase is staring at me from across the room. I don't want to be seen by him or anyone else. This is the last place I thought someone I knew would be. Especially one of the hockey guys.

Chase leans down to say something next to Ana's ear. Her eyes shoot to the corner until they find me. I don't miss the slight downturn of her lips, but it's gone in the next instant. She lifts her face until she's looking at Chase, and her expression transforms. I've seen other girls stare at him like that before, like he's the sun and they're gravitating around him. She's smiling up at him and nodding to whatever he's saying. His hand drops from her back as he starts walking toward me.

I take another sip of my drink. It's lukewarm now. One of the logs on the fire pops from the heat behind me.

"Hey," Chase says, stopping in front of my table and resting his hand on the back of the chair across from me. "What are

you doing here?”

“Studying,” I reply.

He glances down at the book, papers, pen, and highlighter sitting on my tabletop, unused.

He chuckles. “On a Friday night?”

Something about his amusement irritates me. I know how pathetic I must look, sitting in a café on a weekend night, all alone. I don’t need his reminder. I already feel pitiful enough.

“Yes.” There’s a bite to my tone.

He lifts his palms in surrender as his smirk falls, detecting the defensiveness in that one-worded response. “I admire your dedication. I wasn’t making fun of you.”

My eyebrows lower in suspicion. “Sure you weren’t.”

“I wasn’t,” he says earnestly.

He glances to the side, but it’s more like he’s thinking than looking around. Chase brings his attention back to me, searching my face. I’m acutely aware of my messy hair and my unadorned face.

I must look so plain next to his gorgeous date.

That thought makes me feel even worse. I glance back out the window.

“I haven’t seen you around much lately,” he murmurs, his voice low, like he doesn’t want to be overheard.

“Nope,” I agree.

My short answers are bitchy and bratty. I’m aware that I’m taking my foul mood and bad disposition out on Chase. He doesn’t deserve it. He hasn’t done anything to me. But I can’t seem to stop. Hopefully, he’ll take the hint and leave me alone.

The silence between us grows. It’s on the tip of my tongue to ask about Sam, but I don’t. It’ll hurt to hear if he’s doing well. It’ll hurt to hear if he isn’t. So, maybe it’s better not to know either way.

“Are you okay, Oakley?”

I look up in surprise. Chase and I don't talk about our feelings. We normally laugh and play around. We banter, making each other the butt of our jokes. Or we bicker like rivals. But his face is serious as he waits for my response. He looks concerned, and something about it guts me.

Am I okay?

I shrug, unable to speak past the lump that's suddenly formed in my throat, and blink away the sheen of moisture in my eyes.

His jaw tics and then clenches.

"Hi, Oakley," Ana says, stepping up beside Chase.

She looks like a goddess, standing there in her long-sleeved dress with its short skirt and plunging neckline. Her legs go on forever. She places a perfectly manicured hand on his forearm possessively, her other one holding a to-go coffee.

"Hi," I say with a small smile.

At least, I hope I manage to smile. It's hard to tell if I pull it off since I'm forcing it.

Chase glances around, like he's searching for another chair. I panic. I don't want them sitting with me. I just want to be alone to swim inside my head, the way I have been for the past few weeks. I don't want to be forced to make conversation. Not when I still feel so raw inside.

"Well, I need to get back to work," I say hurriedly, placing a palm on my book. "It was nice running into you two. Enjoy your night."

Chase frowns at my dismissal.

Ana grins. She looks relieved. "Okay. Happy studying."

She starts to walk away, hesitating when Chase doesn't move.

"Chase?" she questions, her sculpted brows furrowing.

He holds my gaze for another few seconds that feel like hours before he snaps his attention to Ana. With a small nod, he follows behind her. They take a seat across the room on a couch.

I stare at my notes, but I'm not really studying them. I reach for my phone in the front pocket of my backpack when I hear it ping a few minutes later.

Ollie: What are you up to tonight?

My eyebrows slant as my gaze darts over to Chase, and I wonder if he sent a message to my brother. He's already watching me as Ana sits next to him, talking.

He flares his eyes, questioning why there's accusation aimed at him in my expression.

I turn back to my phone.

Me: Just studying.

His answer is instant.

Ollie: On a Friday night?

Why is that everyone's response?

Me: Yep.

The bubble appears on the screen, indicating that he's typing. It disappears, shows up again, and then vanishes. Finally, he seems to decide on what he wants to say.

Ollie: Come over tomorrow. Study here. We can grab lunch.

Me: Okay.

It's easier to agree to keep him off my back.

I finish my chai latte and start packing up the study materials I didn't bother to read. I can feel Chase's eyes on me from across the room, but I don't look over. I have the bag slung over my shoulder and am out the door. I'm a few steps down the walkway when I feel a hand on my shoulder, turning me.

Chase is standing there, his eyes narrowed, his lips in an angry, flat line. I glance over his shoulder, but I don't see Ana.

"You're walking home," he snaps.

It isn't a question. It sounds more like an accusation. Like I'm doing something wrong.

“Yes, I’m going home. I’m tired. What’s the problem, Chase?” My tone matches his. I’m not in the mood for any bullshit tonight, especially not his.

He scoffs and glances away, shaking his head with a condescending smirk on his face.

I spin on my heel and start walking again, not at all interested in what he has to say. He follows, his long strides easily catching me.

I turn to face him with my arms thrown out at my sides. “What?”

I want to lash out. I’m pissed, but not really at him. I’m mad at the world. It doesn’t matter though. He’s in front of me, pushing the way he always does. So, he’s in the direct path of my wrath.

“You’re not walking home alone, Oakley. It’s late. It’s dark. You’re by yourself.”

I smirk bitterly, tilting my head. “Thanks for the reminder, Chase.”

As if I could forget that I’m alone tonight, walking home all by myself. Unattached. Dumped. Dropped like a bad habit. I remember that fact every second of every day since that night at the bar. I feel it in the ache that’s become a part of me. It’s a constant reminder, residing down deep inside my bones.

“It isn’t safe,” he insists.

I glance over his shoulder again. “Where’s your date? What are you even doing out here?”

“She’s in the restroom,” he answers the first part of the question, verifying that they are indeed a couple tonight. Somehow, the confirmation just makes me feel worse. “And I’m not going to let you walk home alone.”

My eyes narrow as my phone pings, but I don’t remove it from my bag.

“Did you text my brother?”

Chase looks confused. “What? No.”

“It’s just a coincidence that I bump into you and then my brother starts messaging me, asking how I am. Checking up on me. He never texts me late on weekend nights.”

“I didn’t,” Chase says evenly, “but I should’ve. I haven’t talked to Ollie since practice earlier today.”

Hockey practice.

Sam.

My hand rubs the spot on my chest that starts to throb again when my ex invades my mind. Chase’s eyes follow the movement.

“Oakley ...” Chase’s face is a combination of ire and frustration.

“Go back inside to your date, Chase,” I say when he doesn’t finish his thought. The indignation is gone from my voice. Now, I just sound ... tired.

He shakes his head slowly, never removing those moss-colored eyes from my face. “I can’t let you walk home alone, Oak.”

“You’ve got to stop with this savior complex, Chase. It’s getting old.”

Don’t you know that I’m beyond saving?

“Besides,” I sigh, “you’ve got Ana to take home. I can take care of myself.”

It’s a lie. I can barely get out of bed these days. And I can tell from the look on his face that he knows it isn’t true.

I’m a mess.

But I think I can manage to make it home in one piece.

He’s watching me with that knowing expression. He’s always been able to see straight through my walls, like they never existed at all, stripping me bare in the process. I’m not sure if it’s a blessing or a curse.

“I’ll text you when I’m back in my room,” I promise.

This time, when I turn and walk away, I don't hear him following me.

The walkway is well lit at night, but it is eerily quiet. I keep my head up, staying aware of my surroundings, knowing Chase was right; it isn't safe to be out here alone. Ollie would be furious if he knew I walked to the coffee shop and back by myself in the middle of the night. I'm not looking forward to the scolding I'll receive if Chase tells him.

My key card is in my hand as I approach the familiar building that I call home these days. It's quiet as I buzz myself in. I pull on the handle of the door and look behind me.

For a moment, I freeze.

Then, I walk inside and allow the door to slam shut.

Madison isn't home yet when I let myself into our room. I go through my nighttime routine and crawl into bed, staring at the ceiling while willing my mind to shut down enough so I can sleep. But this time, my brain isn't consumed with images of the blond-haired, stormy-eyed hockey player I've been obsessed with for years. The one who broke me. Instead, I find myself thinking about the defenseman with thick brown hair and olive-green eyes. The one who always tries to save me from myself.

I don't bother to text Chase, letting him know I made it home safely. Because when I glanced over my shoulder to the pathway I'd just walked down, right before entering my building, there he stood, beneath a lamppost. Ana was beside him, looking more than a little annoyed. But Chase was stationed there defiantly with his hands in his pockets.

Watching.

Waiting.

Protecting me.

The way he always has.

Even when I don't deserve it.

Chapter Fifteen

Oakley

Chase didn't tell Ollie about our run-in at the coffee shop, so I never received that lecture from my brother. And Ollie and I never made it to our study session and lunch the next day. Because overnight, Granny passed away.

It seems like the hits just keep coming.

Ollie and I drove home and spent the evening with our parents after they called with the news. We couldn't be there for more than one night though because we both had final exams the next week. I hadn't lied when I said I had to study. I probably didn't need to do it on that Friday night though. And I didn't get much accomplished that evening anyway. But no one had known that, except me. And maybe my professors when they graded my tests.

So, my brother and I drove back to school on Sunday to finish the semester. Ollie was done with his classes by Wednesday, and I had my last commitment on Friday morning. Ollie waited until I was finished and then drove us back home for the break.

I am now officially done with my first semester in college. What started out as the best time of my life transitioned into the darkest time quickly after Sam and I broke up. Now, I'm just searching for my footing again.

We are off for the next four weeks for winter break, not scheduled to return to campus until the new year. I'm glad for the intermission. I won't have to work as hard to avoid running into my past while I'm hibernating at home. The hockey team is only on break for a week over the Christmas holiday. Their next game isn't until December 28, but they

have practices before that. I wonder if I'll feel like attending a game by then.

I need to get over my breakup with Sam and start focusing on my brother. The world doesn't revolve around my ex, though mine has for the past year or so. It's likely to be Ollie's last few months playing college hockey with the talent scouts sniffing around him all the time, luring him away from his senior year with promises of big signing bonuses and the glamour of playing in the big leagues. I'll regret not taking advantage of this short time we have together. My head is telling me that. I just need my heart to catch up.

"It's weird to be back here," I comment to Ollie as we huddle in the living room of our house.

The funeral is over. Granny was officially memorialized and buried earlier today. I didn't cry at the service. It's not that I'm heartless or didn't love her. It just didn't feel real to me. The eulogy, the speeches. The picture of her on the pulpit next to the preacher in her favorite dress with her silver hair styled just right. I don't know when it will fully sink in that she's gone. I just know it hasn't yet.

Our home is currently filled with friends, family, and strangers. Everyone is chatting and eating, but the mood is somber. My brother looks handsome in his dark suit with his even darker hair tamed and slicked back from his face. I'm wearing a black dress—the only one in my closet that was conservative enough and still fit. And we're standing in a corner of the room, quiet observers in our own home. It's like I'm watching everything happen while not really participating. But I think life has been that way ever since Sam and I broke up.

All of this feels surreal. Granny's death. The funeral. Being back home for a few weeks after living on my own at college since August. It's like this is my home, but I don't really belong here anymore.

"I felt that way, too, when I first left for the university," Ollie admits. "Even more so now."

He's leaning against the wall next to me, eating a plate of food that's in his hands. I'm not sure why death equates to gluttony for most people, but our kitchen is overflowing with more casseroles than we could eat in a week. Even with Ollie home. I guess people just want to do something to contribute when there is a loss in the family. So, they cook or buy provisions.

I steal a cookie from Ollie's plate.

He shifts away, out of my reach, with a scowl. "There's literally an entire platter of cookies in the kitchen. Stop taking mine."

I snicker, and it feels good to laugh. I don't remember the last time that sound emerged from my throat. Only Ollie could bring it out of me, especially on a day like this. I don't think it'll ever get old, pestering my older sibling. We've perfected our roles over the years. Ollie is the overbearing, overprotective big brother. And I'm the sometimes-reckless, often-spoiled younger sibling.

But I'd die for him. And I know he'd do the same for me.

The air in the room shifts. I look over to see Chase, Sam, and Mike walk into the living room. I stiffen, dread stealing my smile and robbing me of my breath. The moment of lightheartedness is lost. Ollie notices the change in my demeanor, his eyes tracing mine to the front of the room.

"Relax," he murmurs so only I hear him. "They're just here to pay their respects."

I try to temper my response, wanting desperately to hide my growing discomfort from my brother, but I'm sure I'm doing a horrible job of it. Ollie doesn't know all the awful things Sam said to me that night outside of Cheerz. I kept them from him purposely, never wanting to be the reason there's friction between him and one of his teammates. I try to wear a mask around my brother, which is difficult since he knows me well. I don't want him to see the shattered pieces Sam left me in. Ollie wouldn't take it well. That's why I've been avoiding my brother, along with the rest of the hockey team, for the past month. But I can't avoid him now that we're home for Christmas.

My attention goes to the three figures walking this way.

I understand why Chase is here. He's always been an extended part of our family, spending more time at our house than at his own some days. Chase knew Granny. She treated him like one of us. But Mike and Sam ... I'm not sure why they showed up.

The three of them stand out among the crowd with their broad shoulders and their handsome faces. They tower above most of the people in the room, even all the adult men, making the space feel crowded and the air stifling. My stomach sinks as they approach us, and my mind shifts into overdrive.

I wasn't expecting this. This isn't part of the plan. I'm not ready to face Sam. I might never be ready.

The cookie I just ate turns sour in my stomach when the familiar smell of Sam's cologne hits my nostrils. The scent triggers a collage of memories that flash through my head. I picture the first time I walked past him in class at the beginning of our freshman year of high school. When he kissed me on Mike's back porch. The first time we had sex after prom. The way his skin smelled every time before, during, and after that when he drew me into his arms or pulled me closer. That scent triggers my heart, reminding me of the way I loved him. The way I still do.

I don't meet Sam's eyes when the three of them step in front of Ollie and me. I smile at Mike and Chase, skipping Sam altogether, as if he weren't there when, really, he's the one I'm most aware of. But I can see my ex from the corner of my eye, watching me. And I wish he didn't look so gorgeous in his suit. It's annoying how he seems completely unaffected by our breakup and me.

I try to make a decision as all three of them start voicing their condolences, one at a time.

Do I stay and fake it? Or do I make a run for it?

As soon as Sam starts speaking, my body makes the choice for me.

"Excuse me," I say, interrupting him. "I need to ..."

I motion toward my mom, who's talking to one of our neighbors across the room, like she's calling me over. She's not. I ignore the four sets of eyes I feel on my back as I walk over to her. I don't stop when I get close, bypassing her for the kitchen. Taking a moment to fill a cup with Coke, I find Dad's stash of liquor in the cabinet beneath the sink and add some rum to it. Then, I sneak out the back door.

The cold air hits my skin as soon as the door shuts behind me, but I'm too much of a coward to go back inside in search of a sweater. I'm too busy running from the ghosts of my past. Especially when that ghost is standing in the middle of my living room, looking like a wet dream in a suit. And I haven't seen Sam—really seen him—in weeks. The ache is still there. The sting of rejection is still strong. I hoped it would start to fade, but laying eyes on him today brought it all rushing back again.

I spot our old tree house in the back corner of the yard and head there. Goose bumps cover my arms, but I'll just have to deal with the cold temperature. Maybe the rum will warm me up.

I climb the wooden notches built into the tree trunk, precariously balancing my cup of booze in one hand while trying not to fall in my heels. I'm hoping the floorboards will hold my weight once I pull myself inside. It's been so long since I've been up here, and I'm not sure if the wood has rotted by now. They creak some, but don't give as I settle into the corner with a sigh. The space is dusty and dirty, but it's quiet. I won't have to make small talk with a bunch of people I don't know, and I won't have to face Sam.

I look around the empty structure, picturing the tree house how it was when we were kids. My dad had built it for us. Ollie tried to claim it for himself at first, as a boys-only space, but my dad squashed that idea pretty quickly. Some of the old hockey posters my brother hung on the wall are still here, yellowed from age and curling at the edges. I remember when Mom helped me attach an extension cord outside, and we strung twinkling lights around the ceiling of the structure, but they are gone now. Ollie and Chase complained about it at the

time, but they secretly liked it once they saw what it looked like at night.

I envision all the summer evenings we spent in this space with Chase and our other neighborhood friends. We would run around all day long together, exploring, playing, and swimming. And then we would congregate in the tree house until bedtime, telling ghost stories after dark until our parents made us come in for the evening. We even camped out in it one night in sleeping bags. I woke up the next morning with a huge garden spider crawling across my chest. That was the end of my camping days. But I remember thinking it was such a big adventure back then. The tree house was cozy and beautiful. And it was ours.

Things were so much simpler then.

I swallow some of my mixed drink, happy that the rum does warm my blood a little. Not enough though. I'm still freezing. But something about being hidden in here makes me feel safe, so cold or not, I'm not moving.

I wish I remembered to grab my phone.

I lean my head back against the rough oak boards when I hear someone start to climb the stairs down below. I'm expecting to see Ollie's head pop through the entrance, but I'm surprised when I see a shade of brown instead. Chase pauses at the top, smirking at me.

"I thought I might find you in here," he says.

"Caught me." I shrug, tipping my glass to my mouth once again.

He pulls his big body through the opening and sits against the wall adjacent to me. The space inside the tree house immediately shrinks, reminding me of how big Chase is now. He's broad and muscular. I can feel his body heat from a foot away.

"This place seemed bigger when we were kids." He glances around.

There's a layer of dust coating his palms and his slacks. I'm sure my dress is in the same state.

“It *was* bigger,” I say. “Because we were smaller.”

My eyes run over his legs as he stretches them out in front of him. His slacks fail to hide the thickness of his thighs. He rests the side of one against my bent knees.

“What are you drinking?” he asks, his eyes on my cup.

“Coke.” I swallow another sip.

“And?” he asks, lifting his thick eyebrows.

I keep my face stoic as he watches me. Then, I break, a grin spreading slowly across my face.

“Rum.”

He nods twice, pursing his lips. “Thought so.” He reaches out. “Let me have a drink.”

I hand him the cup and watch as his Adam’s apple bobs when he tips it back.

“Hey,” I say when he swallows more. I lightly smack my hand against his chest. “Leave some of that for me.”

He chuckles. “There wasn’t much left.”

He hands it over, and I finish what remains, setting the empty cup beside me on the aged oak floor. I cross my arms over my body.

“Are you cold?”

Even before I can answer, Chase is shrugging off his suit coat and giving it to me. When I slide my arms into it, it’s warm, like a heated blanket, and it smells spicy, like his cologne. The sleeves are so long that they cover my hands.

“Thanks,” I say.

We sit in a comfortable silence for a few seconds.

“You followed me home the other night ...” I finally say, trailing off at the end of my sentence with an unspoken question mark.

He nods slowly, his eyes stuck on the floor, where he’s tracing shapes through the dust and dirt.

“I told you I wasn’t going to let you walk home alone. It was late,” he murmurs.

“I didn’t know you were behind me,” I admit softly. “Not until I turned around when I was walking into the building.”

He stays quiet.

“Ana looked pissed,” I say, watching his face closely for a reaction.

One side of his mouth twitches. “She wasn’t thrilled.”

“I don’t think she likes me very much,” I admit.

His eyes shoot to mine. “What makes you say that?”

I shrug casually. “I don’t know. Call it a woman’s intuition. It’s just a feeling I get.”

The furrow between his eyes deepens. “Has she done something?”

His reaction makes me cautious. He seems to really care, like he’d be angry if she offended me.

I wave it off. “No ... forget I said anything. She’s always been nice to me. I might just be imagining it.”

His face smooths out, but he still has a slight frown as he considers my words.

“Are you two dating now?” I ask curiously.

It would be weird to see Chase seeing someone seriously. He never has, not in all the years we’ve known each other.

“Not really,” he says vaguely.

I don’t know why, but that answer isn’t good enough for me, so I keep pushing. Even though it’s none of my business.

“What did you do that night with her?” I ask, bumping his leg with my knee playfully, trying to downplay the question so I get an actual answer. “Dinner and a movie? Netflix and chill?”

He huffs out a cross between a laugh and a scoff. “She asked me to go to a function at her sorority.”

“Gotcha,” I say, my eyes stuck on the movement of his fingers on the floor.

“I didn’t really want to go. I kind of got cornered into it.”

“Was it fun?” I ask.

He shrugs, but doesn’t respond, exhaling loudly instead.

“What about you?” he presses.

I tilt my head. “What about me?”

“What’s up with you and Sam?”

That name alone causes me to stiffen. Chase is watching me closely with those scrutinizing olive eyes.

“You’re his roommate,” I reply tensely. “You should know. There’s nothing going on between us. We’re finished.”

“Are you?” he asks. His gaze is studying every inch of my face—looking for what, I don’t know. A reaction? Emotion? The truth?

“We broke up, Chase. You know that.”

He blinks once. “But are you done?”

And isn’t that the million-dollar question?

He’s asking if I’m over it. But he already knows the answer. It’s spelled out in the way I’ve avoided all of them for the past few weeks. In the way I ran from my own house to evade seeing Sam today. And it’s written all over my face now.

I stay quiet, but he has his answer.

Chase nods once, reading me like a book, his eyes falling back to the floor once again.

My knees ache from staying in the same position for too long, so I straighten them, one at a time, resting them across Chase’s legs, where his are stretched out in front of me. My cheeks heat as I adjust my skirt, realizing I might’ve just flashed my old friend with the movement. When I glance over, he’s staring at my thighs. I can feel his eyes the way you can sense a touch.

“Sorry,” I stammer. “Did I just flash you?”

He's still staring at where my legs are resting on his knees and shins.

"Maybe." He smirks. "But I didn't mind it."

The blush on my face spreads to my chest. I can't tell if he's teasing me or if he really saw beneath my skirt.

I roll my eyes. "Whatever, Chase. You didn't see anything."

He captures my gaze. There's a heat in his eyes I've never seen directed at me before.

"Purple lace," he murmurs, his voice thick and gravelly as he describes my panties.

As he describes them *correctly*.

For the first time since I've known Chase, I'm suddenly aware that he's a guy and I'm a girl. And he's not just a guy, but a man now. An alluring man. A very attractive, alluring man. The space in the tree house shrinks even more.

"Plum," I choke out.

His lip twitches. "What?"

"My panties ... the color is plum."

I swear, when I say the word *panties*, his pupils dilate until the muddy-green color disappears. He swallows hard, still staring at me. I don't know where the feeling comes from, but I suddenly want him to touch me so badly that I'm a second away from begging for it. Or from crawling into his lap. And it confuses the hell out of me.

"Oakley, are you up there?" My brother's voice comes from across the yard, interrupting our moment.

"Yeah," I answer him, my voice breaking.

Chase swallows again, finally tearing his eyes away from me when we hear my brother climbing up the tree. His raven-covered head pops through the opening. He rests his forearms on the floor's surface, so just the top third of his body is inside.

“Well, shit. I haven’t been up here in years.” Ollie glances over at Chase with a smile. If he notices my legs resting on top of his teammate’s, he isn’t concerned about it. “I wondered where you’d disappeared to. I guess you found her before I did.”

“Are Mike and Sam still here?” Chase doesn’t look at me when he asks the question. He shifts his weight, jostling my legs in the process.

Ollie shakes his head. “They left.” His eyes drift to me. “Mom’s looking for you. I think Aunt Amy is leaving. She wants to say goodbye.”

“Okay, I’ll be right there.”

Ollie glances around the tree house once more with a hint of a smile on his face. “We had some good times in here.”

“The best,” I agree as Chase nods.

Then, Ollie disappears.

I start to take Chase’s jacket off.

His hand lands on my shoulder, stopping me. “Keep it on until you warm up. You can give it to me later.”

I nod, readjusting it on my body. Then, I move my legs off his.

Chase scoots to the opening and starts to climb down, smirking when I laugh at his awkward movements. He starts laughing with me.

“This was a lot easier when I was half this size,” he jokes.

He takes a step or two and then jumps the rest of the way. I climb down after him. Halfway to the ground, I feel his hands slide onto my waist beneath his suit jacket. His palms are warm as he lifts me the final few feet to the grass like I weigh nothing. He pauses just for a second before releasing me, but it’s long enough that I’m hyperaware of his touch.

He’s looking down at me when I turn to face him.

“Did you climb down first so you could stare up my dress, Chase Matthews?” I’m joking with him, trying to make light

of our heavy moment from before. Mostly because I don't understand what's happening between us.

His eyes are heavy with heat once again. "Maybe I needed one last look at those *plum* panties."

I can feel my heart beating in my chest.

"Besides"—he shrugs with a cocky smirk—"it's nothing I haven't seen before. Right? Who knew you were an exhibitionist, Oak, flashing me in the old tree house?"

I shove his shoulder and roll my eyes as we walk toward the back door of my house. And when Chase leaves fifteen minutes later, I realize I'm disappointed to see him go.

Chapter Sixteen

Oakley

“My mom is getting on my last nerve,” Madison complains from my bed.

She’s lying on her stomach, flipping through a magazine.

“I swear, if she hovers anymore, I’m going to pack my stuff up and go back to school early,” she grumbles.

I giggle from my spot on the floor. I’m sitting in front of the mirror in my bedroom, straightening my long black locks. “Your mom is the best. I don’t know why you always complain about her.”

My best friend has been raised by a single woman. She’s more of a big sister than a mother, which is probably good and bad in some ways. Madison has never had many rules. And her mom might party more than she does. But she’s around, and she loves my friend more than anything else in this world.

I see Madison roll her eyes from the reflection in the mirror.

“I can see why you love her. She’s fun. But she isn’t your mother. Sometimes, I wish she’d act more like the woman who bore me and less like my BFF. I don’t need another one of those.” Her ocean-colored eyes meet mine in the mirror. “I already have a bestie.”

My smile widens when she winks at me.

“It’s good to see you smile again,” she sighs after a few moments.

I feel the emotion start to gather in my chest from the concern in her words.

Her tone turns cautious. “Mike’s having a party tonight. A get-together for some of our old high school friends who are in

town for Christmas break.”

There’s a question hiding somewhere in her words. She’s indirectly asking if I want to go. I swallow down the no that threatens to automatically emerge.

If Mike’s having a party, Sam will surely be there.

“Okay,” I say instead.

Her eyes widen, and she tilts her head. “Really?”

“You don’t have to sound so surprised,” I protest, running the wand down another section of hair.

She scoffs.

“All right,” I relent. “Maybe I deserve that.”

“No offense, Oak. But you’ve been MIA ever since you and He Who Won’t Be Named broke up.”

Madison refuses to mention Sam’s name out of solidarity.

I run my fingers through my silky strands, then reach down to unplug the straightening iron.

“I’m aware.” I turn to meet her gaze head-on. “It was hard for me to see him. It still is.”

“I know.”

The sympathy in her tone almost breaks me again.

I turn back to the mirror, studying my reflection. “Will it ever get easier, Mads?”

“Yes,” she answers resolutely.

“Promise?” I ask, needing affirmation.

“I swear.”

“Have you seen him around?” I’m scared, even as the question leaves my lips. I’m afraid of the answer, which is probably why I haven’t asked anyone about him before now. Not even Madison.

“A little,” she admits, dropping her eyes.

“He’s not very broken up about the breakup, is he?”

She sits up, crossing her legs in front of her while considering her answer. “Guys just hide it better.”

I nod with a small, bitter smile. She’s softening the blow, and I love her for it.

“Well, screw him,” I say with conviction, meaning it and hoping I can back up the proclamation with action. “I’m done hiding.”

She claps her hands once in front of her, bouncing a little on my mattress. Madison doesn’t disguise the elation in her expression. And then she springs into action.

“I’ve been waiting weeks for you to say that.” She’s on her feet and rifling through my clothes before I can blink. “The first step to feeling better—especially if you’re going to see your ex tonight—is to look like a smokeshow. Not that you don’t always, but we’re going to take it up a notch.”

She wrinkles her nose at whatever she finds in my closet.

“Come on.” Madison pulls me to my feet. “We’re going to my house to get ready. I have just the outfit for you to wear tonight.”

“I’m not in the mood for a dress,” I warn, rising to my feet.

“Good,” she says over her shoulder, walking out of my room. “Because I’m picturing something else.”

