



**THE WORST KIND
OF PROMISE**

CELESTE BRIARS

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About the Author

THE WORST KIND OF PROMISE

BY CELESTE BRIARS

A Reapers novel

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, organizations, places, events, and incidents are either products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

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To any readers who've ever wanted to be degraded by a scary, tattooed hockey player with a filthy mouth. This one's for you.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Hello, dear readers!

For the best reading experience, I've listed below some potential triggers included in this book. While the story is mainly lighthearted, there are undertones of more serious issues that some readers may find upsetting. Please read at your own discretion.

Content Warnings:

Rape (off-page, but in flashbacks)

PTSD

Toxic family environment

Explicit sexual content

Emetophobia

Alcohol consumption

Drug usage

Violence

PLAYLIST

Theme Song: Hangover – Kiiara

1. Meet You in Hell – Jade LeMac
2. Damn Those Eyes – Ashley Sienna
3. I Like Me Better – Lauv (MVRSE Remix)
4. Liar Liar – Dylan & Bastille
5. Bad Decisions – BOBI ANDONOV
6. Used To Know Me – Charli XCX
7. Set Fire to the Rain – Adele
8. GRUDGE – Anne-Marie
9. Everyone Who Falls In Love (Has Someone Else They're Thinking Of) – Cian Ducrot
10. brrr – Kim Petras
11. THE DEATH OF PEACE OF MIND – Bad Omens
12. Devil Is A Woman – Cloudy June
13. DELIRIUM – Elley Duhé
14. Me and the Devil – Soap&Skin
15. Haunted – Taylor Swift
16. One Of The Girls – The Weeknd, JENNIE & Lily Rose Depp
17. everything i wanted – Billie Eilish
18. How to Save a Life – The Fray
19. Elastic Heart – Sia
20. You Are the Reason – Calum Scott & Leona Lewis

THE NIGHT OF NO RETURN

I look up at the ominous storm clouds as they inch across the desolate sky, draping the night in everlasting darkness.

The promise of rain is poised on the horizon, waiting to fall in tandem with my tears. The streetlamp beside me flickers precariously, a large beacon that shines down on me like I'm a moth caught in a filth-covered flame. Cold air spills over my naked arms and legs, raising goose bumps on flesh, and the cement patch I've claimed as home for the time being has made my core temperature drop.

My dress—once a thing of happy memories—has been forever tainted. I can't feel my body. It's like it doesn't belong to me.

See, that already broken part of me has lost another crucial piece tonight, and I don't know if I'll ever get it back.

I look at my phone and check the time. Ten minutes have passed since I called the only person I could trust—the one I knew wouldn't ask questions and who just so happened to be in Pennsylvania visiting a friend.

I called Kit Langley.

Star left defenseman for the NHL's Riverside Reapers. One of my brother's best friends. The guy I'm secretly in love with—the guy who looks at me like I'm his kid sister.

I'm sitting on the cold, hard gas station curb, wondering why I can't feel the rain penetrate my clothes when a Jeep Wrangler pulls haphazardly into one of the parking spaces, parking diagonally across two white-painted lines. The door

swings open with enough force to jar me from my thoughts, and Kit's behemoth frame lumbers out of the vehicle. The minute I meet his dark eyes, I feel mine surge with water, and despite my efforts to keep my emotions at bay, all of my tears flood out of me like a fast-rising tsunami.

Kit races over to me and yanks me up by the arms, pulling me into his large chest. His grip suffocates me, but I don't try to pull away. He's mumbling something into my hair, his hand cradling the back of my head, the rapid thundering of his heart a steady medium in my ears.

When his embrace loosens and he backpedals to look at me, his eyes are alight with worry, a muscle in his jaw flickering. "What happened?" he asks.

I'm not alert enough to form a coherent sentence, but my voice box is vibrating before I have the chance to clamp my lips shut.

"I..." My chest feels tight, like there's a thorn twisting in my sternum. Pair that with the tears wanting to make a quick getaway, and I'm pretty much as useful as a push sign on a pull door.

"Faye, breathe. You're okay. I've got you," Kit says, the softness in his tone wrapping around me like a gentle caress. His hands are still on my arms, and he's craning his neck down to look at me.

A few sobs slip unbidden from my mouth as I inhale shakily, forcing my bloodshot gaze to focus. My vision is peppered with all sorts of ink blots, and my tongue feels like it's swollen to twice its size.