We spend the time at Madison’s house getting ready together while listening to music by Lizzo and other female-empowering artists until I feel like a bad bitch and more like myself again. Madison dresses me in black pants that fit like a second skin and a dark, silky shirt that dips in the front, showing just a hint of my ample cleavage. We place strategic jewelry on my neck and wrists with silver hoops in my earlobes.

But my makeup is what pulls it all together. My best friend is obsessed with makeup tutorials on TikTok. She takes what she’s learned and makes my turquoise eyes pop with neutral, smoky shades and then tops it off with red lipstick. I rarely wear lipstick. Madison knows this, so she chooses a matte shade that stains, but doesn’t look glossy. It sounds overdone,

but it's not. Except for my lips, the overall effect is flawless and understated. I look and feel like me, just an upgraded, enhanced version with an edge. And she's right. I feel more confident in my skin. And better equipped to face my demons tonight.

It's a little over an hour later when we're walking up the drive to Mike's house. I have a déjà vu moment because the concrete is wet from a recent rain, just like it was that fall evening when Sam and I first got together here. I was anxious about seeing him that night too, just for different reasons. The beginning of Sam and me feels like a lifetime ago. I blinked, and the time passed quickly. But not before leaving scars that will likely last forever.

Instead of noticing the similarities between now and then—or the nervous knots of doubt now arising in my stomach—I try to focus on the differences. Mike's house is decorated. His family put lights along the roofline in red and green bulbs for the holidays. The Christmas wreath on the door is a new addition when we knock. The way I'm a more self-assured, independent woman standing here, waiting to join the party, is a change from the naive, young girl I was with stars in her eyes a short time ago.

I can do this.

"You look amazing, Oakley," Madison reassures in a whispered tone. She reaches over to squeeze my hand with hers, knowing I need strength as we wait for Mike to answer the door. "No matter what happens tonight, you've got this."

I exhale a shaky breath, feeding off her sturdiness, and nod.

The door swings open, but it isn't Mike standing there. It's Sam. I guess the universe decided to throw me in the deep end, headfirst.

Time to sink or swim.

I manage to keep a neutral expression when he flashes into view. But a surge of satisfaction swells inside my chest as Sam's eyes flare when he sees me standing on the stoop. I had time to prepare. I knew he'd be here tonight. I'm sure he

thought there was no way in hell I'd show up to this party. I've surprised him.

Sam's gaze travels across my face, taking in my kohl-lined eyes and pausing on my red-painted lips. He scans my silky, smooth midnight hair before he moves down my body, all the way to my peep-toed heels, showcasing toenails painted in a blood-red color to match my mouth. Another one of Madison's touches.

I memorize the look of longing and lust in his eyes when they find their way back to mine. I've seen that expression on his face before. And I revel in that tiny glimmer of regret that's there, too, storing it away for nights when I'm feeling down and rejected. When I'm left wanting.

I feel powerful in this moment. It's a strength that has eluded me since the night we broke up. I hold on to it with both hands.

"Are you going to let us in?" Madison asks him with a challenging tilt to her head when Sam just stands there, staring.

Her words aren't mean, but they are sharp, leaving no doubt whose side she's on.

Mine.

The door creaks open wider, and Mike appears, throwing an arm around Sam's shoulders. Mike has tinsel around his neck and a Santa hat on his head. His smile widens as he takes in Madison and me. That same flare I saw in Sam's expression colors Mike's momentarily when he peruses my outfit.

I think this might just be a good night after all.

"Get your fine asses in here," Mike orders, winking at Madison and me and physically moving Sam to the side with his arm still casually resting across his friend's shoulders.

"You ladies look hot." Mike's tone is appreciative as we walk past him.

I can feel him staring at my ass.

The house is already packed. I see a lot of familiar faces that I haven't seen since we graduated from high school last May. Madison and I make our way through the room, saying hello and stopping to talk or hug a few old friends. I don't search for Sam again, but I'm very aware that he's here, lurking around. His eyes linger on me more than once.

It takes us twenty minutes to make it into the kitchen. When I walk in, the first person I see is Chase standing there, leaning against the counter, talking to one of his old hockey teammates. I smile when our eyes meet, relief sweeping through my body. He's like a warm, safe hug. Other than Madison, Chase is the only other person here I don't have to pretend with. We don't need to force conversation or search for things to say. It's just easy with him.

He doesn't disguise his eyes as they run across my body the way Sam's and Mike's did earlier. One side of his mouth rises a notch.

"Look at you," he murmurs. There's a heat in his gaze that makes my skin tingle.

He's wearing a ball cap pulled low on his forehead, hiding most of that thick brown hair on the top of his head. One of his Sinclair hockey hoodies covers his chest, and a pair of loose, well-worn jeans and sneakers clothe the lower half of his body.

I slant my head flirtatiously, feeding off my newfound confidence. "Look at you," I mimic in the same complimentary tone.

He *does* look hot. Like a quintessential sexy hockey player.

He moves closer, and I realize he's going to hug me. Chase goes to Madison first, saying hello to her at the same time. Then, he pulls me in. I slide my arms around his shoulders. The bill of his hat brushes the side of my cheek when he pulls away.

"It's good to see you here." Chase says the words to both Madison and me, but I know they're meant more for me. He's proud of me for showing up tonight.

"What are you drinking?" I ask with an eyebrow lifted.

There's a red Solo cup on the countertop beside him.

"Coke." He smirks.

I throw my head back and laugh.

"And?" I ask.

"There might be a little rum mixed in there as well," he quips, his smile widening at our inside joke.

"Did I create a monster?" I ask. "You only had one taste of mine in the tree house."

"Maybe one taste is all it took," he murmurs.

That heat is back in his expression, and my stomach twists from the intimate nature of his words. I like the way it feels, flirting with him. I can't look away from him.

He lifts the cup and tips it at me. "You want one?"

"Nah, she's more of a White Claw girl," Sam says, walking into the room, smashing our moment.

I look over at Sam as my smile wavers. I notice Chase's grin wavers too.

Sam only looks away from me for a brief second as he opens the refrigerator door and reaches inside, emerging with a can of hard seltzer.

Black cherry.

Just like the one he gave me over a year ago, when we were just starting out. When he joked, making a euphemism out of the flavor. Before he actually followed through and stole my cherry months later, along with my heart. Though I guess he couldn't steal something I gave willingly to him.

I know Sam means it in a flirty, sexy way, offering me the drink. I can tell by the knowing smirk on his mouth and the twinkle in his eyes. I remember that look so well. I fell in love with it not too long ago. Maybe it's his way to mend fences or bridge the gap that has widened into a chasm between us recently. But all this does is remind me of how far we've fallen. That can of seltzer represents where we were then, in a

place of excitement and butterflies. First kisses and new beginnings. We were building toward something.

That something has now been crushed. It's lost, shattered into a million pieces in a dark alleyway one night a few weeks ago. And if I'm honest, it had slowly been shifting all the days leading up to that fatal evening. In my mind, everything was left in that broken state when he never bothered to call or text after our final conversation. Not once. As if we—*I*—never meant anything to him.

“I think my tastes have changed,” I say, holding my gaze with Sam. I break our connection when I glance over at Chase, taking him up on his offer. “Will you make me one?”

I want a rum and Coke. And I want Chase to make it for me.

“Of course.” He nods.

Sam and Chase look at each other as Chase brushes by his roommate to grab a Coke from the refrigerator. There are four of us in this room who know this is about more than a drink. Madison, Sam, and I watch in silence as Chase assembles it, adding ice and rum to the soda. He hands me the cup a moment later.

I take a sip of the cold beverage, enjoying the sweet taste on my tongue. The liquid feels warm, going down, despite the ice cubes cooling it, reminding me of tree houses and good times rather than the loss and hurt trapped inside that can of White Claw.

The tension in the room is high.

I extend my cup toward Chase while ignoring Sam. “Cheers,” I say.

Chase is watching me beneath the bill of his hat while he taps my cup with his, and we both drink. I can't read his expression, but it's no longer flirty and lighthearted, like before.

“I'll take that,” Madison says, swiping the White Claw from Sam's hand with a fake smile. She pops the top and drinks half the can in one tilt.

Sam's mouth is in a tight line as he studies me.

"Oakley, can we talk?" Sam suddenly asks. "Outside."

I'm deciding if I want to have a conversation with him when Madison moves closer to me, lacing her arm through mine.

"Maybe later," she answers before I've made up my mind. "We're in the middle of something right now."

Sam scowls. "In the middle of what?"

"Having fun," she responds immediately, taking another drink of seltzer. "And I don't want you to ruin that."

Her words are pointed. The four of us know exactly what she means, but our other classmates in the room are oblivious to the showdown we're having. Most of them don't know the history between Sam and me. I bet half of them don't even know we've broken up.

Sam scoffs with an arrogant grin and a couple of head nods. "Okay, Madison. I see how it is."

"That *is* how it is, Sam," she replies in full protective mode. "That's how *you* made it."

Sam connects his gaze to mine again, dismissing my best friend. "We should talk at some point, Oakley. Let me know when you're ready."

I stay quiet as he turns to leave.

Really, what's there to talk about after weeks of silence? Why now?

The hostility leaves the room as Sam does, and we all relax. I listen to Chase, Madison, and the rest of our classmates discuss the past few months and what everyone has been up to lately. I don't contribute much to the conversation because my mind is stuck on my ex, dissecting his words, his expressions, and his black cherry White Claw offering.

Chase makes me another rum and Coke. Throughout the night, I make myself two more after he tries to cut me off. The alcohol has me spinning in the best way. The incessant thoughts have quieted for the moment, the constant

questioning and analyzing that I always seem to do where Sam's concerned have gone mute. I'm stuck in that happily buzzed space, and I actually start to enjoy myself for the first time in weeks.

A few of the guys from our high school football team approach me, complimenting me on how good I look. I swim in the attention. I dance with some and flirt with many of them throughout the night. Madison and I end up in the middle of the living room, shaking our tails to Mike's constant rotation of music. I'm tired and happy and sweaty when I realize my bladder is about to burst from all those drinks.

"I'll be back," I say to Madison, leaning closer to be heard over the pulsing music.

She nods in acknowledgment and keeps dancing. I have no idea what time it is.

I push my way through the crowd, giggling when I stumble a few times. I might have been a little heavy-handed with the rum on the last two drinks I prepared.

I use the bathroom and wash my hands, sitting on the side of the tub when my head starts to spin a little while I'm in there. A few knocks on the door have me rising and exiting the room. I glance down at the empty, dark hallway.

I need to lie down, just for a minute.

Using the wall for support, I move away from the living room, stopping at the first closed door I come to. I lose my balance as I twist the knob and practically fall into the room as the door opens, laughing at myself in the process. I regain my footing and glance up.

My laughter abruptly dies.

My mouth gapes.

The haze of alcohol partially clears.

And what I see hurts.

It hurts so bad.

Sam. And Cassie. On the bed. Partially clothed. Arms and legs tangled. Hair a mess. Lips connected until they startle apart from the commotion I created.

It's one thing to suspect Sam is moving on and hooking up with other girls. It's a whole other kind of hell to witness it.

I feel myself sink back into the black hole that's swallowed me up the past few weeks. I'm drowning in my misery all over again.

I back away as the bile starts to rise in my throat. When I spin on my heel, I plow into a hard chest standing in the doorway behind me. Strong hands stabilize my arms. Spicy cologne fills my lungs.

Chase.

My protector.

My savior.

He's here again when I need him the most.

His solid arm goes around my waist; his other hand is splayed across my stomach. He's practically carrying me as he walks us down the hall and through the living room without a word, away from the nightmare I keep envisioning inside of that bedroom. Chase answers a couple of people when they call out to him, as if nothing strange is happening. As if I'm not falling apart all over again.

The cool air hits my face when we walk out the front door and down the porch steps. But I feel so hot suddenly. The bile continues to rise higher in my throat.

I lurch away from Chase and make it to the side of the house just in time to lose most of the rum and Coke I drank tonight. I feel him at my back, gathering my long hair in his hands and pulling it away from my face. After expelling the contents in my stomach, I dry-heave for a few minutes before everything settles.

Chase helps me stand.

"Do you have any water?" I ask him, croaking out the words.

He props me against the house and makes me promise not to move. I follow his instructions for once, too tired and too broken to be defiant. I keep my mind blank as I wait, refusing to picture Sam on that bed with someone other than me. Somehow, the fact that it was Cassie hurts even more.

Did he want her the entire time he was with me last year?

Chase returns with a bottle of water. I wash my mouth out a few times to remove the rancid taste and then drink the rest of the liquid. He hands me a piece of cinnamon gum. I unwrap it and start chewing, glad to have a more pleasant flavor in my mouth.

Neither one of us says a word as we start moving toward his truck, where it's parked against the curb a couple of houses down the street.

I pause my steps. "Madison ..."

"I already told her we were leaving," Chase replies without faltering, "when I went back inside to get the water."

I nod, glad I won't have to face anyone again tonight.

We climb into his truck. Both of us are quiet on the short ride back to my house. The side of my head is pressed against the passenger window. The cold surface feels good on my warm cheek. The soft hum of the radio fills the space, Luke Combs's deep voice singing his version of Tracy Chapman's "Fast Car." It's soothing.

Chase pulls up to the curb in front of my house and lets the vehicle idle. All the windows are dark inside the place, except one. Only Ollie's room has a soft glow, where I'm sure the lamp beside his bed is still on. He's probably watching a movie or playing a game on his phone. Or talking to one of the many girls he's dating. I use the word *dating* loosely when referring to my brother. Really, I use the term loosely with all the hockey players.

I turn my head toward Chase. His shoulder is leaning against the driver's window, but he isn't looking at me. He's staring off into space, lost in thought. The lights on the dashboard

create a soft glow across his features. For some reason, I don't want to get out of his truck.

"I'm sorry," I murmur, embarrassed.

"For what?" he asks quietly, still not glancing in my direction.

"For getting drunk. For throwing up all over the front yard. For being a mess. For you always having to take care of me."

I don't know if I want him to let me off the hook and make me feel better. Or for him to say he understands and it's okay. But he doesn't answer. He's wearing that stoic mask he's perfected. I can't tell if he's mad or tired or just disappointed.

"You don't have to do it anymore if you're tired of it. Tired of me," I continue rambling, lost in self-deprecation once again. I sound small and insecure.

I feel both of those things.

He scoffs, low and bitter, shaking his head a few times slowly.

My frustration starts to grow. I already feel horrible after witnessing Sam hooking up with another girl. I'm mortified that I drank so much that I vomited all over Mike's yard. I hate that Chase witnessed it. I can add *pathetic* to the list of adjectives describing me and my behavior tonight. And now, the sadness is creeping back in, threatening to pull me under once again.

One step forward, two steps back.

"Look," I say a little more forcefully. I don't know what I want from Chase, but it's something more than what he's giving me right now. "I apologize, okay? I know I'm a freaking mess right now."

"You don't know anything, Oakley," he says gruffly, finally looking at me. "Your head has been so far up Sam's ass for so many years now that you can't see anything else."

My lips thin into an angry line. "What is that supposed to mean?"

He sits forward, pinning me with his glare. "It means that it's time to stop with this bullshit. I don't know what you see when

you look at Sam, but I don't think you're looking at the guy he really is." He sighs, regrouping and running a hand down his face. "Look, I love Sam. He's my teammate, my roommate, my friend, for fuck's sake. But boyfriend material ..." Chase scoffs out a mirthless laugh.

He looks me directly in the eye. "When someone shows you who they are, believe them. Sam has never been, nor will he ever be, worthy of you."

"So, what ... this is your way of telling me to get over it? To quit being pitiful and forget what I felt for him?"

"Yes!" he practically shouts.

I flinch when his palm smacks the steering wheel with force.

"You're envisioning Sam as the person you want him to be, not who he actually is. Your entire relationship, you were looking for the potential of what it could be. You wanted the possibilities or whatever image you'd cooked up inside your head. Not the reality. You get these visions of what life is supposed to look like—what you want it to look like—and you're so stubborn that you can't let them go. No matter what happens and no matter how he treats you. You try to fit him into that mold. Like he's suddenly going to change and be who you need him to be. It isn't healthy, Oakley."

"That isn't true," I insist with a huff.

"Isn't it?" Chase is challenging me with his words. He's forcing me to consider things I don't want to examine. Because if he's right, then that makes me the problem, not Sam.

"I'm not going to apologize for having feelings," I say.

"I'm not asking you to," he doesn't hesitate to answer. "I just want you to take a good, long look at reality. And let it go. Move on. Enjoy your life. You're wasting precious time on someone who isn't worth it. And, Oak"—he shakes his head slowly—"he isn't sitting around, sulking over you."

The harshness of his words brings tears to my eyes. Mostly because I realize it's true. I saw evidence of it tonight with my

own eyes. And if anyone knows what Sam's been up to since we broke up, it's Chase.

We sit in silence for a few moments, his speech weighing down the space inside the truck.

"I'm not trying to hurt you." He reaches over and wraps his hand around mine. His voice is quieter now. Gentler. "But you should know the facts. Stop pining for someone who doesn't deserve it. He never deserved you, Oakley. And that's the cold, hard truth."

I don't realize I'm crying until Chase wipes the dampness from my cheeks with his free hand.

He pulls me into his chest, wrapping me in his spicy scent. The light stubble across his jaw scratches the side of my forehead. Cinnamon gum is clenched between my teeth.

"You're gonna be okay," he murmurs.

We stay like that for a few minutes until my tears have dried. I pull back, wiping beneath my eyes, where I'm certain my makeup is now a smeared mess.

Chase kisses my forehead with his hands on either side of my face. We both freeze from the contact, and our eyes meet across the short distance.

"Why did you say those things about Sam?" I whisper. "I thought he was one of your best friends."

"He is. He's my brother."

I feel Chase's warm breath against my skin with every resolute word he speaks.

"Then, why?" I ask.

Most of these guys are driven by solidarity and guy code. Especially the ones on the hockey team. They are often loyal to each other to a fault.

Chase's gaze shifts between my eyes for what feels like forever.

"Because you ..." His words fade.

He watches me for another few seconds.

“I ... what?” I need to know what he was going to say. I’m desperate for him to finish his thought, to give me a glimpse inside the steal vault within his head. I care about what he thinks of me far more than I want to admit.

“Because you needed to hear it,” he finally answers.

Somehow, I don’t think that was his original thought. But I know I’ve lost the opportunity to hear the real words when he pulls back, his hands dropping from my face.

“It’s late.” He’s short and stiff this time. His walls are back in place. “Go inside, Oakley.”

I exhale a deep breath of air, but I don’t argue with him. I’m too tired to push for more tonight.

The door gives when I squeeze the latch, opening it. I slide to my feet and shut it softly behind me, then walk across the lawn to my front door. I can feel Chase’s eyes on me the entire time.

I lean back against the front door once I’m inside the house with it closed and locked behind me and listen as Chase’s engine fades into the distance.

Chapter Seventeen

Oakley

That night at Mike's house woke me up. It was a shocking punch to the gut, showing me that Sam had truly moved on. As hard as it was to see, it was the best thing that could've happened to me. Because after I dried my tears and felt the pain of seeing him with her—really felt it down deep—I got angry. And then I decided to pick myself up and move on too. No matter how hard it is at times. Sam isn't sitting at home, crying over me. It's time I stopped moping over him.

Chase's words reinforced my resolve. He gave me the brutal truth when we were alone inside his truck. And I needed to hear it. Besides, a girl can only sulk and wallow in misery for so long before she has to move forward. And my time is up.

We had a nice Christmas, though it was weird without Granny here. The day after the holiday, Ollie packed his things and drove back to college to get back on the ice. Two days after that, Madison and I did the same. Not the ice part, but the *going back to school* part. We had been bored at home, deciding it would be more fun to get to campus early. The only problem was, our dorm didn't open for another week. So, after begging and pleading, Ollie had agreed to let us crash with him until we could get back into our room.

We arrive at his place with a full-size air mattress, a compressor—courtesy of my dad—to fill it up, and our suitcases, taking over my brother's living room in the process. I use my spare key to open his apartment since he is already at the arena, preparing for their game. Madison and I waste no time converting the space, making it our own. We rearrange the furniture to accommodate our new temporary bed. Our luggage is in the corner, but soon spreads to the middle of the room and beyond. We create a bit of a mess, squeezing three

people into a one-bedroom, one-bathroom apartment. I know the clutter will drive my brother crazy, but it's only for a week. He can deal with it in that short amount of time.

Madison and I go to the hockey game that evening. My parents come down, and we sit with them.

I focus on every player, except number twenty-one, the freshman center whose body I know like the back of my hand. Every time Sam skates by, I shift my eyes or pretend he is someone else. It's easy to do when his face is covered by a helmet and cage. Most of the players look the same out there on the ice, wearing their uniforms and pads anyway.

My brother scores two goals, Sam has one, Will Richter has one, and Ben Sims—the winger who hit on me at that first hockey party—scores the final point.

The guys play great, blowing away the competition with a 5-0 win.

My parents leave when the final buzzer sounds. It's already late, and they have a two-hour drive back home.

Madison and I are leaning against the wall outside of the locker room, waiting for Ollie to emerge.

“Great game,” I say to my brother when he comes out of the door.

His hair is still wet from the shower.

Madison gives him props for the goals he scored, and I hug him. When he pulls back, my brother looks between Madison and me through narrowed eyes.

“What's my apartment gonna look like when I get home tonight?”

Madison smiles, but there's a mischievous glint in her blue eyes. I bite my lip to stifle my laugh at my friend's theatrics.

She bats her long eyelashes a few times while Ollie's frown deepens. “You won't even know we're there.”

“Sure.” The sarcasm is ripe in his one-worded response. He sighs.

Ollie slings his large bag over his shoulder, and we start walking down the hall. I haven't seen Chase, Mike, or Sam leave the locker room yet, and I'm secretly glad. Just because I'm ready to move on doesn't mean I'm made of steel. I'd prefer to avoid contact with my ex as much as possible right now, even the small glimpses. It's just easier that way.

"I'm starving," my brother announces. "The guys are going to Cheerz for some food. You two up for that?"

Madison and Ollie both look at me. I instantly feel guilty, realizing how many times I've bailed on them in the past few weeks.

I nod. "I'm hungry too."

Madison smiles proudly, sliding her arm across my shoulders as we keep walking. "That's my girl."

We leave the arena—Ollie gets stopped a few times along the way by fans wanting to shake his hand or take a picture with him—and then climb into my brother's SUV in the parking lot.

By the time we make it to Cheerz, the place is already brimming with people. Most are draped in jeans and jerseys from the game tonight, including Madison and me. A roar goes up when we enter the door, reminding me of what a local celebrity my brother is around here. He's just Ollie to me. But to them—all the fans—he's a hockey star who's bound for the NHL.

I snake my arm around Ollie's and grab his forearm with my other hand to anchor myself to his body. The crowd parts for him, so it's easier to make my way to the table without being trampled if I'm by my brother's side. Madison has her fingers in the back pocket of my jeans for the same reason. I chuckle and hold Ollie a little tighter when I see a few side-eyes and obvious frowns from some of the women hoping to get his attention tonight. Ollie and I look identical—almost like twins—with our raven-colored hair and the features of our face. I'm just a more feminine version of him—thank goodness. But if these women can't tell that we're related ... they must be

blind. It is comical to watch though, all the jealous glances being thrown my way.

It's a celebratory atmosphere inside the bar, everyone high off tonight's win. The table the hockey team always commands is at the back of the place and is already partially full of Ollie's teammates when we walk up. We snag three chairs. My brother sits on the end, at the head of the table, and I sit next to him. Madison is next to me. I end up right across from Ben Sims.

We order drinks. Ollie gets a beer; Madison and I choose sodas since we're not privy to the same privileges as the hockey team with their nonexistent rules on underaged drinking and we aren't twenty-one yet. We also order food since we have the waitress's attention now, knowing once she disappears, we might not see her again for a while since this place is so packed.

Ollie starts talking to Charlie about the game and his goaltending skills that saved a few amazing shots from crossing the line. Ben starts talking to me.

"So, Little Burnham," he says. His brown eyes are smoldering.

"Oakley," I correct, unsure if he's being cute or he simply can't remember my first name.

He smiles, his teeth white against his soft brown skin.

"Oakley," he repeats, making my name sound dirty.

I roll my eyes and hear Madison giggle beside me.

Sam, Chase, and Mike walk up to the table, taking the seats on the other side of Madison. I see them from the corner of my eye, but I keep my focus on Ben. Sam sits the farthest away from me, much to my relief.

Ben's eyes flit to my ex before landing back on my face. "You still dating Anderson?"

I'm not surprised by his directness. Most of these guys have zero filter and little to no tact. It's part of their charm. Besides, they're used to getting away with murder and saying whatever they want.

“Nope,” I say, matter-of-fact, popping the P for emphasis.

I’m proud of myself right now. Once I made up my mind not to let Sam and our breakup control me any longer, I immediately felt stronger. I’m still very aware of him when we’re in the same room. It still stings every time I see him, but I’m hoping that will lessen a little more each day.

“Really?” Ben says, drawing out the word while lifting his thick, dark eyebrows.

I snicker as I shake my head. Ben’s entertaining.

Ben sneaks a glance at my brother to make sure he isn’t paying attention to our conversation. Ollie’s still talking to Charlie.

“When are you going to give me a chance, Oakley?” he asks.

He watches me as he lifts his beer and takes a generous drink.

“Isn’t this you shooting your shot right now?” Madison cuts in from beside me.

“Sims is shooting his shot with Oakley?” Mike incorporates himself into our conversation, leaning over Madison from the other side of her. His voice is loud, carrying over the ambient noise of the bar.

I see Sam’s head turn, his eyebrows furrowed.

I’m not sure why Sam cares if Ben is interested in me. I’m certain Cassie isn’t the only girl he’s been tangled up with since we’ve been done.

Ben narrows his eyes at Mike, surreptitiously sneaking another glance at Ollie. “Shut the fuck up, Hoarst.”

Mike laughs, knowing exactly what he’s doing. He’s stirring the pot and enjoying every minute of it. Everyone knows Ollie is protective over me.

The waitress returns, setting down food in front of our half of the table, and all the newcomers place their orders. The conversation turns to the game tonight as all the guys start talking about some of the players on the other team while we

eat. Madison and I split an order of chicken fingers and fries. The entire table plows through their meals quickly.

“I want a shot.” Madison pouts from beside me.

I reach over and grab Ollie’s beer. The waitress just brought him a fresh glass, so it’s nice and cold. I take a sip before passing it over to my friend.

Ollie glances around the room before looking at me. “Be careful,” he warns.

Ollie doesn’t care if I have a few drinks. He just doesn’t want me to get caught drinking while we’re at the bar.

I roll my eyes as Madison finishes half his beer before passing it back to me. “Please. I’m the sister of the golden boy of hockey. You’re practically a celebrity around here.” I shift my eyes to Ben. “All of you are. I won’t get in trouble as long as I’m with you.”

“I think you’re underestimating our power, Oak,” my brother says. “And I don’t want to be the one to call Dad about bailing you out if you get busted.”

“No one’s getting busted,” Ben reassures arrogantly from across the table. He watches as I finish the other half of Ollie’s beer.

Ollie didn’t need it anyway. He’s already had one drink, and he’s driving us tonight.

Ben gets up and walks to the bar a minute later. When he returns, his hands are full of shots. He passes them out. It’s whiskey for the guys around him and lemon drops for Madison and me.

“I figured you’d want some of that sweet girlie shit,” he says with a wink.

Madison and I smile. He isn’t wrong.

Our half of the table toasts to the win, all of us touching glasses in the middle. And then we down the alcohol.

I feel good tonight. Happy. Included. Madison and I are the only two girls sitting at the hockey table, though there are

plenty of others circling the guys or stopping by for visits. When I see the redhead approaching Sam—Alexis—my spine goes rigid. Madison notices.

“Let’s go dance,” she suggests in my ear.

I nod and force a smile.

“Where are you two going?” Ben asks when we slide our chairs back.

“To the dance floor,” I say, keeping my eyes on Ben in front of me and avoiding the scene down the table.

“Well, let’s do this!” He jumps to his feet, ready to join.

I smile when he follows us into the middle of the crowded bar, glad for the distraction. There’s a band playing tonight, so the space in front of them is packed. We filter into the crowd. As soon as we’re out of sight of our table, Ben puts his hands on my hips, pulling me closer. I wrap my arms around his neck, and we sway to the music.

Ben has a good rhythm. He’s smooth as he moves me around the floor, our bodies pressed closely together. I can see why the ladies fall for him. He’s tall and muscular, though leaner than some of the other guys. He’s funny and flirty. Handsome. He can dance. And the confidence oozes from him like steam rising off a pot of boiling water.

Someone bumps into the side of me, causing Ben to tighten his hold as I stumble. I look over at the offender to see Sam glaring at us.

“What’s up, Anderson?” Ben asks nonchalantly, tipping his chin.

Ben’s smiling at his teammate without a care in the world. I can tell that it doesn’t bother him at all that Sam’s pissed at him for dancing with me. In fact, it might make our dance even sweeter for Ben. And it’s obvious my ex is mad. But when Sam pulls the redhead around from behind him and secures her inside his arms, any guilt I might have felt for flirting with one of his teammates goes right out the window. And when Ben slides his hands further down my hips until they’re resting on the top of my ass, I don’t stop him.

Sam doesn't dance.

That thought just keeps circling my brain as I try to focus on the music and the man holding me. It was rare to get him to dance with me at prom.

Ben leans down closer to my ear. "I think Anderson's looking a little green right now." He chuckles.

I glance over to see Sam's gaze stuck on me. He's still glaring even though there's a willowy redhead wrapped around him. It's slightly nauseating, seeing Sam and Alexis together like this. But I shove the discomfort way down inside my gut and smile at Ben like he's the best thing to ever happen to me. And I hope it makes Sam ill to see me with Ben. I get sick satisfaction, knowing Sam's affected by me right now. He's affected, and he's jealous. It's the first indication I've seen since we broke up that he might still care just a little.

"Do you want to really get under his skin?" Ben snickers in my ear.

"Why not?" I answer, wanting to heap just as much hurt onto the guy who destroyed me as I can in this moment.

Ben leans closer and starts nuzzling my neck. I can feel his smile against my skin. I tilt to the side, giving him better access, and close my eyes. Ben's lips are full and soft. He kisses a trail across my neck, over my jaw, and beneath my ear. When I feel his teeth lightly bite my lobe, I smile from the sensation.

And that's when Sam snaps.

Ben and I are wrenched apart.

Ben laughs, clearly amused by Sam's response.

"What the fuck are you doing?" Sam roars.

But he isn't yelling at Ben. His question is directed at me.

I narrow my eyes. "*You're mad at me?*" I scoff out a laugh, thinking about Cassie. Envisioning Alexis and all the other bunnies constantly sniffing around the guys, offering anything and everything the hockey players might want each night.

I take a step closer until Sam and I are nearly chest to chest. “You no longer get a say in what I do or who I do it with. It’s none of your business.” My hard, annoyed tone matches his.

His large hand collapses around my wrist, and he drags me through the crowd and out the front until we’re alone, the noise of the bar fading behind the closed door. I yank my arm free as soon as we’re outside.

“It’s my business when you’re messing around with my teammates,” he counters, as if he has the right.

I don’t recognize the sound of disbelief that escapes my mouth. “Oh, so you can fuck my old classmates and anyone you want here at college, but I can’t *dance* with Ben?”

“That wasn’t dancing,” he spits, his face red with anger. “He was dry-humping you on the floor. Feeling you up in front of everyone. In front of *me*. And you let him.”

“So what?!” I yell. “We broke up, remember?! We’re done! What I do is no longer your concern!”

My chest is heaving from unrestrained anger. I’m furious with the guy standing in front of me.

He hurt me. No, he gutted me. And then he acted like he didn’t care in the aftermath. He made it seem like we had been nothing, like I was nothing, when he had been everything to me at one time. I hibernated and cried in my room for weeks. Mourning the loss of us. Meanwhile, he was out hooking up with half the campus—or at least, that was what I assumed.

Sam takes a step closer, crowding my space. I don’t back down.

A familiar arm slides across my shoulders, the scent of spice and cinnamon surrounding me. I’m pulled into Chase’s side as he walks us a few steps back and my brother moves in between Sam and me. I didn’t hear them come outside.

“You’d better back the fuck up, Anderson.” Ollie’s tone is ominous.

I’ve seen that look on my brother’s face before. The ferocity. He isn’t playing. And Sam knows it.

“Sims—” Sam starts to say, but Ollie interrupts.

“I don’t care what Sims did. I care about you dragging my sister out here. I care about you yelling in her face.”

I’m still tucked beneath Chase’s arm as we watch the scene play out in front of us.

“I think it’d be best if you went back inside now,” Ollie says, his tone chilly.

If Sam knows what’s good for him, he’ll listen. Because Ollie isn’t making a suggestion. He’s giving Sam a chance to walk away before he acts on instinct and kicks his ass instead.

Remember when I said Ollie and I would die for each other? I meant it. My brother means everything to me. And I mean everything to him. He’s always taken it upon himself to watch out for me, sometimes in an overbearing manner. And he won’t hesitate to throw fists with Sam right now if he thinks my ex is hurting me. Regardless of the fact that they are teammates.

Sam’s eyes meet mine.

“Don’t look at her,” Ollie warns.

Sam looks away. He pauses for a few beats. Then, he starts walking back toward the bar.

“Are you coming, Chase?” Sam asks his roommate over his shoulder.

“I’ll catch a ride with Burnham,” Chase answers. “I’ll see you later.”

Sam doesn’t seem to like that response, but he says nothing.

The front door opens just as Sam is reaching for the handle, and Madison walks out. Her cerulean eyes flit from Sam to Ollie and over to Chase and me. They narrow as she assesses the scene. And her shoulder bumps into Sam when she stomps past him. He barely moves, but I know it’s my best friend’s way of sticking up for me.

“I grabbed your purse and your coat,” she says, handing me both.

The door slams behind Sam's retreating back.

"Are we going home?" I ask Ollie.

My brother's anger is still simmering beneath the surface when he answers, "I think we've all had enough for one night, don't you?"

I nod.

We walk over to the SUV. Madison and I slide into the back and give Chase the front passenger seat. Ollie starts the engine.

"What was he talking about?" my brother inquires, his gaze meeting mine in the rearview mirror. "About Sims?"

It seems like an innocuous question, but I know it's not. Ollie will be all over Ben, too, if he thinks there's a reason to be.

I shake my head and look out the side window. "Nothing. We were just dancing. Ben was just being Ben. Sam didn't like it."

Ollie nods once, seemingly satisfied, and then backs out of the parking spot.

"Sam is such a douche," Madison says to me. "I saw the whole thing. He was trying to make you jealous with that puck bunny, and when you didn't pay him any attention, he got mad and started throwing a tantrum."

"Why would he want my attention anyway?" I sulk. "We broke up. And from what I hear, his bed hasn't been cold since I left."

I speak the words to the back of Chase's head. His shoulders stiffen with each syllable; he's likely reliving the conversation we had in his truck a few short nights ago.

"He doesn't like it because you're no longer sitting at home, pining over him," Madison huffs.

The car is silent for a few blocks as we drive.

"Do you need me to drop you at home?" Ollie asks Chase.

"I thought I might hang out at your place for a while, if that's okay," he responds.

I can see the side of Ollie's mouth rise into a smirk from my seat in the back. "Fine by me. But I have no idea what we're walking into. The twisted sisters back there have taken over my living room."

Madison and I exchange smiles.

Chase turns to look around his seat. "Are the dorms closed?"

I nod. "For another week."

He chuckles as his gaze shifts back to the front. "You have these two in your one-bedroom apartment for a whole week?"

Ollie exhales loudly. "If I can tolerate them that long."

"Hey!" I say.

Both guys laugh.

"We have a spare bedroom ..." Chase starts, then fades off as he realizes there's no way I can stay in the same house as Sam.

"Hell no," Ollie says, stealing the words from my mouth.

"Yeah, I wasn't thinking," Chase replies.

"We need a little pick-me-up," Madison says suddenly. "Let's make margaritas when we get home. Do you have the stuff at your place, Ollie?"

"I have tequila," he says from the front seat.

"What about margarita mix? A blender?"

"Do I look like I sit around my apartment, making margaritas?" Ollie grumbles. As if drinking fruity cocktails would emasculate him somehow.

Chase laughs.

"Well, stop at the market really quick. We can run in and grab what we need." Madison is not one to be dissuaded.

Ollie looks at her in the mirror. "Anything else, Your Highness?"

She smiles sweetly. "That's all for now."

Even my brother can't help but smile through his feigned annoyance.

The incident with Sam is forgotten as we stop by the store to gather some snacks, food to cook breakfast in the morning, and margarita mix. Chase and Ollie wait for us in the vehicle.

We travel the short distance to Ollie's small apartment complex in silence. My brother shakes his head when he unlocks the door and sees all our stuff cluttering his space. Then, he chuckles under his breath.

Chapter Eighteen

Oakley

Madison and I take turns scrubbing our faces in the bathroom and changing into more comfortable clothes while Ollie and Chase grab beers and start watching television in the living room.

“What are we drinking?” I ask coyly when I walk into their space.

Chase glances at me, doing a double take when he sees my tank top and sleep shorts.

“Put some clothes on,” my brother orders stiffly from his spot on the couch.

“I have clothes on. This is my sleep outfit,” I counter. “I’ve worn this at home before.”

“Chase is here,” Ollie grumbles.

I roll my eyes. “Fine.”

It’s not like my clothes are indecent. I left my bra on since we have company and my brother is here. But sometimes, it’s just easier to give in. Especially since Ollie is letting us invade his space in the first place.

I pull a sweatshirt overhead.

Madison walks into the room in an oversize T-shirt that lands on her thighs and seemingly nothing else.

I narrow my eyes. “Why aren’t you telling Mads to put some clothes on?”

My brother smirks. “Because she isn’t my sister.”

“So, if she ran around your apartment naked, you wouldn’t say anything?” I put my hands on my hips.

Chase chuckles.

“Nope,” Ollie says smugly, glancing at Madison’s long legs. “I’d just sit back and enjoy the show.”

I scoff at the double standard while my best friend tilts her head and smiles as if it was a compliment.

“Aww, thanks, Ollie.”

Chase’s laughter deepens when I roll my eyes.

“Where’s the blender?” Madison asks excitedly, her mind on the drinks we’re about to consume.

“Over in the corner of the kitchen, next to the microwave,” Ollie answers. “Tequila is under the sink.”

We find the blender and the tequila and start reading the instructions on the back of the strawberry-flavored margarita bottle. Less than a minute later, Chase appears.

“Move over,” he commands, snatching the mixer from Madison’s hand. “Watch and learn.”

Chase grabs some ice cubes from the freezer and throws them into the appliance. He adds a heavy pour of tequila and the mix to it without measuring anything.

“That’s a lot of liquor, Chase,” Madison comments, leaning against the refrigerator.

I jump up onto the counter next to where he’s working to sit and watch.

“You won’t even be able to taste it,” he promises.

He starts the blender and glances over at me. When our eyes meet, they hold.

“Have you made a lot of margaritas in your lifetime?” I raise my voice to be heard over the noise.

Madison searches the cabinets for glasses.

“First time,” he says with a smirk.

“They’d better taste right,” Madison warns, setting the glasses on the other side of me. “We only have that one bottle of that strawberry mix.”

He tweaks Madison's nose, and she pushes him away with an annoyed grunt.

I laugh.

"They'll be perfection," he promises, winking at both of us. "You watch, Mads. Right, Oakley?"

"I'll wait until I've tasted it to make my final decision," I quip.

"Ouch." He rests his palm against his chest like he's wounded. "Tough crowd." He narrows those murky-green eyes at me. "I didn't hear you complaining about my rum and Cokes."

"I only complained when you stopped making them," I admit.

He points at me. "Exactly."

The image of Sam and Cassie rolling around on that bed flashes into my head, creating a pang in my chest, which I quickly ignore.

Ollie walks into the kitchen, carrying his bottle of beer, just as Chase stops the blender.

"You can't have beer," Madison says, stealing his drink. She tips it back until it's emptied down her throat, then tosses the bottle in the recycle bin. "We're having margaritas."

I'm waiting for Ollie to get mad at her, but he only smirks in amusement.

Chase pours us each a glass and sets the blender back down. There's enough for all of us to have seconds. Maybe even thirds.

I take my first sip of the red frozen drink. It's good, just like Chase said it would be. His lips tip upward on one side as he watches me taste it.

"Well?" he asks.

"It's okay." I shrug.

He takes an aggressive step forward, like he's about to attack me. I jump off the countertop with my drink still in hand.

"I'm just kidding. It's *great!* The best margarita I've ever had in my life!" I yell.

My brother's eyebrows furrow. "Keep it down. I have neighbors."

Sorry, I mouth, though I'm not really sorry at all.

Madison agrees that the drinks are good, but we both refuse to say that Chase is the margarita master when he suggests it. The four of us settle back on the couch to watch *SportsCenter*. Madison is bored within two minutes and suggests we make a drinking game out of the show.

"Every time they say the name of a player, we drink," she suggests.

"Okay," I agree.

The commentators are going through football games right now, and I start to get brain freeze from the icy mix because we're drinking so often.

"Take smaller sips," Madison suggests.

Chase watches with amusement. Ollie ignores our antics, his eyes pinned to the screen.

It isn't long before Madison and I are on our second round of drinks. I don't realize I'm buzzed until I get up to use the bathroom.

"Whoa," I say, wobbling when I stand.

"Slow down there, killer," Chase says. But he's smiling.

Madison convinces my brother to turn a movie on when *SportsCenter* is over, but he insists on an action flick, vetoing her romantic comedy suggestion. Ollie's tired from the game, so twenty minutes into the film, he's closing the door to his bedroom to go to sleep for the night. I'm expecting Chase to be half asleep, too, but I'm surprised when I find him wide awake on the couch. With Ollie gone, Madison switches to the movie she wanted to see and climbs onto our inflatable mattress to watch from there. After another thirty minutes, she's asleep too.

Chase slides over closer to me on the couch. "And then there were two," he jests.

The room is dark. I watch as the light from the television screen flickers across his face, noticing how handsome he's become.

"I thought you'd be sacked out, too, after your game," I say to him, keeping my voice low so I don't awaken Madison.

The stillness of the room, the way his thigh is pressed against mine, and the whispered words between us create an intimate atmosphere. I stare at his face, admiring the contours of his jaw and the light stubble across his skin. The tequila makes me bold and unrestrained.

"Why are you staring at me?" Chase murmurs without turning his face from the screen. He can feel my eyes on him.

"Because I like looking at you."

His lip twitches at my confession. "Since when?"

I lean in closer, ignoring his question, and my nose brushes against his neck as I inhale.

"Did you just smell me?" he asks. There's amusement in his eyes, but his voice is husky and thick.

I nod.

He's watching me now, not the screen. "Why?"

"Because you smell good," I answer honestly.

The tequila must have truth serum infused in it.

"You smell like spices and cinnamon," I add lazily.

I like that his eyes are on me.

I have a blanket over my lap. Chase pulls the corner of it until it falls across his legs and we're sharing it. He's wearing jeans, a T-shirt, and socks. He lost his sweatshirt over an hour ago. I'm warm, so I pull my sweatshirt overhead, dropping it to the floor now that the clothes police is safely hidden behind his bedroom door.

Chase runs his eyes across my newly exposed skin, lingering on the low neckline of my tank top in a way he never has before. He isn't subtle, and he's not trying to hide his interest.

His pupils swallow the olive color of his eyes. His gaze turns heated, like he wants me. Desires me. I'm looking at him the same way.

"How drunk are you?" he murmurs.

"Just buzzed," I say. I'm in that happy place, where everything feels good, but I don't feel sloppy or out of control.

The alcohol isn't controlling me, but I admit, I feel emboldened with it coursing through my veins. I blame the margaritas for my next move.

I shift until I'm sliding my legs over his lap, straddling him. His spine stiffens. It feels right to be this close to him. His thighs are big and muscular. I can feel his erection nestled in that sweet spot between my legs, separated by a few layers of clothes. We're inches apart, studying each other. I've known Chase for most of my life, but it's like I'm seeing him for the first time.

It takes him a few seconds to relax. My fingers reach out until they're tracing the outline of his jaw. I move slowly across the stubble on his chin until I reach the softness of his lips. His lips aren't thin, but they aren't thick either. The perfect in-between size. His eyelashes are long and dark, framing those liquid-moss eyes. His eyebrows are full and masculine, like him. I can feel him watching me as I explore the features of his face. I see only a trace of the boy I once knew. Chase is all man now. Every exhale from him brings a warm puff of air across my mouth.

Our eyes connect, and it's like a live wire just sparked to life. We hold our stare as we see each other for the millionth time ... or for the first—I'm not sure. The pull between us deepens into a twinge and then an ache, gaining strength and momentum with every second that ticks by as we study each other.

"Oakley," he whispers reverently, softly pushing a strand of wayward hair behind my ear.

My name sounds like an angsty promise on his lips. An oath.

I close the distance slowly, allowing him time to push me away. But he doesn't. My lips brush his in the softest of kisses. It's our very first. I pull back an inch, my eyes shifting between his—searching for what, I don't know. Permission? Or maybe I'm searching for a clue as to what he's thinking or feeling right now.

I know my cheeks are flushed, and it isn't from the alcohol. Chase moves forward this time, closer to me. He pauses right before our lips touch again, pulling back the slightest bit in a teasing hesitation, then lurches forward until my mouth is crushed to his, like he can no longer resist the connection. He opens wider, and I follow, our tongues sliding together. Tasting. Testing. His fingers are tangled in the back of my hair, positioning my head right where he wants me. And the scruff on his face scratches my cheek in the most delicious way.

I'm lost in his kisses until I hear a noise from the bedroom, interrupting our moment. Chase hears it, too, because both our eyes widen, and I scatter off his lap. A moment later, my brother stumbles out of his room and to the bathroom. Chase and I sit frozen on the couch, a foot between us now, both of us breathing a little heavier, but trying to disguise it. If my brother wasn't still half asleep, I'm sure he'd be able to tell that something is off. Chase looks guilty as hell, and I know I do too.

"You guys still up?" Ollie asks, his voice thick with sleep, when he's finished in the restroom.

"Yep," I squeak out.

Chase stays quiet.

Ollie goes into the kitchen for a glass of water. Then, he says good night and shuts his bedroom door again.

My head turns until my eyes meet Chase's. He's an impenetrable mask, one I've never been able to read. Tonight is no different. I don't make another move to kiss him, and he doesn't reach for me either. I'm still trying to absorb what just happened between us and how I feel about it.

We watch the movie in silence, but I couldn't tell you anything about the plot or the dialogue or even which actors are in it. I'm lost inside my head as my eyes start to droop. Chase rises at one point, and I ogle him unapologetically as he drops his jeans until he's left in his white T-shirt and boxers. I find myself wishing he'd remove his shirt too. He folds the denim and sets it on the floor beside my sweatshirt. There's a bulge between his legs, and I wonder what it would feel like to straddle him without his jeans between us. But I've lost my courage now.

Chase removes the cushions on the back of the couch to create more room. He lies down with his head on the decorative pillow at the end of the sofa, pulling me beside him. He holds me there as we watch the screen. It's not a friendly embrace, but it's not necessarily smoldering either. It's a lot like this strange, in-between place we find ourselves in right now. We're not really just friends, but not necessarily something more. A few minutes later, I drift off to sleep in his arms.

Chapter Nineteen

Oakley

“Oakley.” My name is whispered as someone nudges my shoulder.

My eyelids slowly open, still heavy with sleep, and Madison comes into view. Her eyebrows are lifted, and there’s a tiny smirk on her face.

“I heard your brother stirring. You might want to get up.”

I turn my head and see Chase next to me on the couch. Our legs are tangled, and I am lying halfway across his chest. The blanket fell to the floor at some point overnight, but we didn’t need it. Chase’s body is like a furnace, warm and cozy. His breaths are even and deep, his eyelids still shut.

I push myself to a sitting position and then stand, careful not to wake him.

But apparently, he sleeps like the dead because he doesn’t even flinch.

“Interesting sleeping arrangements last night,” Madison says with an obnoxious grin on her face when it’s just the two of us in the kitchen.

I wave her off. “We just fell asleep, watching the movie.”

I’m not sure why I’m downplaying things. What happened between Chase and me was monumental. We kissed. For the first time. We’ve been friends forever, but a line has been crossed. And I’m fairly certain we wouldn’t have been satisfied with just kissing if we weren’t in the middle of my brother’s living room with Madison sleeping a few feet away at the time. I know I wouldn’t have been. But until I make sense of it in my head, I don’t know what to say about it, even to my best friend.

“Oh,” she mocks, that playful smirk on her face widening. “You just fell asleep, huh? Two old friends, lying half naked on the couch ...”

I roll my eyes, and she laughs, knocking her shoulder into mine.

“We weren’t half naked,” I protest. Then, I hesitate, trying to find my words. “I don’t know what happened. One minute, we were sitting there, joking around, and the next, I was on his lap, and we were kissing.”

Madison’s eyes widen. “Kissing?”

My eyes flit into the other room when the volume of her voice rises.

“Shh!” I say.

She drops into a rushed whisper. “I thought you were just spooning. No one said anything about swapping spit.”

A blush spreads across my cheeks.

“Oh my gosh!” she whisper-shouts when she notices the flush on my face. “You made out with Chase! You like him!”

My lips tilt up subtly. “I don’t know,” I say honestly. I never could hide anything from Madison. “I’ve never thought about him like that before. But lately ...” I trail off, reliving the way he was looking at me. And remembering the way I was seeing him. “And that kiss ...”

“Was it hot?” she asks excitedly.

“It was ...” I search for the right word. “Smoldering.”

I automatically start to compare the kiss with Chase to my first one with Sam. I was lost in my head with Sam, worried about doing everything perfectly right. But with Chase, I wasn’t thinking. I was just ... *feeling*.

Madison does a silent happy dance. “This makes me so excited! Chase is so much better than Sam.”

Sam.

She says his name like it’s a sexually transmitted infection.

“Slow down,” I warn, confusion overpowering my other emotions. “It was one little moment. It might not mean anything.”

“Maybe,” she says, starting to pull food from the refrigerator. “Or it might just mean everything.”

No pressure there.

We stop talking when we hear Ollie’s bedroom door open, but my mind continues to run. My brother walks into the kitchen a moment later and pauses in the doorway. His hair is sticking up at all angles, and he’s wearing basketball shorts and nothing else.

“Stop drooling over my brother,” I order my best friend when her gaze lingers a little too long on Ollie’s bare chest.

“I’m not drooling,” she insists, still looking. “I’m admiring.”

Ollie’s lip twitches, but he doesn’t respond as he starts making a pot of coffee.

Madison finds a skillet and starts cooking the bacon. I whip the eggs and locate the bread we bought last night for toast. Ollie pours his coffee and leans against the countertop, quietly watching us scramble around the kitchen.

It isn’t long before Chase appears in the doorway, my stomach somersaulting inside my belly when I first see him standing there. Unfortunately, he still has on his T-shirt, so I can’t ogle his broad chest. But he looks so cute, the fog of sleep still heavy on his features. It gives him a more boyish appearance.

My eyes land on his lips. The same ones I tasted last night. His face is a mask of stoicism when he catches me looking. I look away and focus on the food preparations again, that blush deepening across my face.

Things don’t necessarily feel awkward this morning, but I’m not entirely relaxed. I’m not sure how to act. Are we the same Chase and Oakley that we were before we kissed? Friends who kissed once? Was it just a chance encounter between us, a mild make-out after a night of drinking? I don’t know what it all means.

And also, there's Sam, standing in the space between us. My ex. Chase's teammate. Chase's roommate. One of Chase's best friends.

It's messy and complicated.

It's also thrilling and magnetic.

Chase walks over to the skillet and removes a piece of bacon that's cooked, but not well done, like I prefer it. He dabs it on a paper towel to absorb the excess grease, and then he eats it.

I scrunch my nose in distaste. "Gross."

"What?" he replies, his voice scratchy from sleep. "I love bacon."

"I love bacon," I retort, "when it's cooked."

"It's cooked," he counters, still chomping away.

"Barely," I argue.

"Oh, yeah," he says, shaking his head as if he just recalled a memory. "I forgot. You're one of those who likes your bacon burned."

"Well done," I correct.

Chase glances over at Ollie for reinforcement.

"Don't look at me, dude." He shakes his head. "I'm with her on this one."

Ollie and I both like our bacon crispy.

I smirk but then narrow my eyes at my brother. "You're supposed to be on my side for *everything*."

He just sighs and takes another drink of his coffee.

Ollie doesn't talk much in the morning. It takes him a good hour to really wake up. I'm guessing it's funny to see him at morning practices when he's forced to get up at the crack of dawn. Most of these guys aren't very chipper when the first signs of daylight hit. I bet they're like a bunch of zombies during morning skates. Grouchy zombies.

Madison and I finish the food preparations. Ollie pours more coffee for each of us. Chase grabs a container of orange juice

and fills glasses for those of us who want some. Then, we all sit at Ollie's small four-seater table in the corner of the room to eat.

"This is good," Ollie says around a mouthful of food.

"Of course it is," Madison chimes in. "Oak and I cooked it."

"That's why I'm surprised." He smirks.

Madison throws a wadded-up napkin at him.

A warm feeling floods my belly as I glance around the room. It's all so domestic. For the first time in my eighteen years of life, I feel like an adult. We're sitting around the table, together, the four of us, eating the breakfast we cooked. Ollie and Madison keep throwing barbs back and forth while Chase and I eat, exchanging clandestine glances at each other intermittently. It seems like he's trying to figure me out the same way I'm trying to understand him and what we did.

We clean up the kitchen as a group. Madison and I make the bed that I never slept in last night. We straighten the cushions on the couch while Chase pulls his sweatshirt on and my brother disappears into his bedroom.

"I guess I'd better go," Chase announces, standing next to the couch. He glances at his phone. "Mike's waiting in the parking lot."

He runs a hand through his hair, shifting on his feet. He appears uncertain. His eyes won't quite meet mine, and that makes me uneasy.

Does he think last night was a mistake? Does he already regret it?

I hate when I obsess over things, but I do it all the time anyway.

I start chewing on my bottom lip.

"Okay," Madison says, stepping in for my silence. Her eyes skirt between him and me. "Last night was fun." She pauses.

"It was," he replies.

"You leaving?" Ollie asks, walking back into the room.

Chase nods. “Mike’s outside.”

“See you at practice,” my brother adds, sitting on the couch and turning his attention to the television.

“Later.” Chase’s eyes shift to me.

We stare at each other until it starts to become obvious. Then, subtly, a corner of his mouth lifts, and he winks. My nerves instantly settle.

He turns and walks to the door, disappearing behind it.

Chapter Twenty

Oakley

The next two days pass by quickly. I'm never alone. We settle into a routine at Ollie's apartment. He disappears often for hockey practices, lifting, and recovery sessions. Madison and I drive him crazy whenever he is home. We cook a lot, which Ollie never complains about. Especially when our efforts turn out delicious. We bake cookies and make Rice Krispies Treats, eating the entire pan in one sitting. We watch dozens of movies and reality shows until my eyes are practically bleeding from looking at a screen. And we play on social media, posting stupid videos and watching others.

One thing that never happens ... Chase and I don't talk.

He doesn't text me, though he never really has before. But now, I find myself wanting him to. I think about reaching out to him a few times, but I don't. I'm not sure what to say.

Before I know it, it's the last day of the year. Will Richter and his housemates are throwing a New Year's Eve party at their house. The same house where Madison and I attended our first college party.

"That dress is a little short, don't you think?" Ollie scowls as I walk across the living room to my suitcase.

"No, I don't think. It's only as short as every other girl who will be wearing a dress tonight," I argue.

I give in sometimes to my brother's demands. But he isn't going to win this war.

"You're not every other girl," he growls.

"You're my sister," we say at the same time.

I laugh when he glares at me.

“Relax, Ollie. You’re going to give yourself an aneurysm before you’re thirty.”

I locate my shoes and slip them onto my feet, using the wall for balance. Madison walks out of the bathroom in a dress similar to mine, but pink instead of the dark blue color I’m wearing. They’re both strapless and short, but not indecent. My hair is curled in soft, beachy waves, and Madison’s is straightened. She is the light to my dark, the blonde to my black, but we complement each other perfectly in my opinion.

“Ready?” my best friend asks, glancing from me to Ollie.

My brother stands, eyeing both of us from head to toe. He rolls his eyes and shakes his head, muttering beneath his breath, “I know I’m going to get into a fight tonight.”

I smile at his overprotective nature. He just can’t help himself. And I wouldn’t change him—even the overbearing trait—for anything.

We walk outside when the rideshare arrives. None of us wants to drive tonight since we all plan to drink. My brother sits in the front passenger seat, letting Madison and me have the back. With every rotation of the tires, the knots in my stomach tighten a little more. I’m nervous and happy about seeing Chase. I’m anxious to be in the same space as Sam. I’m excited about the party, but I don’t know what to expect. And every emotion I’m feeling is tangled together until I can’t tell which one I’m feeling the most.