Anger tears across his expression. "Faye, who hurt you?"

"He's...I..."

Come on, Faye. You're safe. You're with Kit. You're not in danger anymore.

But was I ever in danger, or was it my past playing tricks on me?

The minute I stop trembling from nerves, I break down into a gigantic, blubbering mess, clinging to the back of Kit's shirt. He hugs me with the same bone-crushing desperation, absorbing the weight of my pain, wringing every tear from me until I'm nothing but a hollow shell.

He uses his thumb to brush away the moisture glistening on my cheek.

My stomach rolls with nausea. "My date. H-he—I said no..." I choke, the sweat on my brow now covering every bare inch of skin.

Kit's eyes heat with understanding, and every muscle in his upper body ripples with iron-hot rage. The cords in his neck are taut, the veins in his forearms like individual rivers of power snaking up to bulging biceps.

"Did he—"

"No," I whisper. "It wasn't his fault. I sent mixed signals."

I'd gone back to his place, we'd started kissing, and then he'd rolled on top of me, and that long ago night came rushing back with such ferocity that I froze. I couldn't speak, I couldn't move, and he took that as a sign to start undoing my dress. It felt like he was peeling off the tattered walls that protected my soul.

"There's no such thing as mixed signals. Either you're into it or you're not. And it's pretty fucking clear when a chick isn't."

"But I was," I whisper. "Until I wasn't."

Kit reaches out to, I don't know, maybe cup my cheek, and I flinch. He stops and lets out a litany of swears so harsh they feel like sandpaper grating against my skin.

"Where. Is. He."

It's not a question.

I trap the plumpness of my bottom lip between my teeth. "Kit, stop."

A guttural rumble stirs deep within his chest. “I’m going to kill that son of a bitch.”

“Kit...” I reach out to lightly touch his arm, and he seems to melt a little, but not much.

With a bracing breath, he rakes his hand through the front of his hair, looking about a second away from hitting whatever poor, helpless object is in the vicinity.

“I’m taking you to file a report.”

“No,” I say, panicked. The last thing I want to do is explain this whole horrid, confusing story to another person.

“I’m not doing this with you right now, do you understand?” he snaps, gritting his teeth. “You’re going to get in the car and go to the police station.”

I flinch at the bite in his tone, wrapping my arms around my midsection. “Nothing happened.”

“Well, clearly something happened.”

Unable to maintain eye contact, I drop my watery gaze to stare at the middle of his chest. “Not tonight.”

“Then when?”

“A long time ago.”

“Does Hayes know?”

At the idea of telling my brother the truth, panic whirls through me like a Category 5 hurricane, determined to bring me to my knees. “No. And he can’t know.”

In hindsight, I probably shouldn’t have said that, because the lid that Kit’s already struggling to keep on his anger has completely blown off into the stratosphere.

“You’re calling him.” He firmly grabs my wrist, urging me toward his car.

I plant my heels into the ground and pull back, managing to break free from his steel vise. Granted, it takes all my strength and a good amount of my breath.

“If I go with you, we can’t tell Hayes.”

“Faye...”

I’m thrown by his gentle protectiveness, the uncharacteristic softness I didn’t think Kit was capable of, much less willing to show me. Kit’s callous. He isn’t compassionate or particularly thoughtful, but it’s not because he actively chooses to be an asshole. He just isn’t perceptive when it comes to others’ emotions. But I’ve never seen him so distraught before.

“Please, Kit. I can’t bring Hayes into this. You know how reckless he can be. If he finds out, he’ll lose it.”

Humorless laughter dances out of him. “Oh, and you think I’m super calm, cool, and collected right now?”

Even with my skittering pulse, there’s enough fire inside of me to light a match. It scalds my insides, wanting to burn every weak part of me, wanting to turn that meek little girl still crying out for her mother into flakes of ash. “I don’t need you to play hero! I just need you to be here for me. I called you because...”

His eyebrows jerk together expectantly. “Because?”

“Because I trust you,” I finish.

Ever since Hayes joined the Riverside Reapers—a National Hockey League team born and bred in Riverside, California—I’ve had a crush on Kit. He and my brother have been friends for four years, and even though they don’t always see eye to eye, they’re always there for each other.

As much as I trust *Kit*, I don’t think I could trust him with my *heart*.

Kit doesn’t believe in strings, whether they’re attached or not.