“Relax,” Madison whispers in my ear, squeezing my hand. “You look great.”

“I’m not worried about how I look,” I admit.

“I know,” she replies deliberately.

She gives me one of her signature grins, the confident one that captures the attention of every person we ever meet. I feel better, just knowing she’ll be at my side tonight.

The ride to the party is short. We walk along the sidewalk leading to the front door. The place is already packed despite it being the middle of the Christmas break with an empty campus. I guess everyone who is in town is here tonight.

Ollie leads the way, pushing through the door, and we follow behind as he carves a path through the people, slapping hands with no less than a dozen guys along the route. “Jealousy” by Offset and Cardi B is blasting from the speakers. The bass is thumping across the floorboards, traveling through my shoes and vibrating up my legs. The furniture has been pushed against the walls to make more room for dancing. People are drinking and talking, swaying to the beat. The atmosphere is electric.

Ollie stops in front of us, looking from Madison to me. “I don’t care if you two want to party tonight. I want you to have fun. But don’t accept a drink from anyone you don’t know. And check in with me from time to time.”

He puts his hand up to stop us as we start to protest. “I’m not trying to kill your vibe. I just don’t want anything to happen to either one of you. When you’re here, you’re both my responsibility.”

He’s so earnest; it’s hard to be mad at him. But Madison can’t resist a little jab regardless.

“Fun killer,” she mumbles.

She softens it with a wink.

“I hear you, Ollie,” I reassure him.

He nods and then turns his head when one of the guys calls out to him from the corner of the room. “See you later,” he says, walking in that direction.

“Let’s get a drink,” I say to Madison, grabbing her hand to anchor us together as we snake through the dense crowd.

The kitchen is just as packed as the living room. There’s a keg set up next to the refrigerator and a huge bowl of red liquid on a table in the corner.

“Ahh, Little Burnham,” Ben Sims says, filling a cup from the bowl and handing it to the blonde by his side. “You ladies want some?”

“What’s in it?” I ask.

“It’s Trash Can Punch,” he explains with a sexy smirk. “The better question is, what’s *not* in it?”

“Let me taste it,” I say.

He scoops a small serving for me, and I take a sip before passing it over to Madison to try. It’s sweet and really good.

“I love it!” I say.

Madison agrees, so Ben refills the cup that she’s still holding and tops off a new one for me. Then, he walks away with the blonde under his arm.

“I’m still not sure if he just likes calling me Little Burnham or if he always forgets my first name,” I murmur to Madison.

She snickers. “My money is on the latter.”

“Mine too,” I agree. I take another drink of the punch. “This tastes so good.”

“Be careful with that stuff,” a familiar, deep voice says from close behind.

My skin pebbles from his breath on my neck.

Chase.

“That punch seems tame, but it’s lethal.”

I spin until we’re facing. His smell wraps around me. He’s wearing his usual jeans and ball cap, but he swapped out the T-shirt for a collared shirt. I reach up before I can stop myself and straighten his collar, using it as an excuse to touch him.

“You look handsome tonight,” I say.

His eyes scan the length of my body. Everywhere he looks feels like a physical touch, inflaming my skin.

“You look ...” His words break as his gaze eats me alive. “Fuck, Oakley.”

I bite my lip to hide my smile. I’m loving the feeling of this new vibe between us. I could drown in it.

Chase’s attention drops to my cup when I take another drink from it.

“Did you make the punch too, Master Margarita Maker?” I ask.

He smirks. “I might have poured the Everclear in the bowl.”

“So, it’s Everclear and punch?”

“Among other things,” he says cryptically. “There’s, like, four different types of alcohol in there. The guys make it because the girls love it. It tastes good, hiding all the booze that’s in it, and then, boom ... you’re hammered.”

“Are you speaking from experience?” I tilt my head flirtatiously.

He slowly shakes his head. “Not me. But I’ve seen it happen to plenty of pretty girls.”

Chase pushes my hair behind my shoulder, then trails his fingertip along my collarbone. I stop breathing. The movement of his calloused finger is smooth and suave. I’ve never seen this side of him before, and I surely have never experienced it.

No wonder all the girls have been chasing him all this time.

My nerves take over, so I take a bigger swig of punch, wanting to camouflage my anxiety with the alcohol in my cup.

“Slow down,” he whispers seductively. His eyes drop to my lips, and he leans a little closer. “It’s going to be a long night.”

“Promise?” I ask, tilting my head. Flirting with him.

“Matthews!” someone yells from across the room, bursting the bubble we were in.

I think Chase was about one second from kissing me. Or maybe I was just hoping for another kiss from him.

“What?” Chase asks without removing his eyes from my face. There’s undisguised annoyance in his tone.

“Come here. You’ve got to see this!”

Chase glances over his shoulder at one of his teammates, who’s watching something on his phone with two or three other guys surrounding him.

“What is it?”

Chase is reluctant to leave. I don't want him to go.

"It's a highlight from the Broncos and Oilers game," the guy continues.

Sinclair's hockey team is playing the Oilers next week.

Chase hesitates.

"Go," I say, knowing they won't stop until Chase goes over there.

"Don't move," he orders, pausing. "Okay?"

"Okay," I vow.

Chase plows through the people to get to his teammates who are standing just inside the living room. He starts watching the screen with them.

I finish the last drink in my cup and help myself to a refill. I'm not doing a very good job of pacing myself tonight, and I know if I don't slow down now, I'll pay for it later.

When I look over, Chase and the guys are moving farther into the living room until I lose sight of him altogether. I move closer to Madison. She's talking to Connor Carlson, a wide receiver on our school's football team. I know she has a mini crush on the guy.

I join their conversation for a while, until I start to feel like a third wheel with all the flirting that's going down between my friend and the athlete. So, I leave in search of Chase.

There are even more people jammed inside the house when I walk into the other room. The music is louder, too, and I'm wondering how long it's going to take before one of the neighbors gets sick of the noise and calls the cops. My eyes scan over dozens of bodies before I find the man I'm looking for. But my heart sinks when I see him, and all the elation I felt a few minutes ago dies a fast death.

Chase is standing across the room, looking sexy and handsome, like before. But he's not talking to the guys about hockey anymore. In fact, the guys aren't anywhere to be seen. But Ana is. She's here, looking as stunning as always in her tight black pants and corset top. I noticed she was kind of

small on top in the past, but tonight, her breasts are pushed up and perfect, making them appear bigger and drawing all eyes to her chest. It's the first thing I notice. And it seems to be what Chase is noticing as I witness his gaze drop to her cleavage, where she's playing with her necklace.

Is that heat in his expression when he's looking at her?

I feel diminished as I watch them together. It was only a few minutes ago that Chase was flirting with me, making me promise to wait for him in the kitchen. How quickly he forgot. But who could blame him with a stunner like Ana standing in front of him?

Even I can admit that they look great together. The hockey stud and his model girlfriend. She's toying with his collar the same way I was in the kitchen. Chase is smiling down at her. He isn't looking for me at all. I think that's what hurts the most.

I thought it might be the beginning of something three short nights ago in my brother's living room with the guy I've known for most of my life. Now, I feel like a fool for feeling anything at all. The hope of the night is sucked away at the sight of them. Any excited anticipation I felt at the prospect of Chase and me tonight is gone.

I don't stick around to watch them fawning all over each other anymore, turning on my heel to head back into the kitchen instead. I gulp down half my glass of punch, no longer seeing a reason to show restraint. I just want to disappear, and the quickest way to do that is to let the alcohol win.

I'm tired of feeling disappointed all the time.

When I hear a commotion on the back deck, I venture outside. There's an intense beer pong game going down. Will is at the table again, but there's a brunette woman beside him this time. The crowd around them roars as he sinks another shot. I lean back against the side of the house to watch. A few minutes later, I'm no longer alone.

"Hey," Sam says, sliding into the empty spot next to me.

"Hey," I say, though I'm guarded.

I haven't seen or talked to him since our fight outside of Cheerz.

"I'm surprised to see you alone," I say, sipping my drink.

He's holding a beer in his hand, but he isn't drinking it. "I could say the same to you," Sam counters.

The bitterness in his tone surprises me.

"You sound jealous," I accuse.

He swivels his head until our gazes meet. "Maybe I am."

The sincerity in the depths of his eyes takes me off guard. It reminds me of the guy I once knew. The one I dreamed about for all those years.

"Why are you jealous, Sam? You're the one who broke up with me."

"Am I?" he asks. "Because it kind of feels like the other way around."

"Well, it wasn't," I insist.

I can feel the warmth of the alcohol now buzzing through my skin. I allow the high to sweep me away. I focus on the good feeling instead of worrying about Chase. I'm not angry with Sam about the past. I just don't care about anything at this moment.

Sam notices my outfit. "You look good, Oak. *Really* good."

"So do you," I admit honestly.

Even when I hate him—and at times, I do—I still think he is one of the handsomest guys I've ever seen.

"I don't want us to fight," he continues. "I don't want you mad at me."

"I'm not mad at you," I say, realizing I mean it.

He gives me a disbelieving look.

"I'm not," I insist. "I was. But it's only because you hurt me."

In the past few weeks, my feelings for Sam have been transitioning from love into sadness into hate. But sometime

over the past few days, they have started to drift into indifference. I'm not totally there yet. I might hate him again in the morning. And I'd be lying if I said the man standing beside me doesn't affect me. I'm still aware when he's close by, and he still resides in the recesses of my mind. But somehow, his presence doesn't gut me like it used to.

Maybe time does heal all wounds. Or maybe Trash Can Punch does.

"How many of those have you had?" he asks with a smirk, believing it's the alcohol talking and not the real me.

"Not enough to not know what I'm saying right now," I answer.

When he smiles at me, he's still the hot hockey player who stole my heart the first moment I laid eyes on him. And I'm still the girl who fell for him.

Regardless of our recent sordid past, I smile back.

"Hey, Anderson!" Richter yells from across the deck. "You up for a rematch?"

Sam raises an eyebrow at me in question.

I nod. "Why not?"

Sam sets his beer bottle down on the deck and claps his hands together once, rubbing his palms a few times for dramatic effect. "Get ready for a beatdown, Richter."

Sam seems lighthearted right now, which surprises me. I know there must still be tension between him and his teammate, but I can't feel it tonight.

I follow Sam to the table as someone assembles the pyramids of beer cups on both sides, and I place my Trash Can Punch on the railing beside me for safekeeping. The entire time, Sam and Will are talking smack to each other, but it doesn't seem laced with venom, like it usually is. It's entertaining, and we start to draw an even bigger crowd.

When I look across the table as we're starting, the brunette woman is gone, and Charlie is in her place, making this a true rematch. Charlie lifts his fingers, pointing from his eyes to

mine as I lift the ping-pong ball in preparation for my first shot.

“I see you, Burnham,” he taunts me.

I let the ball fly without much thought and sink it into the cup directly in front of Charlie. His eyes widen in surprise as he nods.

“Okay, okay. I see how this is gonna go.” The goalie smirks.

Sam tilts his head in surprise.

I shrug. “What can I say? I play better when I’m buzzed. It’s the same when I play pool.”

“I’ll remember that the next time we go to a pool hall, my little hustler,” he quips. “I’ll get you drunk first.”

My little hustler.

As if there’s going to be a next time.

Halfway through the match, the chill in the air causes goose bumps to rise across my skin. Sam notices. He unbuttons his shirt until he’s untucking it from his jeans and handing it over. He has a plain white T-shirt underneath.

“Thanks,” I say, sliding my arms through the sleeves automatically. It’s such a simple, familiar act to be wearing Sam’s clothes. After all, I wore them off and on for over a year.

The material is warm and smells like Sam’s cologne. I try not to think too hard about what it means as I’m searching for that spicy smell instead.

By the end of the game, I’ve transitioned from buzzed and happy to sloppy and drunk. But I keep hitting my shots. It’s like the less I concentrate, the better I am. Plus, there’s nothing at stake tonight. I no longer care if I disappoint Sam. His approval isn’t my concern anymore. And something about that is very freeing.

A huge crowd has amassed along the way. It feels like the entire house is on the deck and the lawn, witnessing our rematch. I even see my brother standing there, watching with a

proud grin on his face, before I lose him again in the mob. And the four of us that are competing don't disappoint the fans, throwing one-liners across the table. Jeering and taunting one another playfully.

As if this were scripted, it comes down to one cup remaining on their side and one on ours. Again. And I'm the next shooter. But this time, Sam isn't hovering over me, pressuring me not to miss. Instead, he's leaning against the railing, one leg crossed over the other, completely relaxed. When I look at him, he winks, extending his hand toward the table in invitation.

I kiss the ball for theatrics—trying not to think about all our dirty hands and all the beer and water and germs that are on that surface tonight—and I launch it in the air. The smacking sound it makes as the plastic ball hits the liquid inside the cup is gratifying. And the roar that goes up around us is even more so.

I glance back at Sam with a smirk. He throws his head back and laughs. His face is lit up in pure joy in a way I haven't seen in quite a while. Then, he grabs me, lifting my body and swinging me around before I land unsteadily on my feet. He keeps his hands anchored to my hips until I've regained my balance. Or maybe he just likes the feel of them on me again. I don't care either way. I lost the ability to think straight about twenty minutes ago.

Will hugs me, and so does Charlie. They give me fist bumps, too, for—and I quote—“beating our asses.”

“That was fun,” Sam says when the celebration dies down.

“It was,” I agree.

I glance at the empty cup in my hand. Somewhere along the way, I finished another glass of punch too.

“You want something to drink?”

I nod. “But make it water this time.”

I'm not looking to repeat the scene outside of Mike's house that night. I imagine vomiting red Trash Can Punch and beer would be even more brutal than the rum and Cokes were.

Most of the crowd goes back inside the house because it's cold outside. But I'm feeling no pain, and the chill doesn't dissuade me. There's a firepit lit across the yard, and some people are smoking weed around it. I wrap Sam's shirt tighter across my body and stumble down the stairs, laughing alone at my incoordination. I find a spot hidden in the shadows, where a two-seater swing is unoccupied, and sit to watch the crackling fire. I can feel the warmth on my face. I don't know anyone who's out here right now, but I don't care. And they don't seem to mind the presence of a stranger either. I slump down in my seat until my head is resting on the back so I can gaze upward while the sweet scent of Mary Jane drifts through the air. The dark horizon is clear tonight with a million stars visible. It's beautiful out.

"I've been looking for you," a growly voice says from beside me.

I swivel my head slowly until I'm looking at him because I find that swift movements make me dizzy at this point. Chase is towering above me. He doesn't look happy.

"Well, you found me," I say, repositioning until my gaze is on the sky again.

He sits down beside me, his large body crowding my space.

"You promised you would stay put." There's accusation in his tone. Accusation and anger.

"You didn't seem to need me, so I found something else to do." My voice is calm and lazy. Like I don't have a care in the world. Like it didn't hurt when I saw Chase and Ana canoodling after our moment together. Several moments.

I'm just thankful for the numbness overshadowing my emotions. I'd rather feel nothing right now. I've been hurt enough lately by Sam. I can't allow Chase to make me bleed too.

"Yeah, I saw the something else you found to do. The *someone* else. Looks like you guys are mending fences." Chase grabs the edge of Sam's shirt that I'm still wearing between his finger and thumb, flicking it away with a scowl on his face.

“I didn’t think you’d notice,” I say, my words equally as bitter.
“I mean, not with Ana up your ass and you up hers.”

He scoffs mirthlessly. The arrogant smirk on his face has me clenching my teeth.

“Ana.” He shakes his head after he spits her name.

I’m not sure what that means. I have no idea how he feels about her. It’s obvious how she feels about him. My mind drifts to the Halloween party back in the fall when Chase didn’t come home that night. And the way they looked, walking through the door of the coffee shop together right before finals week. She likely kissed the same perfectly shaped mouth that I did. She’s probably had pieces of him I’ve never had.

“Yeah, you know. The ‘hot chick’ from your economics class,” I say, using quotation marks when I try to repeat Mike’s description. Though I think I fumbled it this time. “The woman you’re dating. The one you were flirting with in the living room, touching, when I was supposed to be waiting for you in the kitchen like an idiot.”

He made me feel foolish. I’ve felt foolish enough in the past few weeks.

“I’m not dating her,” he insists.

“I saw you on a date. You went to something at her shitty sorority as her plus-one.”

His lip twitches like it’s funny when I refer to her sorority as shitty. All it does is piss me off even more.

“It isn’t funny, Chase.”

All traces of humor drop from his face. He turns until he’s facing me more directly.

“No, Oakley, it isn’t funny. It’s not funny that you kissed me, and you let me kiss you back, but tonight, you spent all your time with Anderson. I don’t get a kick out of the fact that we flirt and talk and I get along better with you than any other girl I’ve ever been around, but it never goes any further. I don’t find it humorous that all I can think about is you, but all you

can think about is *him*. Nothing about this is fucking amusing, Oak. None of it ever has been.”

I’m shocked into silence as I hear people counting down from inside the house, but my mind is also muddled by the punch. I’m not sure that I heard Chase correctly or if I’ll remember it at all in the morning.

The fireworks start to erupt overhead, lighting up the night sky as we hit midnight.

I meet Chase’s eyes, and all I see is frustration and fire, along with the reflection of the lights bursting overhead in every color of the rainbow. I can’t tell if he wants to throttle me or strip me naked and take me to bed. There’s a heat between Chase and me that I never felt with Sam. An intensity. I don’t know if it comes from growing up with someone until you know them better than anyone else. The history and time invested. Or if it’s been there all along between us, simmering and brewing, and I just haven’t seen it until now.

“Your head has been so far up Sam’s ass for so many years now that you can’t see anything else.”

His words swim round and round inside my head in a continuous loop. But I’m too drunk to analyze them properly tonight.

He grabs the back of my neck with his strong hand. His hold is gentle but firm all the same. He holds me there as he stares, his mouth in a straight, unhappy line. I swallow hard, and he watches the movement of my throat. A purple firework explodes in the sky—my favorite color.

Plum.

I just have time to take a breath before Chase kisses me hard. There isn’t anything gentle about his lips right now. I moan into the feel and taste of him, and he takes advantage, slipping his tongue inside until our mouths are fighting. He bites my bottom lip, sucking on it before letting go.

I am breathless as he pulls away and stands.

“Happy fucking New Year, Oakley.”

Then, he turns his back and walks away, fading into the darkness. He doesn't go back up the stairs of the deck or into the house. He blazes a trail around the side of the house until the darkness swallows him up.

I sit there for a few minutes alone on that swing. Finally, I leave the backyard and reenter the house. Sam is standing there, in conversation with one of the wingers, holding my cup in his hand.

“Sorry,” he apologizes as he hands it over. “I got distracted.”

That's the story of our relationship.

I take the cup of water from him and down the entire thing all at once. I place the empty container on the counter and walk away before he can comment. I find my brother—Madison is apparently somewhere with Connor still—and after exchanging a few texts with her, the Burnham siblings go home for the night. Alone.

I have one last thought before oblivion pulls me under ...

Happy fucking New Year.

Chapter Twenty-One

Chase

Have you ever had one of those recurring dreams? The ones that appear on random nights when you're sleeping, crowding your head with faceless people and events you don't quite understand. And they drive you crazy, trying to make sense of them. But you can't ever piece them together completely. That's what Oakley is to me. She's this hazy, unexplainable, recurring dream that I've had ever since we met. And just as soon as I start to think I've figured it out—figured her out—things break into unrecognizable pieces all over again.

My legs burn as my skates slice through the ice, the lactic acid building the longer I move. But I don't stop. I push through the pain.

The rink is empty and nearly dark, except for the natural light coming through the floor-to-ceiling glass across the foyer and the windows lining the top edge of the stadium. We have a rare day off from practice today, but somehow, I still found myself walking through the doors and lacing up my skates. I couldn't stay at the house, not with Sam there. And besides, the ice has always felt like my true home, more so than any other place I've ever lived.

No one has ever loved a sport as much as I love hockey. It's my true north. My reason for getting out of bed in the morning. I push myself to the brink because I want to be the best. And I want to be the best because I never want to stop playing. And only the elite can make it to the next level.

The burning in my thighs lessens as I slow down to an easy glide, stopping by the bench to drink some water and wipe the sweat from my forehead. I settle onto the empty seat and stare at the ice without really seeing it. My mind automatically

drifts to the raven-haired girl that has consumed my thoughts for most of my life.

Oakley.

I still remember the first time I saw her. She was riding that ridiculous pink bicycle with the ribbons on the handles and that stupid wicker basket on the front. Her dark hair was in pigtails, and she had this fierce look of determination on her face as she tried to keep up with Ollie. It didn't matter that her brother was two years older and obviously stronger. She was bound and determined to match his speed, her skinny legs pedaling as fast as she could go.

I chuckle, picturing it even now.

I think I fell in love with her a little right then and there, though I had no idea what I was feeling at the time. Still don't. I just know that she's all I think about other than hockey. My obsession with Oakley started that day, and it hasn't stopped since.

Setting the water bottle down, I adjust my earbuds and grab my stick and a puck, sliding back onto the ice.

Oakley and I have gone to school together since kindergarten. Over the years, we've been in numerous classes with each other. We've studied together. We've bickered. We've been friends. She's watched me with countless other girls, but no one I've really cared about. Not like I care about her. They were just someone to pass the time with.

I'm no saint, but I've never been a player either. I don't set out to hurt women, but I guess I inadvertently do by being unavailable. Women are funny in that way. The more you push them away, the harder they chase. They seem to think I'm a project, a puzzle to be solved. Like all they need to do is work a little harder and they'll break through my rough exterior.

They don't realize I could never give my heart away when it's always belonged to her.

Oakley has no idea how I feel about her. She's always been completely oblivious to my feelings, and I'm pretty damn good at hiding them, self-preservation and all. Plus, I meant it

when I said I didn't want anything distracting me from hockey. And Oakley would be the biggest distraction of all.

She thinks I've looked out for her all this time out of some oath to my friendship with Ollie, but that's the furthest from the truth. I'm always there, watching her from the shadows, because I can't tear my eyes away. Oakley is equal parts beautiful and stubborn, but she carries a hint of naivete too. It's always called to the protective instinct inside that comes naturally to me. I don't want anyone to take advantage of her. I don't want anyone to hurt her.

She never really dated someone seriously until Sam. I knew how she felt about him when he first showed up at our high school freshman year. All I had to do was look at her, and I knew. It was written all over her beautiful face. As much as it gutted me at times, it also made it easier to keep her at arm's length. She never saw me because she was always looking at him. But then that night at Mike's house our senior year, Sam looked back. And he recognized what I'd spotted in Oakley from the very first glance.

Seeing Sam and Oakley together was agonizing, to say the least. Watching him kiss her and touch her. Watching him take her to a hotel on prom night. Oakley was always mine in the recesses of my mind, even when she wasn't. I never fully accepted that she was with Sam, though they were together for a little over a year. I guess I'm stubborn that way. Or delusional.

Sam.

I shake my head, thinking about my friend and teammate. I don't know what he said to her that night they broke up outside of Cheerz. But I know it hurt her. She was a shell of her former self for days. Weeks. She doesn't know that Ollie and I made him pay for the way he'd treated her in practice. Teammate or not, he'd hurt my girl. He'd wounded Ollie's sister. We checked Sam into the wall every chance we got for weeks during practice, punishing him for breaking her. He bitched and moaned about it some, but he knew he had it coming.

Oakley thinks she hid it from us, how much she was hurting following the breakup. But we felt every tear. We noticed every puffy eyelid and blank stare. We saw through her endless excuses to avoid hanging out with us while she tried to heal. Ollie and I saw it all.

My slap shot blasts into the back of the net with more force than is necessary when I think of Sam's shirt across her shoulders last night. The two of them laughing together. I knew at some point that he'd realize what an idiot he was for letting her go. What I didn't expect was for her to be looking back at him with hearts in her eyes, like she used to.

Everything I did last night was for her, down to that stupid collared shirt I wore. I did it all with Oakley in mind. I was pulled away by the guys for a split second and then cornered by Ana for a few minutes more. And by the time I went searching for her, Oakley was already gone. She was lost in *him*. *Again*. And we were over before we ever began.

My roar of frustration echoes through the empty stadium. My head is pointed toward the ceiling, but my eyes are closed.

I was just fine until she kissed me. She was in the box I'd placed her inside all those years ago, that untouchable gift that was just out of reach. But with that one graze, that simple taste, it all went to hell. If Ollie hadn't interrupted, I would've never stopped with a few kisses. It wasn't enough. Nothing with Oakley is ever enough. I want to sink so far inside of her that I can't see where I end and she begins.

I take a deep breath and retrieve the puck. I skate over to the bench and change the music on my phone, choosing something angry and loud. I need anything to drown out the thoughts in my head. Anything to stop thinking about the girl I can't ever seem to forget.

Maybe it's time to change my focus.

To stop looking at the one who never seems to be looking back at me.

New year, new direction.

New me.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Oakley

I made a New Year's resolution this year. I resolved to say yes to everything when asked. Madison asked me to go to a yoga class with her at the crack of dawn one day. So, I went. My brother asked me to meet him for lunch on campus the first week of classes—that was an easy one to agree to—so we did. And then we had so much fun that I suggested we meet every Wednesday for lunch for the rest of the semester to check in with each other. And when the cute guy from my English comp class, Sid, asked me for coffee, I promptly accepted.

As long as you don't play hockey and your name isn't Sam or Chase—or even Ben Sims—I'm your girl. Ask away, and the answer will be a resounding yes.

I needed something to get me out of my slump. And so far, it's working. Which is why we're a few weeks into the new semester and I find myself at the same coffee shop on the edge of campus where I hid the weekend before finals week. I'm sitting across from Sid, a sophomore engineering major who is tall and lean and doesn't play sports.

“What's your major?” he asks, dipping into the prerequisite *getting to know you* questions.

“Undecided,” I answer, sipping my hot vanilla latte. I bypassed the cinnamon. The spice now reminds me of Chase, and I refuse to think about him.

“Is there anything you like to do?” he asks.

I smile. “There's plenty I like to do. I'm just not sure that any of it can translate into a job and income.”

“Like what?” he asks.

I start racking my brain. “I went to a yoga class the other day. I enjoyed it.”

He chuckles. “You could be a yoga instructor or start your own studio.”

“I think I need to survive my second class before I make a career out of it,” I joke.

“Probably smart.” He smirks.

I pause for a moment before answering again, giving a more honest response this time.

“I love to read. And I was in a creative writing class last year in high school. The teacher would give us a subject, set at timer for forty-five minutes, and we would just ... write. I really loved that class.”

“So, maybe an English major? You could be an editor or an author. Or both.”

“Maybe ...” I say, really absorbing his suggestions. “But can I make a living at those things?”

“Sure you can,” he says. “The sky’s the limit if you work hard enough.”

I take another sip of my steaming hot coffee. I set my mug down and point at him with a smile. “So, you’re an optimist.”

“No,” he counters. “I’m a realist.”

“Well, tell me more about you,” I say, trying to keep the conversation going after a brief lag. “Where are you from? What made you want to be an engineer?”

I listen as he starts talking about himself, my mind wandering as I study his face. He’s handsome in an unassuming way. He has a sharp nose and a cleft on his chin. Brown hair, but thinner and darker than Chase’s. His eyes are a shade of blue, like Sam’s, but with less gray. He’s sweet, and he seems kind. He paid for my coffee, which is a plus. I’m all for the guy paying for dates, especially first dates. I guess it comes from my father and my brother always spoiling my mom and me. It’s an old-fashioned tradition I personally love.

We talk for a while before he excuses himself to use the restroom.

I smile as he walks away, deciding I like him. I don't *like* him, like him. I'm not sure there's that spark of attraction between us, but maybe that doesn't always happen instantly. Maybe it grows slowly and steadily with some couples.

I've been struck by lightning twice in my young life. Once was my freshman year of high school, when I glanced at the new boy in class. And the second was a few weeks ago, when I kissed a guy that I'd known my entire life. Both left impressions on me that I can't easily forget. And both ended disastrously.

As if I manifested him, the door to the coffee shop opens, and in walks Chase.

I freeze with the mug touching my lower lip as my eyes follow his stride. He's with Ana, just like last time. Only it's during the day and they both have backpacks strapped to their bodies.

It looks like I'm not the only one who's saying yes to things.

I've seen Chase around some—it's inevitable when he plays on the same hockey team as my brother. But we haven't been to the same parties, and we haven't been hanging out in the same groups. I've been purposely avoiding him, and oddly enough, I think he's been dodging me too. There's an empty ache inside when I realize I miss his eyes on me.

I've spotted him around campus more with Ana, and my brother mentioned casually one day that he asked Chase to grab lunch with us, but he already had plans with her. Maybe they're actually a couple now. I can't blame him—she's a knockout. Plus, it's probably easier with her. Even though all we shared were a few kisses, things between Chase and I were messy.

Whoever says that crossing a line with your friend doesn't change the friendship is a liar. Because everything between Chase and me has changed. Even the way his mouth turns down into an unhappy frown when he spots me from across the room. He looks away instead of walking over this time,

studying the menu board behind the counter like it's the most interesting thing he's ever seen.

"I hate to cut this short," Sid says as he approaches the table.

I finish the last drink of my coffee.

"But I have another class in ten minutes." He glances at his watch.

"No problem," I say, gathering my things. "I need to get going anyway."

We walk together to the counter and deposit our used mugs inside the tub left out for dirty dishes. And when I turn for the front door, we come face-to-face with Chase and Ana. My old friend is eyeing Sid. Ana's watching me.

"Hi," I say, forcing a smile I don't feel.

"Oakley, how are you?" Ana asks.

I have a sneaking suspicion she couldn't give two shits how I'm doing; she's just being polite. Or wanting to appear polite.

"I'm good," I answer.

We stand there awkwardly for a few seconds until Ana shifts her gaze to Sid expectantly.

"Oh," I say hurriedly. "This is Sid."

I leave the introduction at his name. I don't announce that he's my date or my classmate. I let it be a mystery on purpose. And I can tell both Ana and Chase are curious.

"I'm Ana. This is Chase."

I clench my teeth when Ana introduces Chase to Sid, like he's hers.

My eyes shift to my old friend's face for the first time. His jaw tics.

"Nice to meet you both," Sid says, receiving a chin nod from a tight-lipped Chase in response. "I've got to get going."

"I'll walk you out," I say, mostly to escape this uncomfortable interaction.

At the same time, Chase's name is called by an employee, announcing his order is at the counter.

I wonder if he paid for Ana's coffee too.

Sid opens the glass door, allowing me to walk out before him. Another plus. He's a gentleman.

"Thanks for the coffee," I say, turning toward him.

"Thanks for meeting me," he says. He shifts on his feet, like he's suddenly nervous. "Can I get your number?"

"Yes," I say, sticking to my resolution.

He hands his phone over, and I type in my information. When I give it back, he leans down for a hug. I step into his arms and squeeze him for a moment, wishing for the bolt of electricity to hit me, the one I'm searching so hard for. His body is warm and nice, but that's all it is ... nice.

"I'll talk to you soon," he promises, pulling away.

I smile. "See you in class tomorrow."

"That too." He turns and starts to jog away.

I think I made him late for his next class.

I watch him for a minute, laughing when he slows to walk and turns backward for a few steps, throwing me another grin. Then, I spin around and start down the opposite path toward home. I glance through the windows of the coffee shop as I pass by to see Chase's attention already on me. He's at a table right next to the front windows. Ana is sitting across from him, pulling out a laptop from her backpack, but my old friend is just sitting there, staring. At me.

Something inside makes me stop. I lean against a pillar where Chase can still see me, but Ana can't. And I type out a text to him. I have this sudden need to tease him and talk to him. I didn't realize how much I'd missed our banter until I spotted him walking through the door of the café.

Me: Should you walk me home? I mean, it's late, and it's getting dark out.

It's three o'clock in the afternoon, and the sun is shining brightly. There are people everywhere across campus.

I watch Chase pull his phone out of his pocket and glance at it. One side of his mouth tilts up, and then his thumbs are moving.

Chase: I don't know. Last time, you told me you didn't need me.

I frown, wondering if that's what he really thinks. Sometimes, what you say and what people hear are two very different things.

Me: I never said that. I said I could take care of myself.

I pause, looking off into the distance as I'm thinking.

Me: Plus, things were different then.

Chase: Different how?

Me: I was in mourning.

Chase: ???

Me: I was mourning the loss of a yearlong relationship. One that I'd cooked up in my head, according to one of my friends.

I steal some of his words from that night in his truck when he read me the riot act, giving me the cold, hard truth about my relationship with Sam.

Chase: One of your friends, huh? He sounds like a real asshole.

I smile, biting my lower lip.

Me: He has his moments.

I watch my phone screen. There's no answer for so long that I raise my eyes back to the window. Chase is sipping his coffee, watching me over the rim. I bet he's drinking it black or with a little added cream. He finally sets it down and picks his phone back up.

Chase: Friends? Is that what we are, Oakley?

Our eyes meet through the glass and hold. His expression is serious and searching. How do you say that you're in a weird gray area, somewhere between friendship and the precipice of something more? That you've been friends for as long as you have memories, but it no longer feels like enough for some reason? But you might just be too scared to ever act on it because the last time you did, you got burned? And that your heart is still fragile?

And how do you tell him all this when his beautiful maybe girlfriend is sitting across from him?

So, instead, you take the easy way out.

Me: We've always been friends.

Me: Enjoy your coffee date.

Chase is staring at his screen with a small frown when I leave my hiding place and start walking along the pathway home.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Sam

“Hey, Sam!” a blonde-haired, brown-eyed girl yells from a few feet away.

I tip my chin upward, but I have no idea who she is.

“Good luck Friday,” her friend says.

Don't know her either.

“Thanks,” I reply, walking past them.

Since Oakley and I broke up, it's been an endless stream of girls. I meet one on campus or in class. I hook up with another at a party. It's the stereotypical college athlete scenario. Our team is doing well this year. And I'm the new rookie hotshot, so I've gotten a lot of extra attention. Add that to my tousled dirty-blond hair and gray eyes ... and the women go wild.

It was fun at first. The newness. The excitement of meeting someone different every night. I freely admit, I've exploited the benefits of campus fame over the past few weeks. But the appeal has started to fade. There's an emptiness to casual hookups. Even an awkwardness to them that no one talks about. Some of the girls are trying to land a boyfriend on the hockey team, and they don't really care which one. Others want to brag that they bagged the new center.

Don't get me wrong; the attention is great for my ego. And I'm using them as much as they're using me. Sometimes, an easy, no-strings-attached hookup is what I'm looking for, but it's also kind of meaningless once I realize it's the image they're chasing, not me.

I keep walking down the concrete pathway when I see a familiar dark head of hair approaching from the opposite direction. It's Oakley. Her eyes are on the ground as she

moves. She's wearing a long coat and a beanie, like mine, with leggings and sneakers. Her backpack is slung over both shoulders.

"Hey, stranger," I say when she's a few steps in front of me and still hasn't looked up.

Her turquoise eyes widen when they see me. There's a soft blush across her cheeks from the cold.

"Hey," she responds, stopping in front of me. "How are you?"

I hate the cautious look in her eyes right now. I despise the wall that's been erected between us even more. But I know I put both of those in place.

"I'm good," I say, studying the face I know so well, but haven't seen in a while. "Busy, but good." I pause for a moment. "Haven't seen you around much lately."

Oakley and Madison haven't shown up at many of the hockey parties this semester. And they haven't been stopping by Cheerz on game nights when we go out afterward. I've noticed. And I am probably to blame for their absence too.

She shrugs and looks away. "I've been busy with school and ... stuff."

I grab her hand as other students approach to pull us off the path. Her skin is cold. I don't let go, even when we are out of the way. But after a brief hesitation, she gently pulls away.

I'm warm, but my palm turns frigid when hers is gone. I suddenly miss her so much that it strikes my chest like a bolt of lightning, paralyzing me.

"What are you doing right now?" I choke out spontaneously, trying to find a reason to spend more time with her.

I am desperate to erase some of the distance between us.

"I'm headed to the library to study. Madison's watching some reality show at home, and I couldn't concentrate."

"Have you eaten?" My eyebrows lift as I wait for her answer.

"No ..." she says hesitantly.

I can tell I've caught her off guard.

"Come grab a bite to eat with me." I nod toward the parking lot, which is close by.

We had an early practice, and then I had class afterward, so I drove today.

"I ..." She stumbles over her words as she tries to come up with an excuse.

"Come on," I persist, one step away from begging. "It's been too long since we've seen each other. It's just some food."

I think she's about to say no when she looks away and bites her bottom lip. But she meets my gaze and surprises me instead.

"Okay." She nods. "I didn't really want to go to the library anyway."

We step back onto the concrete path and start walking toward my vehicle. I open the door to the passenger side for her to slide in before shutting it once she's settled. It's a move I've made a hundred times before, and it feels so comfortable. So good. But I don't think it's the action making it feel like that ... it's the girl. Even though everything is different between us now, I like the way she looks, sitting in the front seat of my car.

We start making small talk on the drive to the restaurant. She stiffens when I pull into the parking lot in front of Cheerz.

"Do you think this is the best place for us to eat?" She frowns.

"Maybe not," I admit, thinking of our last two interactions outside of the bar. "Or maybe it's time to make new, better memories here." She still looks skeptical as I turn the engine off and wait for her response. "Come on, Oak. The cheese fries are the best in town."

"Okay," she agrees reluctantly.

I try not to notice the way she glances to the alleyway as we're walking toward the entrance. Or the way she bristles when my hand hits the small of her back. I open the door, allowing her

to walk in before me. The place is only half full. We're in between the lunch rush and the nighttime bar scene.

"This place has a completely different vibe during the day," Oakley observes.

I glare at a guy who stares a little too long at Oakley from across the room as the possessive streak inside of me flares to life. When he meets my eyes, he looks away.

"Yeah, it's a lot quieter," I add, following behind a hostess and Oakley.

We're seated at a booth lining the wall. We sit across from each other and order sodas. I add cheese fries before the server leaves. Oakley starts reading the menu while I stare at her. She pretends not to notice.

Oakley lowers it a few minutes later as another waitress drops off our drinks.

"Hi, Sam," the brunette says.

I glance up at the woman, schooling my expression as much as possible when I realize she looks familiar. I hooked up with her once before at a party sometime in January. Her name is Melody or Melony ... or something like that.

"Uh ... hey," I say, throwing her a neutral smile.

Oakley unwraps a straw and places it in her drink, her attention on the glass in front of her. But I know she's listening intently. I can tell by the tiny furrow between her brows.

"You never called," the waitress persists, completely ignoring the fact that I'm eating with another woman right now. Or maybe she's doing it on purpose out of spite.

"Nope," I say, my voice hardening.

Another server appears to place a pile of hot fries with melted cheese in the middle of the table. I grab a small plate and place it in front of Oakley and then slide one in front of me.

"These look good," I say with a smile toward Oakley, trying to dismiss the other woman.

“Okay then,” the woman mumbles under her breath. She frowns and walks away, but not before the damage is done.

Oakley is doing her best to appear unaffected as she takes a fry from the pile, the cheese forming a long string as it pulls apart from the rest. She drags it through the ranch she poured on her plate, shoving it into her mouth. But the temperature just dropped another twenty degrees at our table.

“I guess this place isn’t all that quiet during the day,” she disagrees frostily after swallowing. “There’re still plenty of women to fawn all over you.”

She pulls the beanie from her head and throws it beside her, her aquamarine eyes slinging accusations at me when our gazes meet.

And she isn’t wrong.

“I’m sorry,” I say honestly. I never apologized to her for anything that happened between us. And I am sorry. I wish I’d never hurt her while trying to figure out what I wanted.

“For what exactly?” She tilts her head.

It feels like a trap, but I dive in anyway. No one’s ever accused me of being smart.

“For everything. For the way we broke up. For never having a conversation about it afterward. For the waitress just now.”

She watches me for a few minutes, trying to determine if I’m being genuine.

“What about all the women you hooked up with after we broke up? *Right* after we broke up. Cassie? Are you sorry for any of that?”

When she voices that question, I realize for the first time how diminished she must feel by my actions. I dived right into the legions of women waiting for a chance with a hockey player, as if she and I never meant anything. There’s a lot of talk surrounding the players, on and off the ice. I’m sure she heard all the rumors of my escapades. She might have even heard them from Ollie or Chase. I know she saw it with her own eyes at Mike’s house right before Christmas.

Using her fork, she cuts off another section of cheese fries and places them on her plate. I do the same, though I'm not as hungry as I was before. The guilt is consuming my appetite, I guess.

"I mean, how would you have felt if I had done that to you?" she pushes.

"I would've been pissed," I admit.

"Really?" There's an edge to every one of her words now. I know I deserve it, but I hate it at the same time. "Because I was more hurt than angry." She glares at me for a moment while she lets the admission ruminate between us. "Maybe it would've been easier if I had just been mad. Cassie ... really, Sam?"

I start to drag a hand through my hair when I realize I still have my beanie on. I toss it to the side and slide my fingers through the messy strands.

"Not my best moment," I admit.

She takes a drink of Pepsi through the straw. The original waitress returns, the one I haven't slept with. We place our orders. When she leaves, there's a weighted silence sitting between us. I can literally feel the weeks of pain I put Oakley through. It sits heavily on my shoulders for the first time.

"Did you want to be with her the entire time we were together?" Oakley asks, her voice small. She sounds fragile right now. Breakable.

"What?" I scoff. "No."

Oakley is crazy if she thinks I ever wanted Cassie for more than a moment. We hung out briefly during the summer before our senior year of high school, but that was the extent of it. I never gave Cassie another thought unless she was standing right in front of me.

"Then, why?" she asks.

And isn't that the biggest question of all? I have no idea why I do the things I do half the time. So much of it is spontaneous. I act without thinking. Just like on the ice. My moves are

reactive. I don't plan. I just respond in the moment. I forget sometimes that the moves I make in everyday life have consequences. I can hurt people, people I care about. Just like I hurt Oakley.

It's on the tip of my tongue to tell her how Cassie was coming on to me that night. How I was so drunk at the time that I don't remember going into the bedroom with her. And once Oakley stumbled into the room, I sobered up quickly. But by the time I pulled myself together and left the house, all I saw were the taillights to Chase's truck with my ex-girlfriend in the seat next to him.

But I don't say any of this because they sound like excuses right now, even to me. And I can tell she doesn't want excuses. She wants the truth.

"I think I did all that because I didn't care about them," I confess.

"Really?" she says, nodding her head. "Because I think you did it because you didn't care about me."

It seems like a mic-drop moment.

We search each other's eyes for what feels like hours. I can see the broken pieces I caused reflected in hers. I hope she can see the regret in mine.

"It feels like anything I say right now is going to be the wrong thing," I murmur. "I mean it when I say I'm sorry I hurt you. I'm sorry I'm such an idiot sometimes." I pause as she remains quiet. But there's a silent strength in her that either I missed earlier or is just now becoming apparent. "Where do we go from here?"

"I'm not sure," she admits.

"I want you in my life, Oakley," I say.

"What the hell are you two doing here?" Mike practically yells, suddenly appearing at the end of the table.

Oakley shifts her eyes to him. The tension in her shoulders dissolves as a genuine smile appears. The air becomes a little less weighted as Mike slides in beside her, either oblivious to

the heavy conversation we were just having or ignoring it. He immediately starts to demolish our cheese fries, and even though it annoys the hell out of me, I'm thankful at the same time. Because now, Oakley is smiling as he talks. Then, she laughs. The sound is an echo of the past. Of better times. I hold on to it, hoping we can move past the bad things that have happened between us.

A new start. I'm not sure what that looks like to me right now. I just know that I've missed her. And she's the only girl who's ever meant anything to me. I want her back in my life.

I don't think we can only be friends.

Because I didn't realize until I saw her on campus today ... her beautiful face and the smile that lights it up still bring me to my knees.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Chase

I sling my dry towel over the side of the half wall and walk into the shower. The tiles are slick beneath my feet from the steam in the room. I turn the nozzle and adjust the temperature, then step beneath the spray. The warm water instantly relaxes my sore muscles.

It's March, and we're in the thick of postseason play. Our consistently solid performances throughout our regularly scheduled games landed us in one of the sixteen spots in the playoffs. We're in search of the Frozen Four title. And we just won the first game, taking us into the second round. Everyone's flying high after the win. I listen to the echo of their excited voices as they rehash some of the highlights of the game tonight, unable to drop the smile on my face. This is what it's all about. This is what we train so hard for.

One by one, we finish showering, walking into the locker room to get dressed. I see Ollie move through the door to the hallway, and I wonder if Oakley is out there, waiting for him like she does after some of the games.

She was here tonight. I spotted her in the stands. I had known she'd be here—she usually is—but I don't always see her in the midst of the crowd. But she was front and center in Ollie's hockey jersey with her dark hair pulled back into a ponytail. I had to force myself to look away once I saw her, and that's not like me. When there's hockey to be played—especially during the final tournament of the season—my focus is typically on one thing ... the game. But my mind and my eyes wanted to be on a single person in that stadium.

Oakley.

I miss her.

I've purposely kept my distance since the first of the year. At the moment, I'm regretting that choice. But it's too hard to see her now when all I want to do is kiss her again. Since we crossed the friendship line, I feel this need to tell her how I feel. A strong desire to make her mine. But then I remember that she's never been mine. Her attention has always been on Sam. And I care too much about her to settle for second place.

I dress quickly and leave the locker room just in time to see Oakley's raven-covered head disappearing with Madison around the corner as Ollie stands in the hallway right outside of the door. He slings his bag over his shoulder. I swallow down the disappointment.

"Good game tonight, man," I say, walking up to my friend and clasping palms.

"One down," he says.

"Do you know who won out of the UMass and Harvard game?" I ask.

"Last I heard, they were tied and going into overtime."

I nod, walking beside him as we make our way down the hall.

"You going to Richter's?" Ollie asks.

Will and his roommates are having another party to celebrate tonight, and then it's back to work tomorrow. We play our next game the day after tomorrow.

"I was gonna stop by for a little bit. Is your sister going?" The words are out of my mouth before I can stop them.

Ollie watches me for a few seconds. I can see him from the corner of my eye.

"I don't know," he answers after the pause. "I think she and Madison were going to get something to eat right now."

I nod casually, trying to downplay the fact that I just asked about Oakley. I never have before. It's not that I'm intimidated by Ollie when it comes to his sister. I just don't want to show my cards to him or anyone else.

As far as I know, no one saw Oakley and me kissing in Ollie's apartment that night, and no one who matters saw us on New Year's Eve. I'm sure Oakley talked to Madison about it at some point. I don't think there's much those two don't know about each other. But none of the guys know.

"I'll see you over there," I say to Ollie as we part ways in the parking lot.

I jump in my truck, and before I head over to the party, I detour into a drive-through to get some food. By the time I arrive at Richter's, there are cars parked down the block. I pull into a spot and carry my burger, fries, and Coke inside the house.

My spirits are high when I walk inside. Everyone is still pumped from the win tonight. I head straight into the dining room and grab a spot at the table next to Sam, who also stopped somewhere for food.

"Dude, I'm fucking starving," Sam says, hitting my knuckles as I settle in beside him.

He's currently digging into a burrito, and he has at least three or four more items wrapped and ready to be eaten.

I devour my burger as more guys arrive and join us. Someone checks the scores online to find out who we'll be playing in two days, and we start talking game strategy. Before I know it, forty-five minutes have passed.

"One won't kill you," Richter says, trying to hand me a cold beer when I'm dumping my trash.

"I'm good," I say, waving him off. I don't want anything to slow me down on the ice in two days.

I glance over to the living room when I see a flash of dark hair, but I sigh with discontent when the woman turns, and I connect with brown eyes rather than teal.

The ironic thing is, the more distance I put between myself and Oakley, the more I look for her. Everywhere I turn, I'm hoping to run into her. By chance. On purpose. I don't care anymore. I just want to see her, talk to her. Argue with her until she frustrates the hell out of me. I'm starting to wonder

why I was avoiding her in the first place. It hasn't made life easier. If anything, my hunger for her has only grown.

"Hi." Ana steps into my space with an eager smile on her beautiful face.

"Hi," I reply, trying to muster up a smile.

Things would be so much easier if I wanted Ana instead. She's gorgeous, tall, and lean with legs for days. I can look around the room and see several pairs of male eyes on her right at this moment. Most of them would jump to have her attention on them. To have her looking at them like she's looking at me tonight. She's made it clear that she wants to be more than friends. I can tell every time she points those longing eyes in my direction. And she's never dated one of my teammates and best friends. She isn't Ollie's sister either.

But despite her good looks and sweet personality, she doesn't make me pant the way Oakley does. I force it with Ana. I *want* to want her. But every time I'm with Ana, all I do is think about someone else. And that's not fair to her.

She hugs me, lingering in my arms for a few seconds too long. Then, her head swivels, and her mouth is pressing against mine, taking me off guard for a moment. I gently push her back, not missing the downturn of her lips when I do.

Ana's grown bolder the past few weeks. Showing up at places she knows I'm planning to be. Asking for help with subjects I know she doesn't need help with just to find excuses for us to study together. Kissing me unexpectedly, like tonight, or finding reasons to touch me.

"Great game tonight," she says, recovering quickly.

"Thanks," I reply, leaning against the wall. "I live for this time of year. I used to dream about being in the Frozen Four when I was a kid."

"Well, you guys will for sure make it this year. You all are playing great. Ollie's slap shot was amazing tonight!"

I don't answer, knowing Ana tries but she knows very little about hockey. It's not that I care. I don't expect every woman to love the sport as much as I do. But what's annoying is the

way Ana tries to act like she knows more than she does. She's trying to talk sports with me to show me how much of a guy's girl she is. I've been tempted to tell her to relax and just be herself on more than one occasion. She's great like she is; she doesn't need to try to be someone she's not.

"What are you doing tonight after the party?" she asks, running her hand down my arm. She stops to tug on the end of my long-sleeved shirt, playing with it at my wrist. Her eyes are on her hand.

"Crashing," I say honestly. I run the fingers of my free hand through my hair, pushing it back from my face. "The games always wear me out."

Her chocolate eyes connect with mine.

"You could crash at my place," she suggests brazenly, the invitation open.

Ana isn't asking me to stay over to sleep. She's tempting me into her bed and into her body.

Everyone thinks we already slept together back in the fall after the Halloween party because I didn't come home that night. But we didn't. I had gotten uncharacteristically drunk at that party. Ana took me back to her apartment since I couldn't drive, and I passed out in her bed. We'd slept next to each other, but I never laid a hand on her. Not my best moment. I know she's been hoping for a repeat—for more than just a shared mattress and pillow. I got the impression she was disappointed something didn't happen between us that night.

I hesitate.

Her loose shirt shifts down her shoulder, and I get a glimpse of a purple bra strap.

Plum panties.

And suddenly, the decision is made for me.

"I can't," I say gently, noticing the disappointment on her face. "I'm sorry."

I don't make excuses. I give her arm a soft squeeze, flash an apologetic smile, and turn to leave.

The air is chilly when I step outside onto the back porch. The nights are still cool right now even though the days are warming up. There are a few people around the firepit in the back corner, and I see Ollie over there with a beer in his hand. I walk toward the fire and sit next to my friend.

“Don’t worry,” he says as I take the seat next to him. “I have a two-beer max tonight.”

I lean forward with my elbows on my knees. “I’m not the beer police. You’re old enough to decide your own limits.”

“Beer police,” he mumbles through a chuckle. “That reminds me of Madison. She’s always saying I’m the fun police, out to kill her good time.”

“I didn’t see Madison or Oakley here,” I observe, my eyes on the flames.

“Nope.” He tips his bottle back, finishing the last of the beer. Then, he leans forward and places the empty glass on the ground beside his chair. “They haven’t made it to a lot of the parties this semester, come to think of it.”

A few beats of silence pass as the fire crackles in front of us.

“I saw you inside with Ana. How’s that going?” Ollie asks.

“It’s not,” I confess. “She wants it to be something, but I’m just not feeling it.”

“Interesting,” he murmurs, watching the side of my face.

I turn to look at him. “Why is that interesting?”

He smirks. “Well, Ana’s obviously hot. I’ve seen Richter and Sims circling her on more than one occasion. But she always seems to have eyes for you. I’m surprised you’re not jumping on that opportunity.”

I shrug indifferently, turning my head back to the front. “I don’t know ... I guess something is missing. Something’s holding me back.”

“Or *someone*,” he says with a smirk.

I narrow my eyes at him. “What?”

“Oh, come on, Matthews.”

I sit still, unsure what it is he’s insinuating.

He leans forward until his elbows are on his knees, mimicking my position. His voice drops. “You think I haven’t noticed the way you look at my sister?”

My gaze shoots to his in surprise. *Was I transparent all those times I thought I was being discreet?*

He chuckles, still watching me.

“Relax,” he reassures. “She has no idea. She’s clueless, just like you.”

I’m speechless when I turn away. If he merely had a suspicion that I was into his sister before, I’m sure I confirmed it just now. I tense, awaiting his next words.

“I’ve watched you watching her for years. Looking out for her. Protecting her ...” He trails off, leaning back and resting one ankle across his knee. “If there’s anyone I’d want to be with Oakley, it’d be you. Sam was never right for her. I would’ve told her that myself—almost did a few times. But we both know if I’d told her not to see him, she’d have done the opposite.”

One side of my mouth lifts. She’s always been so stubborn.

“She needed to see it for herself,” he says.

“And has she?” I ask.

I want to know if she’s over Sam. I’m desperate to know.

He nods slowly a couple of times. “I think she has. She doesn’t watch him every time he walks into the room anymore. That sad look doesn’t come into her eyes when he’s flirting with another girl. She’s seemed happier lately.”

“Is she dating anyone?” I ask, feeling free to dig for information now that Ollie’s being more forthcoming.

I think back to the guy I saw her with at the coffee shop. *Sid*.

His brow furrows. “I don’t think so. She’s been out on a few dates, but nothing serious.”

I swallow hard when he mentions her going out with other guys.

“What’s holding you back?” Ollie asks.

I meet his eyes again. They’re similar to Oakley’s, but a deeper blue color with less hints of green. I pause for a few beats, really considering my answer.

“I don’t think she sees me that way,” I finally admit.

His head bobs. “How will you know if you never shoot your shot?”

He rises from his seat, slapping me on the shoulder as he walks away, leaving me to ruminate on what he said. Inadvertently, I think Ollie just gave me his blessing to pursue his sister. I didn’t realize how much I needed my friend’s approval until he just handed it to me.

Ollie was one obstacle in the way of Oakley and me because I didn’t want to cause issues with one of my best friends. But apparently, he was never an issue at all. Sam is another issue, but it seems like he’s out of the equation too.

So, now, if only I can get past the final stumbling block keeping us apart.

Me.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Oakley

The music pulses around us as I lift the heavy mane of hair from my sweaty neck. I don't stop moving though, smiling over at Madison when she winks at me.

"I'm burning up," I admit when she leans in closer.

She nods in agreement. "Let's take a break."

I weave a path through the bodies on the dance floor with Madison holding my hand and walking behind me. We make it back to the table where we've planted ourselves with some of our other friends. Half of the girls from our dorm floor are here tonight, celebrating with us.

"I thought we lost you two," Hailey says.

She lives across the hall and has been spending more time in our room lately since her roommate is driving her crazy.

"We *were* lost," Madison quips. "Lost in the music."

I laugh at my friend, reveling in the good vibe of the night as she dances around again.

Everything just feels good right now. The hockey team won again earlier tonight, advancing to the third round of the playoffs. One more win, and they'll be in the Frozen Four. And Monday just so happens to be my birthday, giving us an extra reason to party tonight. So, after we watched the guys play, we rushed home to change in preparation for a Saturday night out.

Madison glances down at her phone. She reads something and starts typing.

"Who are you texting?" I ask.

With a coy smile, she pulls it away so I can't see the screen, but says nothing.

I narrow my eyes. There are no secrets between my best friend and me. She's up to something. She already insisted on bringing a cake into the eighteen-and-over club with us, along with a package of candles. And all our girlfriends are here.

I sip on my ice water when there's a commotion at the front. I see the crowd part, and a bunch of broad shouldered, drop-dead gorgeous men come walking in, my brother at the head of the pack. There are six multicolored balloons hovering overhead.

I glance over at Madison. "What did you do?"

She shrugs, her blue eyes shining. "Your brother wanted to celebrate your birthday too."

I laugh, glancing back at all the hockey studs filing into the space. All eyes are on them right now.

"It looks like he brought an army."

"Well, that must've been Ollie's doing. I didn't know anyone was coming but him," she admits.

I watch as everyone in the club vies for their attention. Ollie stops a few times, gives a couple of fist bumps, a head nod here and there. A smile or a tip of the chin to the hungry crowd, and they're eating it up. It's easy to forget that hundreds of people pay big money to watch them play on the ice. When you add that to a winning season ... their celebrity status soars.

To me, they're just Ollie and the guys.

To everyone else, they're gods on skates.