I know liking an unreformable womanizer is a disaster waiting to happen. Kit doesn’t date. He never has. He’s almost always pictured with a new girl, and each relationship lasts as long as a hockey game. If I wanted to get my heart broken, I’d let Kit manhandle it all he wants. As much as I wish things could work out between us, I’m smart enough to know that Kit

can't give me what I need—he can't give me stability or reassurance or unconditional love.

Like any well-adjusted young woman with a burning hatred for romance, my endless search for love is in part thanks to my absent father. When my mother died of cancer, my father abandoned his parental duties, leaving me and my brother to fend for ourselves. The only thing he was good for was the money he sent us.

I knew Kit was going to be in town this week. And a part of me wanted to reach out, to grab lunch with him, to just *see* him. But I knew better. So I was going to let him coast through Pennsylvania without so much as a text.

Not only would keeping my distance benefit me, but it would probably save Hayes from going into cardiac arrest. Hayes is a...protective...older brother. He's never approved of my previous boyfriends. He never thought they were good enough for me. If he found out I liked one of his best friends, his whole world would implode. He'd probably ship me off to a nunnery overseas. After he castrates Kit.

Kit's lips wrench into a frown, and I wish we were meeting under different circumstances. I wish he was disarming me with that million-dollar grin of his, the one that makes paper-thin wings flutter in the pit of my belly.

"I'm sorry for losing my cool." He sighs, letting the knots of his muscles slacken, his voice returning to a lukewarm drawl. "You're scared. Flying off the handle isn't going to help either of us."

Upon seeing me shiver, he glides his hands gingerly over my arms, generating a spark of heat within me.

"Come on. Let's at least sit in the car while we talk things over."

I nod through the debilitating lump in my throat, letting him guide me to the passenger door.

The minute I get into the safety of his Jeep, the roar of the outside world comes to an anticlimactic stop. All I can hear is

the mingling of our breaths and the jittery whirring of the heater coming to life.

“What happened?” he asks, his hands white-knuckling the steering wheel.

I shift uncomfortably against the leather seat, a yawning hole of dread opening inside of me, threatening to drag me under and fill my lungs until they forget what crisp air feels like.

“I was on a date with a guy. Everything was going well. We went out to eat, then he invited me back to his place. It-it all happened so fast. We were in the living room, laughing about something stupid, indulging in glass after glass of wine...and then he was on top of me. He was on top of me, and I couldn't scream, no matter how hard I tried. I tried saying no. I was frozen.” A string of words, almost all obstructed by the thickening saliva and errant tears in my mouth.

My head sloshes with the insuppressible memories, and my gut does a nosedive all the way to my toes.

“When I finally got the courage to move, I pushed him off me. He had no idea what was happening. I just freaked out. I was so embarrassed. I grabbed my things and ran like hell,” I supply, my hands shaking despite being planted safely in my lap.

This night has brought up a past trauma I've tried so hard to bury. Trauma that's haunted me for five years now. It's teleported me back to the night of my senior prom—when I was raped by a man who claimed to be my friend. Ever since then, I've been wary to go on dates, to trust men. And yet, I went on this date voluntarily, thinking I could gain control over my trauma.

I was wrong.

Kit doesn't say anything for at least two minutes.

And then he loses it.

He curses so loudly that it echoes in my ears, and he punches the steering wheel, rocking the entire car in the

process. I'm surprised he doesn't break anything. His ivory-colored fists are strained, and his arms twitch with an ungodly amount of tension. I think he's going to lash out again, but all he does is inhale deeply.

Kit rests his hands on the steering wheel, the surface of his knuckles throbbing with a crimson hue. "What do you want to do?"

The last thing I want to do is go home. Or be by myself. But I don't really have another option.

I want to stay with you.

"Take me home," I finally decide, the weight of my solitude bearing down on my shoulders.

Kit's leg bounces against the underside of the steering wheel. He's so large that he takes up the whole space, even with his seat pushed all the way back. His head is flush with the ceiling, his elbow eating up the entirety of the console between us.

He ponders me for a moment, swishing my weak words around in his mouth, then grimacing like he hates the taste of them.

He sticks the key in the ignition. "I'm not taking you home."

I buckle my seat belt even as uncertainty courses through my veins. "Then where are you taking me?"

"To my hotel room," he says, looking over his shoulder as he backs out of his makeshift parking space.