I glance around the group, watching as the hockey players revel in the attention. All, except one. My eyes land on the olive irises of the boy positioned to the right of my brother. He isn't looking around, accepting accolades. Flaunting his feathers and basking in the attention. He isn't doing any of that because those eyes are locked on me.

Chase Matthews.

My childhood friend.

One of my brother's best friends.

My ex-boyfriend's roommate.

My protector.

But right now, as I'm staring at him, he's none of those things. In this moment, he's the hottest, sexiest, most interesting man in the club. There's no pretense or attempt to play it cool. He can't take his eyes off me. And I can't take my eyes off him.

Chase isn't dressed in anything fancy or out of the ordinary. He's just ... Chase. In his black T-shirt and Bruins ball cap with his jeans and sneakers. But everything about him looks different to me tonight. Or maybe it's just that I'm seeing him—*really* seeing him—for the first time in my life.

I swallow hard, burying the nerves that are suddenly erupting in my stomach.

"Do I look okay?" I ask Madison, leaning in and lowering my voice.

Her eyes narrow as she tries to decipher my body language. "You'd better not be worried about how you look because Sam's here."

"Sam's here?" I swivel my head around, realizing I didn't even notice him.

Huh.

But there he is, standing on the other side of Chase. For so long, his sandy hair and gray eyes were all I could see. But tonight, I didn't even notice he was here. He was outshone by the man standing next to him.

And I'm not sure what to make of it.

When I ran into Sam on campus, I was surprised when he asked me to have a late lunch with him. And then I was mortified when he took me to Cheerz of all places. That sports bar holds nothing but bad memories between us, so I wasn't sure what he was thinking. Maybe he wasn't thinking at all.

But it turned out to be a good thing. When the waitress showed up—the one who brought our drinks—it was immediately obvious that something had happened between Sam and her. She couldn't tear her eyes off him. And he couldn't have looked more uncomfortable. I felt a tiny spike of jealousy, which was progress over the all-consuming green-eyed monster that used to flare at the thought of another woman with my ex. And it forced some of the old demons to the surface, the ones I tried to bury every time we ran into each other for the sake of everyone else around us.

Our conversation that day was raw and painful. And it hurt. But it also brought some semblance of closure to me. I could finally ask some of the questions that had been haunting me since we had broken up. And I finally vocalized how it all made me feel. It was nice to unleash the beast rather than keeping her tucked away and hidden. It was a relief to say some of the things I needed to say.

The furrow between Madison's eyes deepens as she reads my face. She glances back over at the guys, who are only a few steps away now. Her gaze lands on Chase, and her mouth stretches into a wide, knowing grin.

"You look fucking amazing," she says, bumping my shoulder.

I roll my eyes and feel the blush rising on my cheeks as she realizes I wasn't focused on my ex, but rather on the man standing next to him.

My brother stops in front of me and leans down to give me a hug. I squeeze his big body, sensing the spotlight is now on me too. Ollie kisses the side of my head. He's used to the attention.

"Happy birthday, sis."

"I didn't know you were coming," I say, smiling as we pull apart. "And I definitely didn't know you were bringing an entourage."

He smirks arrogantly. "It's the only way I travel."

I shove his shoulder, and he laughs.

“Happy B-day, Little Burnham,” Ben says, leaning in to give me a one-armed hug. He hands over a bouquet of pink roses at the same time.

“For me?” I take the bundle, smiling up at him.

One at a time, Charlie, Will, and Mike step up and hand me a different-colored bouquet. Sam is last with red roses.

He gives me that one-sided smirk that used to melt me to the core. “Happy birthday, Oak.”

Sam lingers longer than the rest, planting a kiss on my cheek, but landing very close to the edge of my mouth. The unique smell of him floods my nostrils. He hovers next to my ear.

“By the way, you are on fire tonight. *Love* the shorts.”

I shake my head and shove him away playfully while balancing all the roses.

I’m wearing tiny black shorts that barely cover my ass. A silky button-down shirt on top. A necklace that looks more like a choker and sky-high heels to top it off.

And I’m thankful that Sam and I left things better than we’d found them the other day when we ran into each other on campus. By the time he dropped me off, the tension was gone between us. Things aren’t perfect by any means. But better. And better is headway.

One of the other freshmen on the team has half a dozen balloons in his hand. He passes them to me.

“What am I supposed to do with these?” I ask the group in general, looking around now that my arms are full of flowers and balloons.

“Here,” Madison says, taking the inflated bundle and tying them to the back of a chair. She finds a place for the flowers too.

Chase steps forward. His arms go around my waist, and mine go around his neck. He presses against me for a moment that’s too brief, and I hang on a little longer, listening to his deep chuckle in my ear.

He lets me go, but doesn't move far away.

I tilt my head flirtatiously as the butterflies multiply in my stomach.

"Where're my flowers, Chase?"

I'm teasing him. I didn't expect him or anyone else to bring me anything. I'm sure Ollie put them all up to it. Or flat-out forced them to buy me the roses and balloons.

"Your gift is me showing up." He smirks.

I roll my eyes at his joke.

Everyone around us is talking and laughing loudly, but Chase and I are in this small bubble of our own.

"What if I want a refund?" I quip.

He chuckles. "No refunds. No exchanges. You break it, you buy it."

Madison grabs my hand, tugging me back toward the dance floor. My eyes widen as I look at Chase helplessly.

"Go," he says.

"Come with me," I beg as she's pulling me away.

"You know I don't dance, Oak." He smiles and shakes his head. "I'll be over here."

I watch as he sits in my seat and takes a drink of my water as I get sucked into the crowd. When I turn around, Will, Ben, and Charlie are in the middle of the floor with us. We all start moving to the beat, but soon, a dance competition begins. A circle forms around us. The guys bust out terrible moves, like the sprinkler. Watching Charlie—the larger-than-life, six-foot-five-inch goalie—fumbling around while trying to look suave is priceless.

"I swear the people back home said I was a younger, much smoother John Travolta," he announces, throwing down some disco action.

Madison looks skeptical as she watches him. "Did they need glasses?"

“Hey!” he yells over the music, feigning hurt.

He grabs my friend and starts spinning her around the floor.

My laughter intermingles with Madison’s. I haven’t smiled this hard or had this much fun in ages.

We stay out there until I wave the white flag, surrendering. “I need a breather!”

I haven’t missed all the appreciative glances the guys were getting while we were dancing. A few women move in on them the moment that Madison and I walk away.

Chase, Ollie, Sam, Mike, and three of their teammates have pulled up extra chairs and are sitting around our table, intermingling with the girls from our floor.

“I think it’s time to sing to the birthday girl!” Madison announces.

She unpackages the cake she brought—chocolate cake with white icing—and arranges the candles. Charlie, Ben, and Will walk up with three new girls from the dance floor. Someone hands Madison a lighter, and a second later, I can feel the heat from nineteen candles lighting up the space. Chase is sitting in my spot, right in front of the cake, and he isn’t moving.

I lift a brow and look at him questioningly.

He smirks, grabs my hips with his large hands, and plants my ass right on his lap. My eyes widen in surprise. Chase has never been this touchy-feely with me before. He’s never been this bold or assertive, especially in front of others.

Madison is watching from across the table with a small smile. Sam is staring at us, his expression scrutinizing. And my brother is just sitting there, like everything’s normal. Like I sit on his teammate’s lap every day of the week.

I relax after a moment and squirm to find a more comfortable position. Chase’s hands tighten on my hips in warning. I can feel his body as it stirs in response.

“Hold still,” Chase whispers next to my ear tersely.

The bill of his cap partially shields us from the rest of the table. His warm breath fans across my cheek. The spicy smell of his cologne envelops me. I bite my lip to camouflage my smile.

Madison leads a rendition of “Happy Birthday.” I feel like the entire club is staring. And they probably are since I’m surrounded by the hottest hockey players on campus. Charlie sings at the top of his lungs. His dance moves were questionable, but there’s no doubt about his singing ability. He’s definitely tone-deaf. It makes me like him even more. He’s like a big, lovable teddy bear.

When they’re finished singing, Madison tells me to make a wish.

I think for a moment, already sure of what I’m going to ask for. I close my eyes and blow until every single candle is extinguished.

“Man, if I knew Oakley could blow like that ...” Ben’s words die off as Ollie glares at him.

“Watch it,” my brother warns.

The other guys chuckle and smirk.

“What did you wish for?” Chase murmurs.

I rotate toward him. His face is right there. Those eyes. Those lips. Tempting me. Taunting me. Confusing me.

“I can’t tell you,” I whisper, “because then it won’t come true.”

My skin tingles in every spot we’re touching. I haven’t felt that feeling in so long. Not since Sam. My stomach twists and turns with nervous knots as I watch Madison cut the cake. She hands me the first piece, giving me a corner one since she knows I’m an icing girl. I take a bite, practically moaning as the sugary sweetness melts on my tongue. I feel Chase tense beneath me.

“You’re killing me, Oak,” he growls.

I smile, swimming in this flirty, new vibe between us. Everything about tonight is surprising me, especially Chase. I

haven't had a drop of alcohol, but I suddenly feel drunk.

Chase wraps his hand around mine and uses my fork to take a huge bite of my cake, devouring half of it while I protest. He smiles, completely unrepentant.

I laugh, glancing over to catch the unhappy stare on Sam's face. My smile drops, and my laughter dies off.

It's not that I feel guilty—because I don't. Sam broke up with me. And I'm not flirting with Chase to get back at him or make him feel a certain way. To be honest, I haven't thought about Sam at all tonight. And, to my relief, it's been that way for a while.

I rise from Chase's lap. "I'm going to the restroom."

I walk off before anyone acknowledges me. I stand in a short line for the ladies' room. And when I'm done, my past is waiting for me in the hallway.

Sam is leaning against the wall with his hands in his pockets. There's a scowl on his face. He really is so handsome, even when he's upset. I've explored every inch of his muscular body, and he's done the same with mine.

I step in front of him. "Were you waiting for me?"

"Is there something going on between you and Matthews?" he says without preamble. His tone is accusatory.

"I don't know," I answer honestly. Even though my feelings for Sam have changed, it's thrilling to know he's jealous. The power between us shifts.

Right at that moment, Chase rounds the corner, pausing for a split second when he sees Sam standing in front of me. He walks closer.

Sam glares at his teammate. "Is something going on between you and Oakley?" He aims the question at Chase this time.

Chase looks at me, our stares holding. "That depends ..."

"Depends on what?" Sam spits, standing up straighter. An angry flush colors his skin.

"Depends on her."

Sam and Chase turn to look at me. I'm not sure which one is my past and which one is my potential present. They want an answer. I take a second to think about the question.

"Yes," I say boldly, my eyes flicking to Sam. "There's something going on between us." I pause for another moment, looking back at Chase for confirmation.

The images of straddling him and kissing him on Ollie's couch flash through my mind. Our angry kiss at midnight on New Year's Eve.

Chase stays silent, leaving the ball in my court.

"I'm just not sure what it is yet," I add.

Sam scoffs, "Just fucking great." He steps between Chase and me until we're facing each other.

Chase is now at his back, blocked from my view.

"Are you doing this to punish me?"

"No." I shake my head.

"He's my teammate. My *friend*."

For a few seconds, Sam looks at me like I've wounded him. Then, before I can say anything else, he spins around and stalks off, shoulder-checking Chase as he goes.

I sigh.

"What *is* going on between us, Chase?"

He takes a step closer. "I don't know."

The door to the men's room opens, reminding me we're in a hallway.

"Did you need to use the restroom?" I ask now that it's free.

He shakes his head. "I was coming to find you."

"Me?"

"You." His tone is sure and determined.

He takes another step closer, crowding me against the wall. Something has shifted between us tonight. The hallway is hot and narrow. He grabs the bill of his cap and rotates it slowly

until it's facing backward and no longer in the way. His eyes travel over the features of my face as he brushes a lock of my hair back, tucking it behind my earlobe. His fingertip trails along my jawline until it lands beneath my chin, tipping it upward. The space between us shrinks further.

A shiver travels up my spine as he takes control, touching me in a way he hasn't before. I'm not sure what's about to happen. I'm not sure what I *want* to happen. All I know is, I'm putty in his hands right now.

"Do you have plans on Monday?" he murmurs. His lips are mere inches away.

People are moving around us. I know they're there, but I'm not seeing them.

"Monday ..." I whisper, trying to think. "No."

"Let me take you out for your birthday?"

"Okay," I mumble, thinking I'd agree to anything he asked of me right now.

I don't know who this person is standing inches from me. But he's looking at me with molten eyes. The shield I'm so used to seeing—the one I can never read—is down, allowing me a glimpse inside. And I like what I'm seeing because my old friend is staring at me with need. Like he wants me. Desires me.

Chase watches me for over a minute. We're breathing the same air. I'm trying to understand this magnetic pull I suddenly feel toward him. He pauses in that millisecond before we collide. It seems to be his signature move because he did it the last time we kissed too. It only heightens the anticipation of the connection for me. He eliminates the remaining space between us and crushes his mouth to mine, giving me sweet relief.

When we part, he leans his forehead against mine, and we're both breathing harder.

"It's been too long since we've done that," he growls.

"Way too long," I agree.

He brushes my lips with his one last time and then laces our fingers together, leading me down the hallway and back to our table. My eyes find an empty chair, where Sam once sat. He isn't here anymore. Mike's gone too.

My brother's eyes flit to my hand, where Chase is holding it, and a small smile is on his lips. I look at him questioningly. He just winks and looks away.

I'm not sure what to make of this entire night. No one is acting the way I would expect them to. Not Chase, not my brother, and not Sam.

We don't stay much longer. Chase and I don't get another minute alone, but he and Ollie give Madison and me a ride home. My head is spinning as I stand in front of my dorm and watch them drive away. I keep thinking of Monday and the date I now have on my birthday. It's strange how crazy life can be and how quickly things can change. Anything can happen at any moment, and suddenly, everything is different.

Madison throws her arms around my neck from behind and rests her chin on my shoulder as we both watch the taillights fade, the Bronco carrying Ollie and Chase into the distance.

"Did you have a great birthday party?" she asks. Her voice sounds tired.

"It was amazing," I answer. "Because I had the best party planner." I reach up and squeeze her forearm. I can sense her smile.

"Chase and you ..." Madison trails off, leaving an obvious question mark on the end.

I sigh as I smile, those tingling feelings reemerging in my stomach when I think of him.

"Tell me everything," she demands as we turn to walk into the building.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Chase

I sigh, staring at my eggs as Sam practically slams a skillet down on the stovetop. He's been banging around the kitchen for a good five minutes since he walked down here this morning. He's pissed at me, but he isn't saying it. He's acting like a two-year-old instead, denting a perfectly good pan in the process.

Mike's eyebrows lift as he takes a bite of the breakfast the two of us prepared before the toddler appeared. We didn't make enough eggs for Sam, so he's making his own.

I almost laugh at Mike's expression, but I hold it in, knowing it will only set Sam off even more.

"You have something you need to say to me?" I finally ask my angry roommate, breaking the silence.

Sam spins around until his glare is pointed at me. "Do you have something to say to *me*?" he retorts.

"Not really," I retort.

Mike snickers.

Sam points at him with the spatula. "Shut the fuck up, Mike."

Mike takes a drink of his coffee to hide his smirk.

Sam turns his wrath back on me. "*Oakley*, Chase? *Oakley*? Out of all the girls, you go after mine?"

I bristle at his words. "Oakley isn't yours. She hasn't been yours for a while now."

She was never really yours.

"It doesn't matter," he huffs. "She was mine first."

He's so wrong about that. He doesn't know how wrong he is.

“You broke up.” I state the obvious, trying to stay rational.

One of us needs to keep our heads. Or we’re going to end up throwing fists before the breakfast dishes are washed and put away. It would be so fun, having to explain to Coach why I broke his center’s nose right before our next game of the postseason.

“Haven’t you heard of bro code, Chase? You don’t go after one of your buddy’s girls. One of your *teammate’s* ...”

My jaw tics as I try to keep my temper intact.

“I don’t need a lesson from you on bro code. Plus, why do you care? You haven’t talked about Oakley in months,” I accuse. “The week after you broke up, you had another girl warming your bed. And it hasn’t slowed down since.”

He smirks arrogantly. “You keeping track of my sex life, Matthews?”

“Hardly,” I scoff. “But it’s impossible to miss all the tail you’ve been chasing this semester and last.”

His face turns stormy again. “It doesn’t matter what I’ve done. Oakley’s off-limits to you.” He shifts his stare to Mike. “And you.”

Mike snickers. “All bets are off if she wears that Wonder Woman costume again.”

Mike is kidding.

I’m not.

“This isn’t Sam’s world and the rest of us are just living in it. You don’t have some weird claim on Oakley forever because you dated for a while,” I spit, my temper rising.

“We dated for a year. *Over* a year,” he counters.

“I’ve known her my whole life,” I growl.

I know every different kind of smile she has. I know when she’s lying and when she’s telling the truth. When she’s happy and the times she’s sad. I’ve memorized every line on her face, every shade in her eyes. I could draw the shape of her lips and describe the smell of her skin.

Sam studies me for a few minutes. I meet his stare with a fierce one of my own.

I'm not backing down on this. If it costs me this friendship, Oakley's worth it. The chance to be with her—finally—is worth the risk to me.

"I always knew you had a thing for her," he accuses.

I don't deny it.

"All this time, you were the faithful friend, standing in the shadows, watching and Hoovering. Like a fucking snake waiting to strike." He narrows his angry eyes, his temper boiling despite the seemingly controlled tone he's using.

"I'm not letting you have her," he suddenly declares.

A mirthless laugh escapes my throat. "Well, it's a good thing I don't need your permission. I'm not asking for it. You gave up all rights to Oakley when you dumped her."

"Just remember that ..." He smirks arrogantly.

My brow furrows. "Remember *what*?"

"I dumped *her*. Not the other way around. You, Matthews, have been friend-zoned. She wanted me. She's *always* wanted me. I just need to make her remember that."

He stalks out of the kitchen.

It's like the gauntlet was just thrown down, declaring war. But Sam had better not underestimate me. Because I'm ready to fight this time.

Mike raises an eyebrow as he chews his breakfast. The dry humor he usually displays is long gone, replaced with a serious expression.

"I'm not sure what just happened, but the two of you need to figure it the hell out. And don't bring it on the ice. We need to be a unit, going into the next game. We're right in the middle of playoffs, for fuck's sake."

I know Mike's right, but I'm not giving in to Sam on this.

"His ego is out of control," I argue. "He's an arrogant prick."

Mike nods. “Yep. He always has been. He’s also one of your best friends.”

“Yeah,” I sigh, sitting back in my chair. “But Oakley ...” I trail off.

“Oakley was his first,” Mike reminds me unnecessarily, making me wonder if he’s on Sam’s side.

“She might have been his first ... but I loved her first.”

Mike’s eyes widen at my declaration.

I don’t talk like this about a girl. Ever.

“You’re serious about this?” he asks.

I nod once.

He breathes out a long exhale when he realizes I’m not joking.

“What happens if you shoot your shot and she’s not feeling it? Then, you’ll have lost a friend over a girl.”

“She’s not just a girl,” I say without hesitation. “And she’s worth the risk.”

“The risk of losing a friendship with Sam?” he asks.

“The risk of losing everything.”

A friendship with Sam. A relationship with Oakley. It’s all a gamble, but one I’m finally willing to take.

We don’t talk again as we finish our breakfast. Sam is already gone by the time I gather my gear and Mike and I head to the arena for practice. Our next game is a week away. Third round. Win or go home. If we win, we’re in the Frozen Four. If we lose, we’re done for the year.

Sam and I keep our distance for most of practice. It isn’t until we’re scrimmaging at the end that all hell breaks loose.

I intercept a pass and am skating down the ice with the puck. I pass it forward to Ollie, who’s ahead of me. I take one more glide before someone slams me into the wall from behind. A cheap shot. I’m rattled for a second before I regain my balance and my wits. And then I whip around, ready to throw my gloves to the ice when I see Sam’s face.

Mike and Ben are in between us before I can blink, trying to prevent an escalation. Mike's been on high alert all practice after witnessing what went down at home earlier. And I guess Ben was close enough to see the look on my face to know I was about to throw down with one of our best centers.

"That was a pussy move, Anderson," I yell.

Hitting me from behind was dirty. And he knows it.

"Yeah," he counters with a smirk. "Kind of like the pussy move you made on Oakley."

"I seem to remember you breaking up with my sister," Ollie says to Sam, skating into the mix. "I don't think you have one fucking say in it if Matthews decides to grow a pair and approach her."

"You approve of *him*?" Sam yells incredulously, pointing over at me. "You've been checking me into the wall for months because of Oakley."

He nods unapologetically. "I stayed out of your relationship until you hurt her. Now, it's open season as far as I'm concerned. In fact, I think you've gotten off a little too easy."

"What the hell is going on here?" Coach asks, reentering the arena, his face red with anger.

He left the ice for a minute, missing the hit and the altercation following it.

"Nothing, Coach," a few of us declare.

"Well then, stop talking and start playing," he yells.

The puck drops, and play restarts. Sam doesn't cheap-shot me again. I resist retaliating even though everything in my body is begging for it. But this isn't over. Sam isn't going to let this go.

And I'm not going to let Oakley go.

Not without a fight.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Oakley

I tuck a strand of hair behind my ear for the thirtieth time in the past five minutes. My stomach is in knots. I've checked my appearance in the mirror too many times to count.

"Would you stop fidgeting?" Madison orders, her voice dripping with annoyance. "You're driving me crazy."

"I can't help it," I defend myself. "I'm nervous."

"What are you nervous about? This is Chase. You've known him your whole life."

"That's exactly why it makes me nervous," I admit.

Chase Matthews. The boy who grew up down the block from me. One of my brother's best friends. The boy I've watched for years, but never really saw until recently. And he's supposed to be here any minute to take me on a date. An actual *date*.

The knock on the door startles me from my thoughts. I rise from my sitting position while Madison stays on the couch, watching me with equal parts irritation and amusement. Chase is standing on the threshold when I open the door. His signature scent surrounds me.

"Hi," I say, biting my lip as I look up at him.

His brown hair is thick on top and cut into a fade at the bottom. His jawline is smooth and freshly shaved. He's wearing a navy-blue collared shirt and jeans. The color makes his eyes appear a deeper shade of olive green. Those eyes are watching me when our gazes connect.

An amused tilt angles his lips upward.

I've noticed how good-looking he is before, but he's never scrambled my thoughts or stolen my breath like he is right now.

“Are you ready?” he asks.

I nod, grabbing my purse from the side table, and shaking my head to clear it.

“Hi, Madison,” he says from the doorway. “Bye, Madison.”

She waves a hand in the air with her eyes still on the television. “You kids have fun tonight. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t do.”

“And what wouldn’t you do?” I challenge.

She turns her head and smirks. “Nothing. So, go crazy.”

We all laugh, and I walk into the hallway, locking her inside the dorm room.

Chase and I start toward the elevator, bypassing the stairs this time. We pass by a few of the girls living on my floor. One of their eyes widens when they take in Chase’s appearance. From his sculpted shoulders to his muscular build and handsome face, he garners plenty of attention wherever he goes. Especially inside an all-girls dormitory. I don’t miss the look of envy aimed at me when I say hello to them.

“Where are we going?” I ask inside the elevator.

It’s a small lift to start with. But with Chase inside, the space feels tiny.

“You’ll see,” he says cryptically.

We walk side by side to the truck, and he opens the door for me. I can feel his eyes on my legs and my dress as I climb inside.

I’m quiet for a few blocks once we’re driving, just watching the familiar streets passing by. The soft hum of the radio is playing in the background.

Finally, I speak. “Is this weird to you too?”

Chase chuckles. “What? Going out, just me and you?”

“Yes,” I say. “I’m nervous as hell.”

He glances over, then reaches for my hand, lacing our fingers together and resting them on his thick thigh like it’s the most normal thing in the world. I can feel the warmth of his skin radiating through his jeans.

“Ah, do I make you nervous, Oak?” He’s teasing me.

“Yes,” I admit.

“Good,” he murmurs, glancing from me back to the street. “If you’re nervous, that means tonight means something to you. Happy birthday, by the way.”

My anxiety starts to settle as I realize how nice my hand feels, cocooned within Chase’s. He carries a quiet strength with him that I’ve always admired, and I start to soak some of it up. I feel safe in this truck. I’m comfortable. He’s the friend I’ve always known; he’s just showing me a little different side to him. And so far, I like what I see.

We drive until we’re outside of the campus area and away from all our normal spots. Chase steers his truck into a gravel lot in front of a diner and parks.

He angles toward me. “It doesn’t look like much, but the food is amazing.”

“I trust you,” I say. And surprisingly, I do. “I’m just happy you didn’t take me to Cheerz.”

He purses his lips. “Why would I take you there?”

“Best cheese fries in town,” I answer, stealing Sam’s words.

“We go there all the time. I wanted to go somewhere different. Somewhere we won’t run into anyone we know.”

He has no idea that it was the perfect thing to do.

Chase reluctantly releases my hand, and we climb out of the truck. A few minutes later, we’re seated in a booth next to a large window facing the road. I study the menu.

“How did you find this place?” I ask, perusing my options.

“My mom and I came here after one of my games.”

I decide what I want and then turn my attention to the hockey stud sitting across from me.

“Just your mom?”

Chase is an only child. But he grew up with both parents at home, though I’ve heard rumors that they haven’t been doing so well lately. As far back as I can remember, his dad has never missed one of his games.

He nods.

“Things not going well with your parents?” I inquire.

I remember when we were kids, they would fight a lot at times. Chase would stay at our house intermittently to escape the chaos at his.

“Nope,” he says nonchalantly, like it’s normal. And I guess, for him, it is. “They’re splitting up.”

“Chase ... I’m sorry. I didn’t know.”

He shrugs. “It’s been a long time coming.”

“It still sucks.”

He leans across the table and laces our fingers together again, his thumb stroking my skin. It’s weird, being here with him like this. But at the same time ... it isn’t strange at all.

The waitress appears, and we order our meals. She leaves, but our hands stay connected. We talk about our classes and the next hockey game coming up. He mentions Ollie and the draft this summer. Before I know it, I have a piping hot plate of food in front of me.

I ordered chicken tenders and mashed potatoes with a side of carrots. The first bite of potatoes melts in my mouth. My eyes widen and shoot over to Chase. He’s already watching me with his fork hovering over his plate. He smirks.

“This is amazing,” I say.

He chuckles. “I told you.”

“You did,” I say, shoveling another bite of food in my mouth.

“There’s an Amish farm a few miles north of here. They run this diner. Everything is homemade.”

It’s literally some of the best food I’ve eaten since arriving at college.

“You’ve been keeping this little hidden gem a secret?” I joke.

He’s too busy diving into his meatloaf and mashed potatoes to answer.

A thought crosses my mind. “Or did you bring Ana here?”

Even before Chase asked me out tonight, I’ve been wondering what his status with Ana is. She seems to be everywhere Chase is on campus. At the coffee shop, walking to class with him. And even though I haven’t been to many hockey parties lately, I’m guessing she’s a regular at those too.

I’m holding my breath, waiting for his answer, hoping he didn’t bring her here first. I know it will somehow taint this night if he has. It will feel more like their spot rather than ours.

Chase meets my eyes. “I’ve never brought Ana here. Except for that night I went with her to the sorority thing, we’ve never gone out.”

“That can’t be true,” I scoff. “I’ve seen you all over campus together for weeks. The coffee shop ...”

He smirks, and I suddenly feel exposed. “You’ve been keeping tabs, Oak? Watching me?”

I roll my eyes, trying to downplay it. “Who could miss you? You’re taller than all the other students, and you hockey players always have an entourage around to satisfy your large egos.”

He chuckles. “Is that right?”

“Yep,” I answer between bites. “But I guess I shouldn’t assume that you’re dating Ana because one girl is never enough, right, Chase?”

His thick, dark eyebrows lift. “Wow, you don’t think very highly of me, Oakley. Or is it just hockey players in general?”

“Hockey players,” I confirm. “You’re guilty by association.”

We eat in silence for a few seconds, and I'm afraid I've ruined the good mood of the night.

"That's where you're wrong, Oakley." When I look up, Chase has a serious expression on his face. "I'm not like that. I'm not Sam."

It feels like time stands still for a moment when Chase mentions the elephant in the room.

I spear a carrot and twirl it on the end of my fork. "Why did you ask me out tonight, Chase?"

"I wanted to take you somewhere for your birthday."

That's sweet that he wanted to make my day special. But it still doesn't clue me in on his intentions.

"What are we doing?" I push, my eyes finally reaching his face.

"Well, right now, we're eating," he chides.

I lay my fork on my plate. "You know what I mean."

"I do." He pauses to wash down a bite of food with a drink of water. Then, he sets his utensils aside and rests his elbows on the table, giving me his full attention. "Let me make this clear, Oakley. I asked you out tonight because I couldn't stand the thought of you spending your birthday with anyone other than me. And I didn't bring you to a place I bring other girls because there are no other girls besides you. You might not realize how amazing you are, but just because you're blind to it doesn't mean I am. There's nowhere else I'd rather be right now and no one else I'd rather be with. Are we clear?"

I can't speak, so I nod instead.

He starts eating again, finishing what's left on his plate as I wrap my mind around his words. Then, he finishes my food, too, after I tell him I'm full. Just like always. For as long as I can remember, either Ollie or Chase would eat my leftovers. It's such a common occurrence that it feels normal. But now, there's an intimacy attached to it as well that wasn't there before.

I'm staring across the table at the boy I knew who became this man right before my eyes. And when I wasn't looking, he started transforming from a mere friend into something more. I don't know how it happened, and I don't know when it happened—maybe a little bit at a time for me. But there's a warmth I feel in my chest as I watch him that is growing into a full-blown flame. I'm afraid, at some point, it's going to become an inferno. And that scares me to death. Because I don't know if I can survive it if it burns out suddenly somewhere down the line or fully ignites, consuming me altogether.

Chase disappears to the restroom for a few minutes. And when he comes back, the waitress is behind him with a piece of chocolate cake—my favorite—with one solitary candle burning in the center. She sets it down in front of me as Chase slides back into his seat.

"Make a wish, Oakley," he murmurs.

I think it's already coming true.

I close my eyes and blow out the candle to seal my newest wish. Then, with a fork each, Chase and I eat every crumb of that cake. And it's just as delicious as the rest of the meal was.

"I'm so full," I say, leaning back and cradling my stomach as Chase signs the credit card receipt.

"Me too," he says.

But I know him. He could keep eating if there was more food in front of him.

"Wait," he says, stopping my movement when I start to stand.

My brow furrows.

"The other night, when I didn't bring you roses at the club ..."

I shake my head, cutting him off, "I didn't expect you to bring me anything. I was teasing you."

"I didn't bring you flowers because I didn't want to give you the same thing as everyone else. And I already had a present for you. But I wanted to wait for tonight, when we were alone," he confesses.

He pulls a flat package out of his pocket and slides it across the table. I lift it up, and he starts laughing.

“I’m not the best at wrapping.” He’s embarrassed.

I’m speechless. Again.

Chase is right; he’s horrible at wrapping. The thing is a mess. But somehow, it means even more to me, knowing he did it himself, no matter the result.

I tear the paper off to reveal a necklace. It’s sterling silver and delicate. And in the middle of the strand is my name.

For years, I’ve complained that my name is so unique that I can’t ever find jewelry with it. He was listening, I guess. All this time, he’s been listening. And I always wear silver jewelry. Earrings, bracelets, necklaces ... they’re all silver. I prefer it to gold. Chase knows that. Because Chase knows me.

He *sees* me.

There are tears in my eyes when I look up at him.

“I had it made,” he murmurs.

He’s always so confident with just a hint of arrogance. But right now, he’s sheepish. Unsure.

“I love it,” I choke out. “You couldn’t have gotten me anything better.”

We both stand, and I lift my hair while he fastens it around my neck, fumbling for a minute because his fingers are so big and the necklace is so delicate.

We leave the restaurant, but I stop him before he opens the passenger door.

“Thank you,” I whisper, “for dinner, and for the present. For taking me out tonight.”

I’m overwhelmed. By him. By the way he’s making me feel. By everything he’s doing.

I elevate on my toes and kiss his cheek, lingering there for a moment to drink him in. His smell. The warm feel of his skin. This entire night.

We leave the restaurant and drive home. I don't talk in the truck, and neither does Chase, but it's a comfortable silence.

"Do you want to come in for a while?" I ask when he pulls into the lot in front of my dorm.

I'm not sure what I'm asking. I only know I want more time with him. I don't want him to go. He must feel the same because he accepts. He parks the truck, and we walk back into the building and onto my floor together. The shared space is quiet and mostly dark when I open my front door. Madison left a lamp turned on across the room for me. And there's a soft glow beneath her bedroom door, but it's closed, and she doesn't come out if she hears us enter.

I throw my keys on the counter and turn toward Chase.

"Do you want to watch TV?" I ask, keeping my voice low since Madison is here.

Chase slowly shakes his head, stepping closer to me. The space shrinks, and the air thickens. He's looking at me in a new way, a hungry gleam in his olive-colored eyes. He pushes my hair back away from my face and cradles the sides of my head with both his hands.

My heart is pounding in my chest as his warm breath drifts across my mouth. He smells like the peppermint he ate as we left the restaurant.

"Thank you for dinner," I whisper.

He inches closer. "You're welcome."

"Tonight was perfect," I say.

"You're perfect," he murmurs.

His eyes drop to my lips. And then he's kissing me. It isn't tentative or searching, like that night in Ollie's apartment. And it isn't angry, like it was on New Year's Eve. It's passionate and sure. He doesn't hold back, and neither do I.

We're moving backward as our lips are still colliding, our tongues sliding against one another and my fingers in his hair. When we pull apart to collect a breath, our eyes stay connected, like there's an invisible line linking us together. I

don't blink because I don't want to miss a moment of the way he's looking at me. No one has ever looked at me like this before. Not even Sam when things were good between us.

I make a decision in that moment, my hand taking his. I lead him into my bedroom and softly close the door behind me. My back is plastered to the wooden barrier as we stand across from each other. I automatically reach for the jewelry he put around my neck, fingering it. My room is dark, except for the glow from the twinkling lights I left on over my bed. It's enough illumination to trace the hard edges of his jaw and the outline of his lips. The liquid-moss color of his eyes.

His brow furrows for a second.

"What?" I ask.

"I don't want to move too fast."

My lips tilt into a soft grin. I step forward until my hands are sliding up his chest and around his neck. "I've known you practically my entire life. It's not too fast."

He nods slowly. "It's been a slow burn for me, for sure. But you've always had your eyes ... elsewhere."

Elsewhere is code for Sam. For years, I had my attention on his teammate.

"Maybe my eyes were closed for years, Chase. But they're open now. And I see you."

"Yeah?" he asks.

"Yeah."

The space between us disappears. His kiss is harder this time. More demanding. He's nipping at my bottom lip and tugging it with his teeth. He's not cautious, giving me everything instead.

He unwraps me like a present, one piece at a time. Our clothes are grouped together on the floor. His shoes and socks, his shirt, then my dress. His jeans rest on top of the pile. The colored part of his eyes is swallowed by blackness when he sees the panties I wore tonight.

I shiver as he runs a fingertip along the lacy band across my lower stomach.

“Did you wear these for me?” His whisper is hoarse and broken, and his eyes don’t leave the delicate scrap of material covering my most private parts from him.

“Yes,” I freely admit.

“Did you think you were gonna get lucky tonight?”

“I didn’t know what to expect from tonight,” I admit. “But since that day in the tree house, every time I see these panties in my drawer, I always think of you.”

“You look fucking hot in purple,” he practically groans.

“Plum,” I correct.

His fingertip slips beneath the band another inch, and my skin pebbles beneath his touch. He stays right there while my body is screaming for him to slide lower and relieve the ache that’s growing into a full-blown need. But he’s in no hurry. It’s like he’s trying to memorize the way I look and feel right now.

I start tracing the lines of his contoured chest. His muscles are bigger, more defined than when he was in high school. All traces of the boy he once was have been erased and enhanced. My old friend is all man now, down to the tuft of dark brown hair in between his pecs and the trail that disappears into his boxer briefs.

“Maybe we should get you a pair of plum briefs,” I moan as his finger slips lower.

“That would go over well in the locker room.” Sarcasm drips from his words.

He parts my slit and slides through the slickness that’s there. I can hear it lubricating his movements as he moves down to my opening, circling it a time or two before traveling back to my throbbing clit. He flicks it a few times lightly, teasingly. Then, he removes his hand from my panties. I groan in frustration.

The deep timbre of his chuckle is the only sound in my room other than our heavy breathing.

“Patience, baby. I’ve waited a long time for this.” His voice is pure gravel at this point.

Baby.

His finger disappears into his mouth. His eyes close, like I’m the best thing he’s ever tasted.

When his attention is on me again, his hands slide beneath the straps of my bra. The pads of his fingers are calloused and rough. They feel good against my skin. He skims the top of each breast, where I spill from the cups. Then, he follows the material around back and expertly flicks the clasp until the bra is falling down my arms and joining the rest of our clothes on the floor.

“You’re a little too good at that,” I say, lifting my eyebrow.

He smirks arrogantly.

“Practice makes perfect?” There’s a question mark on the end of it.

I’m wondering how experienced he really is.

He seems to realize my concerns. “I haven’t been with as many girls as you think.”

His hands mold around my breasts. I’m more than a handful, even for him. His thumbs brush across my nipples, his eyes glued to the motion as they harden beneath his touch. His mouth dips down until he’s sucking on a stiffened peak, and my fingers automatically slide through his thick hair to keep him there.

“Fuck, Oakley,” he moans against my skin. “You’re so sexy. So beautiful.”

The lighting in here is perfect. The soft glow from over the bed creates a romantic setting all on its own. I grow impatient as Chase plays with me.

My hands drop to the sides of his briefs and tug until they’re lowered on his hips. His cock juts out, hard and proud in between us, resting on his lower abdomen and extending all the way to his belly button. My eyes widen as my hand slips

around him. My thumb doesn't quite meet my fingers when I grasp him. He's not only long, but thick too.

"You're huge," I whisper-shout.

He chuckles against the skin of my neck, where he's nibbling and licking me. "Thanks, baby."

"I mean it, Chase. That thing is not going to fit in me."

"Oh, it'll fit," he murmurs. I can feel his smile against my skin. "I promise. We'll go slow."

Chase pulls away to push his boxer briefs all the way off, kicking them to the floor. He hesitates when his fingers start to lower my panties.

"I almost hate to take these off."

"Well, we don't have to do anything," I tease, moving back a step and releasing his heavy cock.

He practically growls, grabbing me by the hips and pulling me closer. The scrap of material is gone in seconds, and he tosses me on the bed. He pauses, just standing there, staring down at me.

"What's wrong?" I ask, lifting to my elbows when he freezes.

"Absolutely nothing."

"What are you doing?"

"I'm looking at you," he murmurs, his eyes sweeping across my body. His words and the expression on his face are reverent.

"No one's ever looked at me the way you do," I admit.

He strokes himself slowly, his hand moving up and down his erection. "And no one else ever will," he promises. "Are you sure you want to do this tonight?"

I nod. "I'm more than sure."

I don't think I've ever wanted something more.

Chase starts to reach for the wallet in the back pocket of his jeans. I stop him.

“You guys get tested for the team, right?” I ask.

He nods.

“I started the pill over Christmas break. I’ve only been with ... one person.” I don’t want to say Sam’s name right now. I don’t want to make him a part of this moment. “I’ve never had sex without a condom before, but we can. If you want.”

In some weird way, I feel like this is something I can give to Chase that I never gave to Sam. A way to make our time together different and special.

“You’re sure?” he says.

I nod.

He climbs on the bed. I love the heaviness of his body when it presses me into the mattress. He’s resting part of his weight on his elbows on either side of my head. He kisses the tip of my nose and then brushes his mouth across my lips.

“Just so you know,” he whispers against my mouth, “I haven’t been with anyone since we came to college.”

“What?” I’m surprised as I lean back so I can see his face. My fingers trace the line of his jaw.

“No one else,” he confesses. “You’re who I wanted.”

And I know he’s had plenty of opportunities. There’s been more women than just Ana clamoring for his attention.

“I’ve pictured you like this so many times,” he adds.

“How do you do that?” I ask.

“Do what, baby?”

“Make me feel so special.”

His eyes soften. And then he kisses me. His touches start off sweet and turn to fire in an instant. Hands and lips are everywhere. His finger glides across my clit again and then penetrates my opening, stroking all the way to his knuckle before he adds a second finger. My thighs are sticky by the time he’s lining up his cock at my entrance. It’s only been a

few months since the last time I had sex, but I feel like it's my first time again when he pushes into me.

He's so big.

"Breathe," he murmurs when he feels me tense.

The flared head of his cock is in, then maybe an inch of his shaft, but we have a long way to go. Chase nuzzles my neck, finding a spot right beneath my ear that drives me wild. He concentrates on it until he feels me relax, and then he slides forward a little more.

"You're so tight, Oak. But you're soaking wet too. You feel so good."

"Have you ever ..." My words die off as I lose my nerve to ask the question on the tip of my tongue.

"Have I ever what?"

"Had sex without a condom?" I finish.

"No. Only you, Oakley."

That small reassurance makes me relax even more.

Chase goes slow, just like he promised. He pushes inside of me one inch at a time until he's fully seated. And then he stays there for a minute, allowing my body to adjust.

I feel so full, like he's spearing me in half.

"You okay?" he asks, kissing my face and then gently biting my earlobe.

His hand starts tracing my nipple, and it hardens further. He leans down to lick it.

"Yeah."

"Can I move yet?" He waits for me to answer.

I nod.

Chase pulls out a few inches, then pushes back in. His movements are slow and smooth. He keeps working me until the slight sting is overtaken by a throbbing ache. And before I know it, I'm begging him to go faster.

We move together like this, my legs drifting around his waist. His pelvis tilts until every thrust is brushing across my clit in the most perfect way. I clench around him, and he groans.

“Are you close?” he murmurs.

He’s struggling to maintain control. I can see it in the strain on his face and feel it in the tightening of his muscles.

“I’m getting there,” I say. “But it’s okay.”

I’m giving him permission to let go and not wait for me.

His expression shifts into anger, like I’ve offended him. He stops moving, but leaves himself inside of me. “Absolutely fucking not. You always come first.”

His finger lands on my clit, rubbing it. Stroking it along one side and then the other. Finally, he starts going in circles. He watches my face for clues, varying the speed and pressure until I’m pleading with him to keep going. I’m breathing harder, and I tighten around his cock that is still inside of me. He slides in and out of me again when I’m on the edge. I explode a moment later, a thousand bolts of lightning rushing through my lower stomach and groin and traveling up my spine. I’m panting as Chase starts pounding into me. It doesn’t hurt though. It only feels good now. He hikes one of my legs up higher on my chest right before he stops while buried deep inside of me. I feel him swelling, and the space between my legs becomes even wetter with his release. And I realize I’ve never experienced anything this intimate with anyone else.

Not even Sam.

Chase rests more of his body weight on me with his head in that space between my shoulder and neck while he catches his breath. He tightens his arms, like he can’t get close enough.

“Was it good for you?” he asks, his breath warming my neck.

“It was amazing, Chase,” I say honestly.

My fingernails trail up and down his back.

He pulls away a little, smoothing the strands away from my face. His hair is tousled, and his cheeks and chest are flushed from exertion. He’s never looked sexier to me.

“The best sex I’ve ever had,” I murmur.

“Really?”

I can tell he’s pleased by the arrogant smirk on his face.

“Don’t make me regret saying that,” I groan.

He laughs and rests his head on my chest while I run my fingers through his hair.

I think back to the times Sam exploded before I did and then left me throbbing and unsatisfied. I always thought that was just what happened sometimes. And I’m sure it does occasionally. But I never realized he was a selfish lover until now.

We reluctantly separate and clean ourselves up. I quickly learn that sex without a condom is a lot messier. I don’t tell Chase that he left me a little sore and achy from his massive size. I don’t think his ego can handle another declaration like that tonight.

When we crawl back into bed together, he holds me, and we talk until we fall asleep. And the last thought I have is that nothing is ever going to be the same again.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Oakley

“Who knew Chase was hung like a horse?!” Madison exclaims.

“Shh!” I grab her shoulder with one hand and slap my palm over her mouth with the other. I glance around campus, but no one seems to be paying attention to us. “I should’ve never told you.”

Once I’m sure she’s under control, I remove my hand.

“Who are you kidding?” My best friend smirks. We start moving again, walking from class to our dorm. “You can’t keep a secret like that from me.”

I roll my eyes. Mostly because she’s right.

“So, he’s huge,” she continues at a much lower volume. “But how was it?”

I sigh, trying to search for the right words. But I guess the dreamy expression on my face answers for me. Or the crimson color of my cheeks.

“That good, huh?” Madison fills in the blanks.

I nod. “That. Good.”

“I always kind of thought he had a thing for you,” she admits.

I narrow my eyes incredulously. “What gave him away? Was it the way he always used to boss me around? Or the times he acted like he was a stand-in for my brother? Or maybe it was when I tried to kiss him senior year and he couldn’t run away fast enough?”

“Silly girl.” She tsks. “That was all foreplay.”

“And the kiss?” I lift an eyebrow defiantly. I don’t agree with her theory.

“Would you kiss a guy you liked if you knew he was using you to get the attention of another girl?” she counters.

“Well ... no.”

“Exactly.” She side-eyes me smugly, as if the case is settled.

We enter the brick building that houses our place and take the stairs. Madison insists on walking the stairs every single time, saying it keeps her butt high and tight. Following behind her, I have to agree it’s working. But then again, she’s always been a knockout.

We walk down the hallway to our room.

“Are we going to Richter’s tonight?” my best friend asks while unlocking our door.

“I’m planning on it,” I answer.

Will and his roommates are having people over to watch a Bruins game. It won’t be as big of a gathering as some of their parties, but I’m sure there will be plenty of people there. Girls and guys.

“Are you going with your new boyfriend?” Mads teases good-naturedly.

I laugh. “He’s not my boyfriend. Not officially.”

“Oh, so is this a *friends with benefits* situation?” she asks.

I dump my backpack next to the couch and head into the kitchen to grab a glass of water.

“I don’t know what it is,” I answer honestly.

Chase and I haven’t gotten that far. He spent the night with me on my birthday and left the next morning. Both of us have been busy with classes all week.

“So, am I third-wheeling it tonight or not?” Madison asks, flopping down on the couch.

I frown. Come to think of it, I haven’t heard from Chase all day. It’s not that I expect us to be connected at the hip now, but

it's the first time since we hooked up that he's been silent for this long. For the past three days, there was a *good morning* text waiting for me every time I opened my eyes, and the messages would continue throughout the day. I didn't realize how much I liked it until my phone was silent this morning.

"I haven't talked to him today," I admit. "Let me text him."

I remove my phone from my bag and send a message. I ask Chase how his day is going and if he's going out tonight. I'm sure he's planning to be there since his teammate is hosting and hockey is involved.

He doesn't answer right away. It's a full hour before I get a reply.

Chase: I'm back home. Trouble with my parents.

I frown while I'm staring at my phone.

Me: I hope everything is okay.

He doesn't answer. Chase is often a man of few words, but this seems off, even for him.

Madison and I get ready for the party and then walk over to Richter's house. Most of the team is there, including my brother.

"Hey," Ollie says, giving me a side hug and tipping his chin at Madison. "How did your stats test go?"

"Okay, I guess," I say with a sigh. I'm not sure how I did on the exam, but I'll find out next week when we get them back.

I don't recognize the brunette standing by my brother's side. But she wraps her hand around his arm possessively. I don't like it when random women try to claim my brother in front of me. It's annoying. I'm his sister, not competition.

I shift my eyes back to Ollie, dismissing the woman altogether. My brother is watching me with an amused smirk, likely reading the thoughts in my mind or just the expression on my face.

"We're gonna get something to drink," I announce, grabbing Madison's wrist and tugging her along with me.

My best friend leans in closer to my ear and speaks low. “Who’s the girl with Ollie?”

I roll my eyes. “Don’t know, don’t care,” I answer. “She’ll be gone by tomorrow anyway.”

She snickers.

Ben and Charlie are in the kitchen when we walk into the room, along with Sam.

“There she is!” Sam’s smile widens.

I look behind me to see who he’s talking about, my eyes narrowing when I realize he means me. Sam and I are on good terms now, but his over-the-top greeting was still unexpected.

“Here we are,” I deadpan, dropping my hold on Madison. “What’s on tap for the night?”

Sam opens the fridge and moves aside so I can see my drink options while Charlie digs through a bag of food on the counter.

“I brought a case of Amstel Light,” Sam announces.

“They let you buy beer?” Madison asks, shaking her head.

The guys get away with murder in this town. Sam can purchase alcohol regardless of his age just because he can shoot a puck into a net.

“Yep,” he answers, one side of his mouth tipped in an arrogant grin.

“A cold beer sounds perfect,” I admit, glancing over at Madison.

“I’ll take one too.” She reaches for a bottle, twisting the cap off. “Thanks, Sam.”

Madison winks at my ex and then walks over to Charlie. He’s unwrapping a footlong sub. She steals the large pickle lying next to the sandwich and takes a bite.

“Madison,” the giant goalie scolds, “you might be hot, but I’ll end you if you mess with my food.”

She smiles and takes another bite, wiping the pickle juice from her lower lip. “Bring it on, big boy.”

He swipes it from her hand, and in two bites, the rest of it disappears. Charlie smirks victoriously.

Madison shoves his broad chest. The giant doesn’t move an inch.

“Haven’t you heard that sharing is caring?” she whines, eyeing his sandwich.

We didn’t eat anything before coming here tonight.

“I’ve got something I can share with you later, blondie.” He winks. He dips his chin and gives my friend a smoldering look. “Second room on the right, upstairs.” He pauses on his way into the living room, looking back over his shoulder. “And it’s *a lot* bigger than that pickle.”

Ben laughs as he takes his sub and follows Charlie into the other room. “If you’re not into goalies ... my room’s across the hall, Mads.”

I laugh as Madison rolls her beautiful blue eyes.

“In your dreams, Sims.”

“You are in my dreams, baby!” he yells as he keeps moving. “Every. Single. Night.”

Madison laughs under her breath and follows behind them.

Sam hands me a bottle of beer, but won’t release it when I grab the bottom. I stop and look up at him. He’s watching me with a small smile on his face and a challenge in his eye. I tilt my head in confusion as I realize he’s flirting with me.

“What’s this?” I ask.

“You asked for one of my beers,” he replies smoothly.

He and I both know I’m not referring to the bottle in my hand.

I lift an eyebrow, meeting his stare head-on. “Well, are you going to give it to me?”

“Oh, I’ll give it to you all right.” He smirks, finally relinquishing his hold on the Amstel.

“Okay, Charlie,” I deadpan, equating his behavior to his teammate’s.

I twist the cap, releasing the pressure. A tiny vapor of white evaporates from the top as I take a sip, my eyes still on Sam. He’s got my attention. I’ve seen him in action enough to know he’s throwing down game on me right now. I’m just curious as to why.

His stormy eyes fall to my lips as I take another sip, the cold ale sliding down my throat. A slow blush makes its way up my chest and neck to my cheeks. His attention has always been addictive. When he notices me, I feel like I’m basking in the warmth of the sun. Everything is bright and alive. Vibrant. But in the next instant, I remember what it was like when he shut the light off in the alleyway that night outside of Cheerz. I was left in the dark, where it was cold and lonely. And it took me weeks—months—to find my way back.

I look away. “Thanks for the beer.” I walk into the living room, where the Bruins game is in the middle of the first period.

Looking around, I see all the seats are taken. I start to slide down to the floor with my back against the wall when I feel Sam approaching. He has two chairs from the dining room in his hands. He sets one down for me and places the second next to it. I settle into the seat, and he joins me after retrieving his drink. I can see Ollie watching us from the corner of my eye.

Taking a deep breath, I gather myself before emptying the bottle in one long swallow. As soon as I set it on the floor, it vanishes. And a minute later, Sam’s handing me a fresh one. My eyes meet his, a million questions lying between us.

He swipes the pad of his thumb across my cheek affectionately. “You’re welcome.” His murmur is low and rumbling.

I shift my gaze to the television screen and pretend to watch the game. But I’m thrown by Sam and his sudden attentiveness. It reminds me of the first night he kissed me, when his attention was centered on me. That night feels like eons ago. I was a different girl then. I was innocent and wide-

eyed, happy to accept any scraps Sam might give to me. But now ... now, things are different. I'm different. War wounds change you. Especially when you're dealing with the guy who inflicted them in the first place.

Boston scores the first goal of the game during a power play with one minute left in the first period. The room erupts, including the man beside me. We watch the time expire, and the teams exit the ice. Everyone starts to shift around, but I can't focus on anything, except Sam. He's wearing the same cologne he wore our senior year. I haven't smelled it in a while. It's funny how a scent can bring back an onslaught of memories with just one small sniff.

My mind starts to run through our senior year, the summer, and the start of college. As I'm thinking, I realize all my memories involve Chase, too, and my thoughts immediately shift to him. There's a warmth that accompanies images of Chase. My childhood friend. My defender. And now, my lover. He wrecked me the other night in the best way. It was so unexpected, yet so smooth and easy, transitioning from friends to lovers.

I run my finger along the silver jewelry around my neck absentmindedly. I haven't removed it since he gave it to me.

Is that what Chase and I are now? Lovers?

"It's hot in here," Sam suddenly announces, stealing my attention. He puts his hand on my thigh. "Come outside with me?"

My eyes are stuck on the spot where he's touching me, and my finger is still tangled in my necklace. The skin of my thigh feels warm beneath his palm, even through my jeans.

"Why?" I ask.

"Because I need some air," he responds, giving me his most convincing grin. "And I want you to keep me company."

I hesitate.

He dips his head until my eyes are pulled to his. "Come on, Oak." He says it so innocently.

But Sam is far from innocent.

The blond hockey player's hand disappears from my leg as he stands. I don't know if I'm irritated or indifferent when I find myself rising to my feet and following behind him, an imported beer bottle dangling between my fingers.

The back door hinges creak as Sam opens it. He holds it for me as I slip across the threshold. I stop at the edge of the deck, leaning against the railing and staring out into the dark backyard. Sam moves into the spot beside me. His shoulder is touching mine, but we're both facing forward. There's tension between us, an unspoken awkwardness that's new. I sense Sam wants something from me. I'm just not sure what it is yet. But I'm curious enough to be standing here right now.

There's a knot in my throat as I swallow down another drink of beer. I rest my free hand on the wooden railing. I tense when Sam slips his hand on top of mine, lacing our fingers together, just like he used to. He tightens his hold when I start to pull away.

"Wait, Oakley," he begs.

I freeze. "What are you doing, Sam?"

I can't look at him. I'm afraid of what I'll see if I do. And I'm scared of how it might make me feel.

"I've missed you," he murmurs, penetrating the darkness.

"Since when?" My eyes narrow.

"Since you walked away from me."

I pull my hand out of his grasp. We both shift until we're facing each other. My expression is guarded, but he captures my gaze, holding me prisoner.

"That's funny ... I seem to remember you being the one to walk away," I say defiantly.

His eyes search between mine—looking for what, I don't know.

"And I've regretted it every day since," he counters.

His pupils are dilated from the darkness, but I can still see the gray color surrounding the black.

“When was it that you missed me, Sam? Was it when you were hooking up with every other coed on campus? The redhead? Because I don’t recall you acting all that broken up over us.”

He sighs while dropping his hand down to his side, taking mine with it. He has me in a firm grip while my arm hangs there limply.

“I made a mistake,” he counters.

“You’ve made a lot of mistakes,” I say, thinking about all the rumors about him over the weeks. All the women I saw him with. The way my phone stayed silent after we broke up.

He grips my chin. There’s a desperation in his touch that I’ve never felt from him before. The furrow between my eyes deepens. He slides his fingers to my cheek, cupping the side of my face.

“I was an idiot.”

I stay quiet, my mind racing in a hundred different directions all at once. My gaze is unfocused and stuck on his chest. I guess that’s why I miss it when he leans in. His lips are on mine before I can register the feel of them. He’s taking from me, begging me to give something back to him. He kisses me while I stand frozen in place.

When my mind finally engages with the present, I start to push him away. At the same time, the back door crashes against the side of the house. I startle, my head whipping over to see Chase standing there.

A very enraged Chase.

His hands are fisted at his sides, and his nostrils are flaring as his gaze flicks between Sam and me. His eyes are incensed and accusatory. I can see the fire in them, even through the shadow his ball cap creates over his face.

Fuck.

This must look awful ... especially after the night we just spent together.

I take a step toward him, and his jaw tightens, stopping me.

“First chance you get, huh?” Chase spits, his words directed at Sam. “As soon as my back is turned, you make your move.”

The blood in my veins turns to ice.

“I could say the same to you,” Sam growls.

Both men look feral.

Chase takes a step closer, but his attention is completely on my ex-boyfriend. I’m left forgotten on the sidelines.

“I told you I wasn’t gonna let you have her,” Sam continues.

I lift my eyebrows. “Excuse me?”

“And I told you”—Chase takes another step, both men ignoring me—“that it’s not up to you. She isn’t yours. She never was.”

I watch in horror as Chase throws the first punch, connecting with the side of Sam’s mouth. His lip splits, blood spilling out. Sam smirks as he wipes the blood from his mouth with the back of his hand. He scoffs before he pounces, landing a fist on Chase’s cheek.

“Stop!” I yell as the door crashes open again.

Ollie rushes out with Ben, Charlie, Mike, and Madison on his heels. My brother bear-hugs Chase from behind before he can throw another punch while Mike nearly tackles Sam. Charlie stands in between the two warriors, separating them with his large frame.

Madison is by my side, her arm around my waist as my heart pounds in my chest.

Chase angrily shakes out of Ollie’s hold. He won’t look at me.

“What the fuck are you guys doing?” Charlie accuses. “We’ve got a game tomorrow. Don’t you want to play in the Frozen Four? And you two choose now to go after each other?”

Chase is still breathing hard, his wrath palpable. He spins on his heel and stalks back into the house without another word. I hesitate for a second before I'm running after him. He's through the crowd gathered in the living room and out the front door before I can catch him.

"Wait!" I yell, grabbing his sleeve.

He turns toward me.

I freeze.

For the rest of my life, I will never forget the look in his eyes right at this moment. It's boiling with rage and resentment. His gaze is full of betrayal. But the thing that flattens me the most is the mountain of hurt lying there. I can't hide from it. It's staring me in the face.

Has it always been there and I never noticed it before?

"It wasn't what it looked like," I insist. Now, I'm the one who sounds desperate.

The fight bleeds from Chase in an instant, his shoulders dropping in defeat. I hate the hopelessness I see in his expression now even more than the hurt. His cheek is swollen where Sam struck him.

"It's always gonna be him, isn't it?" he asks. His voice is barely above a whisper and laced with despair.

"No." I shake my head, taking a step forward.

He steps back, keeping distance between us.

"It is," he whispers. "No matter what I do, it'll always be him, lurking there in the back of your mind."

I shake my head, but I can tell he doesn't believe me.

He turns and walks away. I start to follow, but someone grabs my arm. I spin to see Sam holding on to me. My brother, his teammates, and Madison are all standing on the porch behind him, ready to come to my aid and probably making sure Chase and Sam don't fight again tonight.

I shake loose from his hold. "What, Sam? What do you want from me?"

For so long, Sam was all that I dreamed about. I couldn't see past his broad chest and crooked grin.

I hate the tears filling my eyes, one or two spilling over my lower lids before I can stop them. All the hurt and confusion is tumbling out, and I can't stop it.

Sam.

Chase.

"I just want *you*," Sam persists.

I turn my head away when he tries to wipe my tears. Tears that he caused.

I hear a door close and Chase's engine rumble as it starts somewhere down the street.

"You don't want me." I shake my head.

Sam grips both my arms now, trying to convince me. Ollie takes a step forward, but Madison stops him.

"We were so good together, Oakley. We were so good. Don't you remember?"

I take a step back, slipping from his grip as I hear Chase drive away. I wipe the tears from my cheeks as I watch my ex. His dirty-blond hair is a mess. His lip is swollen and bleeding, but his face is still a mask of perfection. There is a halo around him from the porch light.

"I remember, Sam," I whisper gently, reaching up to touch his cheek. He leans into my palm. "I remember everything. The good *and* the bad. But mostly ... I remember the way your back looked as you walked away from me. From us. That's the image I remember the most when I think about you and me these days."

He doesn't speak as I rise on my toes and kiss his cheek. But I think deep down he knows it's a kiss goodbye. Then, I turn and walk away.

Madison falls into step beside me without a word. And we walk home. She climbs into my car when we reach the dorms and rides alongside me as I search for Chase. And she is next

to me when we return to the dorm much later, unsuccessful in our attempt to find him.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Chase

Everything is off from the moment we enter the ice. The entire team is out of sync. My bad attitude spills over into my performance, and I spend plenty of time in the bin, racking up penalties and giving the other team multiple opportunities to beat us. Ollie is the only solid player tonight. He keeps us in the game. But in the end, it isn't enough. We lose 3–2. One win away from the Frozen Four.

I blame myself for the loss, but I couldn't find the will to fix things with Sam before the game. If I had, maybe team morale would've been better. Maybe we could've found a way to win.

But fuck Sam. I don't know if I'll ever mend fences with him. I'm not sorry for hitting him. I only wish Ollie and the guys had been delayed a little longer, so I could've wreaked some real havoc on his pretty-boy face.

I had driven back to school yesterday because I didn't want to go another night without seeing Oakley. And I needed to get some distance from my parents' drama. I walked into Richter's house, eager to find her. Excited. But she wasn't in the living room. She wasn't in the kitchen or any of the bathrooms either. Then, I saw them—Sam and Oakley—standing outside on the deck.

Together.

Alone.

I watched them from the window. I saw him slip his hand over hers on the railing and keep it there. I didn't see her fight too hard to remove his hold. I couldn't hear what they were saying, but the look on their faces spoke loud enough. And then, when he kissed her, rage flashed across my vision. Years

of hurt and frustration over that girl had all come boiling to the surface. And I couldn't wait to get my hands on Anderson.

My parents are waiting for me when I leave the locker room with my wet hair and my sour expression, my mom standing on the opposite side of the hall from my dad. They are in a cold war right now. I'm stuck in the middle. They fight over everything. Money, the house, the cars ... me. Especially me.

My mom called me, crying, the other night. Actually, she was a hysterical mess, which is why I went home. She found out my dad is dating some woman. It was news to me, but really, I don't care either way. And I don't really understand why she cares so much. They're separated and getting a divorce. She hates my dad at this point. They hate each other, but she doesn't want to see him with someone new. It's messed up. The whole situation has drained the life out of me.

I make the obligatory small talk for a few minutes, not saying much to either of them. They think I'm upset about the game. That's only part of it. A small part, but I'll gladly use it as an excuse right now. It's ironic really. Me with my hockey obsession, uncaring about a loss. And tonight was the biggest loss of my hockey career. But I can't find it within myself to care. And I wish neither of my parents were here right now. I escape from them as quickly as I can.

I see Oakley with her folks down the way, talking to Ollie, but I pretend not to.

I make it to my truck, unscathed, and I drive around alone aimlessly for a while, stopping to buy a case of beer before I pull into the diner outside of town. Despite my foul mood, I'm starving.

I finish my meal and order a slice of apple pie in solitude when the door opens. Oakley enters the place. She pauses just past the threshold, her head turning from one side to the other until her eyes land on me. Her gaze singes my skin. She watches me for a minute, allowing me a moment to drink her in before she walks closer, sliding into the booth across from me.

"Hi," she says.

Her black locks cascade over her shoulders and down her back. But her hair can't hide the jewelry around her neck. I see a glint of silver reflecting the lights overhead and the outline of her name. She's wearing my necklace. And my jersey.

"Hey," I reply.

"I've been looking for you," she says.

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah," she says without a hint of a smile. "I've been searching for you since last night actually."

I didn't want to be found. And I'm not sure if I'm ready for this conversation yet.

There's a heaviness to the silence with her sitting here. The weight of unspoken words presses like a barbell on my chest, but I do my best to ignore it. If there's one thing I'm good at, it's stoicism. I'm a pretender, acting like I don't care. Especially where Oakley is concerned. I've mastered it over the years.

"I'm sorry about the loss." She's cautious with her words.

I shrug. "I played like shit."

"I hope I didn't have anything to do with that," she adds, not denying my claim.

You had everything to do with it.

But I stay silent.

Oakley reaches across the table and grabs my hand. I stiffen and resist for a moment before allowing her to tug my arm across the table. She inspects my knuckles, running her thumb across the scab and still-swollen skin.

"You didn't ice this last night, did you?" she mumbles.

"Nope."

I slide my arm back to my side of the table, disconnecting us, when the waitress arrives with my pie. It's hot with a scoop of vanilla ice cream slowly melting on top.

"Can I get you anything, hon?" the waitress asks Oakley.

“A coffee,” she says with a gentle smile. “Please. And another spoon.”

“Coming right up.” She walks away.

I glance up at Oakley as I dig into the dessert. “What makes you think I’ll share?”

She tilts her head, watching the pie and ice cream disappear behind my lips. “You’ll share with me.”

I chew, already gathering another bite. “You sound so sure,” I say after I swallow.

“I am sure. I know you, Chase Matthews.”

“You know me, huh? Well, please ... enlighten me.”

She leans back in her seat and crosses her arms over her chest. The waitress drops off a cup of hot coffee and an extra spoon. Oakley thanks her, but doesn’t move.

“I know you think I’m still in love with Sam,” she says, matter-of-fact.

I lift my eyebrows, but don’t contest the statement.

“But you’re wrong,” she continues.

“I’m never wrong,” I declare, taking another bite of pie while acting like the thought of her and my teammate doesn’t destroy me.

“Well, you’re wrong about this.” She pauses for an extended beat, forcing me to look at her. Using her index finger and thumb, she pinches the hockey jersey covering her torso. “Do you see whose jersey I’m wearing?” She reaches up to run a finger along the metal strand around her neck. “Do you see whose necklace is around my neck?”

I nod, chewing slowly. “I also saw whose lips were on yours last night.”

“I didn’t ask for that kiss. I didn’t want it.”

“You didn’t pull away either.”

She shakes her head, frustration marring her beautiful features. “He surprised me. That’s all it was. I didn’t expect him to kiss

me.”

“He still wants you,” I announce.

She huffs out a mirthless laugh. “So he says.”

I arch my brow. “You don’t believe him?”

Oakley leans forward, resting her elbows on the table. “Sam doesn’t really want me. He just doesn’t want to lose me to you.”

I take a drink of water to try and clear the lump in my throat.

“And really,” she continues, “it doesn’t matter one way or another what Sam wants. Because I don’t want *him*.”

“You’ve always wanted him,” I counter, silently begging her to tell me I’m wrong.

“Past tense,” she corrects me. “Everything is different now.”

“What’s different?” I ask.

“*Everything*.” A few beats pass as we stare at each other in a silent standoff. “*Me. I’m* different.”

I don’t know what to say, so I say nothing. Mostly because I agree with her. She *is* different.

When Sam broke up with Oakley, I watched her break. She was fragile. And fragile things aren’t built to last. But she’s not weak. She’s strong. She just needed someone by her side to build her up rather than beat her down. She needed a reminder that she was strong enough to outlast the bad things life threw at her. Because none of us are immune. We will all be tested. That was one of her tests. But she picked herself up. And she’s stronger for it since she’s emerged on the other side. I can see the fight in her now. The resolve.

“I’m in love with you,” she whispers.

I blink once and then twice, trying to assimilate the words.

“What?” I ask.

“I’m in love,” she repeats, lifting her spoon as if she didn’t just say something monumental. She dips the utensil into the pie, making sure to get a large scoop of ice cream along with it.

Oakley meets my eyes right before she takes the bite. “*With you.*”

A warmth spreads through my chest, but my stubborn self is still on guard. “Then, why were you kissing Anderson last night?”

“I wasn’t,” she counters around a mouthful of dessert. “I thought we’d already covered that. You need to keep up.”

She gives me a little smirk, and I can’t help the chuckle that escapes. I shake my head.

This girl.

“You frustrate the hell out of me,” I admit, taking another bite of food.

“Same,” she answers.

I slide the pie to the middle of the table, and her smirk widens. I let her revel in her little victory.

“Well, it’s not surprising,” I say, my eyes on my dessert as I dive in again.

“What’s not?” she questions as she chews.

I let her steal the very last bite.

“It’s not surprising that you’re in love with me. I mean, what’s not to love?” I drink the last of my water, nodding to the waitress when she stops by the table to refill the glass and remove the empty pie plate.

“Your humbleness is your most lovable quality,” she deadpans.

My lip quirks.

“Are you going to drink that coffee?” I ask.

“No,” she says.

“Let’s get out of here then.”

I pay the bill and leave a tip. I hold the door open for her as we exit the diner. I grasp her hand when it brushes mine as we approach the truck, making a silent decision to come back for her car later.

We stop beside my vehicle, and I press her back against it. She slides her arms around my neck.

“I don’t want Sam,” she stresses, her eyes flicking between both of mine.

I nod.

“I know you’re listening,” she whispers, “but do you *hear* me?”

“I hear you,” I murmur.

“Then, stop running from me.”

I kiss her, wiping away all traces of her ex from her lips.

“You’re what I want,” she whispers against my mouth. “Only you.”

I kiss her again, deeper this time. She tastes like apple pie and every dream I’ve ever had.

I drop my forehead to hers to catch my breath.

“From the moment you touched me, I was yours,” she moans.

Every word is like sugar on my lips.

“Say it again,” I demand.

“I’m yours.”

Her soft curves feel like heaven, molded to mine. My hands slide from her waist to her ass, grabbing a handful in the process. I feel myself start to harden, my cock straining painfully behind my zipper.

“Are you wearing those plum panties?” I moan against her neck.

She grins. “Plain old white cotton. Sorry to disappoint.”

The thought of her in simple white panties still creates the hottest vision in my mind.

“You could never disappoint me.” Reluctantly, I pull away. “Do you have anywhere you need to be?” I ask. “I want to show you something.”

“The only place I need to be is wherever you are.”

I hit the key fob to unlock the truck and open the passenger door. I smack her tight ass as she climbs into the vehicle.

“Look at you,” I quip, “with all the right answers tonight.”

She laughs, shaking her head, and I love the way it sounds.

I walk around the front and settle into the driver’s seat. The gravel crunches beneath the tires as we leave the parking lot and pull onto the street. I steer the vehicle onto a highway.

She asks me more than once where we’re going, and each time, I ignore her question as I drive farther outside of the city. I still love to frustrate her. I can’t help myself.

After about twenty minutes on the road, Oakley discovers that old hockey hat that we were fighting over a while back. I tossed it behind my seat earlier today. She puts it on, smoothing her hair back first. It looks good on her. It always has.

“I see you put the stolen evidence in your truck so I couldn’t steal it back.” She smirks.

I shake my head, a ghost of a smile on my lips. “And I told you before ... it’s always been my hat.”

“Mmhmm,” she hums, but it’s rich with sarcasm.

I might not be able to convince her, but the hat *is* mine. I bought it at a hockey camp I attended one summer when I was twelve. At some point, it landed in Ollie’s room, where it stayed for several months. I was over there one day and saw Oakley wearing it. I liked the way it looked on her, so I let her have it for a few more weeks before I took it back one afternoon. It smelled like that lavender shampoo she used. It still reminds me of her every time I wear it now even though the scent faded long ago.

I pull off a two-lane highway onto a dirt road and follow it up an incline. We climb for a bit until I stop at the top of the hill, where it levels out. I kill the engine and turn off the lights.

“Where are we?” Oakley questions.

“My dad bought this land a couple of weeks ago. He’s going to build a house on it.”

“Wow,” she says, glancing around.

We leave the vehicle. I grab some blankets and a sleeping bag I have stowed in the cab—things my mom sent back with me the other night. I’m glad now that I didn’t unload it all yet.

I already have a piece of foam lining the hard surface of the bed of the truck to protect it from some furniture I moved recently. I undo the sleeping bag and spread it along the surface, throwing the other blankets up there as well. I jump into the back and help Oakley up. I sink into the surprisingly soft surface with my back leaning against the cab. Oakley snuggles up beside me.

We’re at the top of the hill, overlooking the small city that holds our university. There are a million stars out and a half-moon easily visible without the lights of the city to obstruct them.

“Is this where you stayed last night?” Oakley asks.

“Part of the night,” I admit. “Then, I crashed on Ollie’s couch.”

I can feel her frown. “He didn’t tell me.”

“I asked him not to.”

“My brother should be loyal to me first,” she says stubbornly.

“He *is* loyal to you.” I chuckle. “He’s loyal to both of us. Your brother knew you would bulldoze your way into his place, demanding to talk to me. He also knew I wasn’t ready for that conversation then.”

“I don’t bulldoze,” she insists indignantly.

I laugh again. “Right, okay ...” I draw out the last syllable.

I can see her pouting from the corner of my eye. I lift her until she’s straddling me, and then I kiss her hard, erasing the pout from her full lips. I push her hair back away from her face.

“You’re so damn beautiful,” I murmur.

Her turquoise-colored eyes glow in the moonlight.

She traces my jaw. “So are you.”

I nip at her lips, slowly pulling the jersey with my number over her head. She raises her arms. She's wearing a white cotton bra with lace along the edges. The material barely contains her voluptuous tits. I nuzzle her cleavage, pulling the cups down until I can reach her nipples. I suck and lick her until her nipple is a hardened point, and then I shift to the other side. She moans, reaching around back to release the clasp, giving me full access to all that supple skin. Her tits spill into my hands with her bra gone, my tongue still tasting and exploring her. I know she likes what I'm doing when her hands tighten in my hair to the point of pain. Maybe I'm a masochist because I like the pain.

Oakley's whimpers spur me on as I feast on her naked skin. She's squirming on top of me when I lick across her clavicle, my hands still exploring. She's trying to create much-needed friction as she slides back and forth across my lap. My dick is so hard that I'll probably have the imprint of my zipper on it, but I want to take my time. I've dreamed of her like this so many times; it almost doesn't feel real even though we were together just a few nights ago. But the silkiness of her skin reminds me that this is actually happening in real time. Right now, she's completely mine.

I lay her down on her back and lean over her, watching the way the moonlight dances across her skin. Her lips are parted, and her chest rises and lowers with each breath. There's a mild breeze tonight, and the air is growing cooler. But it isn't until I draw a callous fingertip down her stomach that goose bumps appear. I flick the button open and lower her zipper. She helps me push her jeans over her hips and down her legs, taking those white panties with them. I chuckle when she sits up impatiently to remove my shirt, and she doesn't stop there, taking the rest of my clothes off until we're both as naked as the day we were born.

My cock jumps when her hand collapses around it, smearing some of the pre-cum leaking from the tip. I'm on my knees when she leans forward to wrap her lips around the head. My neck drops back, and my lids close from the warm heat of her mouth. My abs clench when she drops down as far as she can go on my shaft, using her hand to pump the base. I force

myself to watch her, wanting to memorize the look of her mouth wrapped around me, her hair raining down her shoulders, and those teal eyes staring up at me.

I feel a familiar tingle at the bottom of my spine when she keeps sucking me, twisting her hand in a way that makes me groan. She runs her tongue along the underside of the sensitive head before releasing me to take a breath, licking her bottom lip when she's done. It leaves a light sheen along her mouth that makes me almost animalistic with desire.

I take her lips, and I'm not gentle. My fingers slide down her stomach as I'm laying her down. She's hot and wet when I find her center, plunging one finger inside of her as my thumb circles her clit. Her lips are on my neck, biting and leaving her mark until the sensations are too much and she loses focus.

"Please ..." she cries.

I smirk. "Please what?"

She grabs my shoulders and tugs me toward her until our mouths are connected, my tongue tasting the apple pie and ice cream all over again. Her tits are pressed against my chest, her nipples razor sharp as they slide across my skin. She spreads her legs more, making room for my hips. I start to grind against her. She chases the friction when the head of my cock finds her clit, rubbing against it.

"Chase ..." she cries, her moans turning to frustration.

I smile against her neck. "What, baby?"

"Stop teasing me."

"I'm not teasing you," I insist. "Doesn't this feel good?"

"Yes, but ..." She squirms against me, lifting her hips until I'm sitting at her opening.

"But what?"

I keep myself right at her entrance, not allowing the head to slip inside. The tension builds. I chuckle when she slides her legs around my hips with her heels on my ass, trying to pull me into her.

“Chase.” I can feel her frown.

My name sounds like a filthy word, rolling off her tongue. It makes me even harder.

“Tell me what you want, Oak.” I lean back a couple of inches so I can see her face.

Her lids are hooded, her eyes molten. “I want you.”

I dip until I’m kissing her. I bite her lower lip and tug it before letting go.

“Where do you want me?” I don’t recognize my voice; it’s so thick with lust.

“I want you inside of me.”

I thrust forward, watching as her eyes close and her head tilts back, her breath hitching.

“Is that what you want?” I ask, attacking her neck. My nose glides along the edge of her jaw.

“Yes,” she chokes out.

“Are you still sore from the other day?”

The thought of making her raw from my cock makes my chest swell.

“Not now,” she moans.

Good. I won’t need to be gentle tonight.

I start slamming in and out of her, my forearms cradling her upper back and my hands anchoring her shoulders. She moans. She feels like a warm, wet glove around my dick, squeezing me tightly. The only sounds are of the leaves rustling in the breeze and our skin slapping together.

I lift my knee, taking her leg higher in the process. The friction of our skin is perfection. My lower pelvis angles until I’m rubbing across her clit with every glide, remembering how much she liked it the other night. She moans again, louder this time. Her legs tighten around me when I hit a spot deep inside of her, so I stay there, grinding harder across it until she’s panting beneath me.

I kiss her, thinking about how different sex is with someone you love. My first focus is her. I want to please her. I want her to explode on my cock. It's more important to me than my own release, and that hasn't been the case with other girls in the past.

Oakley's clinging to me now, rubbing against me frantically as I thrust in and out. And then I feel her inner muscles tighten and spasm around my shaft. I work her through her orgasm and then follow her over the edge, burying myself as deep as possible when I come.

I take a moment to catch my breath, then start to roll to the side, afraid I'm suffocating her beneath me. But her arms hold me in place.

"No," she demands, her words breathless and labored. "Stay here."

"Am I squishing you?"

"No. You're keeping me warm."

I lift the slightest bit to put some of my body weight on my forearms so I can see her face. Her eyes study my features for a few moments, one of her fingertips tracing them. She pauses on the bruised skin of my cheek. It's no longer swollen, but there's a bluish tint to my skin now.

"Madison said you've always had a thing for me," she murmurs.

"Is that a question or a statement?"

"A question," she answers.

"Madison is right ... I've always wanted you."

It feels good to admit it out loud. I've lived inside my head for so long, keeping my feelings for her at a safe distance.

She traces the edges of my eyebrows and then drops to my lips. I nip her fingertip and then suck the pad into my mouth.

"Why didn't you ever say anything?"

I shrug. "You weren't ready. Maybe I wasn't ready for you either."

It's not enough to meet the right person. You have to meet at the right time too.

"Are you ready now?" she whispers.

"You couldn't tear me away now. I'm yours."

"And I'm yours," she confirms.

I kiss her again, softer this time. She lifts her mouth to lick the outer edge of my ear and sucks on my lobe. I harden beneath her again.

"I love you," she whispers.

I slide into her, and we go slow this time. I take my time worshipping her body, showing her that I love her too.

We stay in the back of my truck the entire night, talking and loving on one another beneath the stars. Sharing secrets. I let her inside of my head. She's already claimed the space inside of my chest. I don't sleep much, but it's a perfect night, one I'll never forget.

For the first time in my life, reality trumps my dreams. Having Oakley beneath my body and in my arms is better than what my imagination conjured up all those years she was around but at a distance. Being friends first has increased the intimacy between us tenfold. I know there's no going back from here. And it feels like the beginning of something really special.

Chapter Thirty

Oakley

I sip my coffee and stare out the window, waiting for Chase. He doesn't see me sitting here when he walks by. He pauses on the sidewalk in front of the café, slapping hands with some guy I don't know, and my eyes greedily eat him up. He's so handsome. I don't know why I didn't notice it before. His broad shoulders and moss-colored eyes. That chiseled jaw. I picture his body beneath the clothes, the image turning me on instantly.

He pushes a strand of thick brown hair off his face when the wind blows it across his forehead. And when he laughs at something the guy says, his eyes crinkling at the corners, I melt into a puddle right there at the table.

I've never felt this way about anyone before. Not even Sam Anderson. If you asked me a few months ago, I would've said my life was ending since Sam no longer wanted me. I didn't realize then that I had something much better waiting for me. Someone who had been staring me in the face for years, but a guy I never truly saw until recently.

The door chimes when it opens, and I watch Chase scan the crowd until he finds me. There's a bounce in his step that wasn't there before. And a glow in his olive-colored eyes. I'd like to think I have something to do with that.

"Hey," he says, leaning down to kiss me.

My chest flutters when he's near, and I hope that never goes away.

"Are you ready?" he asks, glancing at his cell phone for the time. "We're supposed to meet Ollie in ten."

I nod, rising to my feet and walking over to the trash to deposit my cup.

Chase takes my hand in his, and we walk out the front door, dodging students who are entering.

“Are you hungry?” he asks me.

“Starving,” I admit with a smile. “Are we going to the Mexican restaurant?”

“Yep.”

We walk along the path leading to the parking lot, our arms swinging in sync and our fingers laced together. It feels so natural and normal. So right.

I spot Sam’s muddy-blond head across the quad, but he doesn’t see us. He’s talking to some girl, his arm braced against the wall next to her head. If I know Sam—and I think I know him well at this point—he’ll bounce back quickly from my rejection. By the looks of it, he already has. I smile to myself, knowing things are just as they should be.

It’s funny how quickly life can change, though it didn’t feel like it was fast when I was wading through the muck. I watched my dreams go up in smoke when Sam and I ended things. He broke me into pieces. But those edges were glued back together, slowly and piece by piece until I started to feel whole again. And Chase was always there, waiting for me. Protecting me. Loving me from a distance.

There’s still tension between Chase and Sam, but it’s better. According to my boyfriend, the two men ran into each other in the hallway at their shared home one morning after their altercation. Chase called Sam a prick, and Sam called him an asshole. Then, they walked downstairs and ate breakfast together.

Men.

I don’t know if they’re necessarily friends right now, but they’ve established some sort of truce where they can coexist.

I’ve spent a couple of nights with Chase at their house, though I was resistant at first. But Chase said Sam needed to get used

to us being together, and he wouldn't do that if we avoided him. Chase also said that he waited for me for so long that he refused to hide me away now just to make Sam more comfortable. I think, in time, it will become less awkward.

I climb into the passenger side of Chase's truck, a spot that's quickly becoming mine. Chase reaches over to take my hand again after backing out of the parking space. Everything becomes clearer when I look to my left to see him sitting there. When he notices me watching him, he lifts our hands and brushes his lips across my knuckles.

Chase appears untouchable on the surface, yet he is so soft underneath. It's a side not many get to see. I'm just glad I'm one of the chosen few. He's steady and strong. He's my best friend, my hockey stud.

I think I was always working for Sam, striving to keep his attention and gain his affection. I don't feel that way with Chase. It isn't a job with him. It's just ... easy. I never have to wonder about my worth. Chase's love is free; it doesn't have to be earned. I can see it in his eyes every time he looks at me, and I can feel it in his touch right now.

I glance down at our hands, where Chase's thumb is stroking my skin.

Chase puts me first. I realize now that he always has.

"What are you going to order?" my hockey boyfriend asks me as he steers the truck.

We start to discuss the options, knowing we're both going to order tacos, like we always do.

If I had been paying attention when Sam walked away from me, I would've seen Chase standing in the shadows, waiting to catch me when I fell, rather than focusing on Sam's back as he left. Life is all about perspective, and mine is changing. Evolving. The journey is funny that way, I guess.

We drive into the parking lot and claim a space. Chase and I walk across the asphalt, laughing and talking. He opens the door for me and follows as I walk to a booth where Ollie is waiting for us. With my brother sitting there and Chase's hand

on the small of my back, everything in this moment feels sweet. My childhood friend becoming my man has been the biggest surprise for me. I admit, I never saw him coming.

All I know is ... I'm completely his.

And best of all, he's entirely mine.

Acknowledgement

Like most writers, I loved to read first. Getting lost in a good story is pure magic, in my opinion. But I never thought I'd write a book of my own. Now, I find myself releasing book #11, which is wild! Who knew getting sidelined by an autoimmune disease could lead to something like this. This is the 4th book I've published with the help of a "team", and I can't thank them enough for believing in an Oklahoma girl who doesn't always believe in herself. The whole process of writing and releasing a book is so much fun, but it's also really scary. I can only hope a few people will get enjoyment out of reading it as well. That's the cherry on top.

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the author's you are working with. Thank you for being the biggest cheerleaders and loving to read as much as I love to read and write!

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About The Author

Michelle Scott



Michelle practices medicine by day and is an amateur writer by night. An avid reader all of her life, she enjoys a good happy ending and strives to put them in her own writing. She is a lover of sports, drinker of coffee, and mother to her three fur babies. She lives in Tulsa, Oklahoma.

Books By This Author

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