With his arm right by my head, I get an intoxicating whiff of the bergamot cologne he always wears, which only lightly masks the heady musk of him. I covertly breathe him in, losing myself in his scent, the proximity, the safety of it all.

When I open my eyes, we're barreling down an empty ribbon of road, vegetation flashing past my peripheral.

"I don't know if that's a good idea," I tell him, worrying at the hem of my dress.

Kit slams down hard on the brakes, nearly making me face-plant into the glove compartment. My seat belt strains against my chest, squishing my boobs, and I recoil from the momentum.

He fully twists toward me, glaring. “What are you talking about?”

“Us. Being alone. In a hotel room together.”

The truth is the only place I’d feel comfortable right now is in that goddamn hotel room.

“Are you afraid of me?” Kit asks, pained.

“No. I know you’d never do anything to hurt me. It’s just —”

I’ve never been in a room alone with you.

Seeing that this is apparently argument-worthy, Kit pulls to the side of the road, puts the car in park, and flips his hazards on. “You’re out of school, right?”

“My finals ended a month ago,” I admit, turtling in on myself.

“I just want to get you somewhere safe, okay? If you’re worried about missing work, tell them something came up—which it did—and that you need time off to be with family.”

I’m not worried about my job as a teaching assistant. I’m worried about having to confront my very real, very terrifying feelings for Kit. The good thing about Kit living all the way on the other side of the country is that I don’t feel inclined to give in to my temptations. But right here, right now, I want to give in so badly, even after the night I’ve had. All I can think about is lying in bed with him and having him hold me until I fall asleep.

The look on Kit’s distractingly chiseled face would be butterfly inducing if it weren’t for the hard lines marring his features. “I promised your brother I’d look after you.”

I cross my arms over my chest, doing my best to look sure of myself. “I can look after myself.”

“Clearly, you can’t.”

I wince like he’d just physically burned me. Honestly, that would probably be less painful than whatever heart-squeezing sensation is erupting behind the cage of my ribs.

Kit registers what he said a second too late, regret immediately shadowing his eyes. “Fuck, Faye. I didn’t mean that.”

Tears sear the backs of my eyes, and I swallow down the vomit threatening to spray the floor of Kit’s car. “No, you did. You’re right. I need to handle this. I’m not your problem.” I unbuckle my seat belt and reach for the door handle, but the little lock above it clicks down.

Kit knocks his head back against the headrest. “I didn’t... there’s...this is all a lot to process,” he confesses. “I can’t imagine how hard this is for you.”

All I do is nod, because now my mind is channel-surfing back to three hours ago when I thought I’d end the night with a kiss goodbye. The buzz from both the alcohol and adrenaline are starting to wear off, meaning I’ll have to consciously try to weather this torrential storm.

I don’t know what to say. I’m paralyzed again.

I suddenly feel Kit’s hand squeeze my palm, and it jolts me back to the present. The warmth of the gesture brings a comfort I haven’t known until now, not even when I’ve searched for it in other people.

“Look, Faye, when you called me...I’ve never been so afraid in my entire life. I was worried something bad had happened to you, and I was right. I need to know I’m keeping you safe, otherwise I’m going to lose my mind.” There’s a brokenness to his words that impales that failing organ in my chest.

Lose his mind? Does he really feel that way?

His fingers tighten around mine, almost painful enough for me to acknowledge it.

“If I go with you, you have to promise not to tell Hayes,” I murmur ashamedly, and I know I’m in no position to negotiate, but I refuse to burden my brother with all this drama.

“You’re seriously asking me to keep this big of a secret from your brother, who’s one of my best friends, and who I also happen to live with?” His barb, sharp and stinging, clings to my side and burrows into flesh and muscle.

He’s right: keeping a secret this catastrophic from my hotheaded brother isn’t going to end well. But the alternative is possibly seeing my brother in handcuffs as he’s being taken away for aggravated battery.

I’ll get on my knees and beg this man if I have to. “Please, Kit. He never has to find out about this. He’ll kill that guy on some crazy vengeance trip.”

“You’re lucky *I’m* not going to kill that guy,” Kit growls.

Oh, I am. Hayes might have enough rage to fuel a small village, but Kit beats his already impressive strength with a six-foot-five body of pure muscle.

“I appreciate it, I do. And now I’m just asking you to keep a teensy, tiny secret.”

Kit sucks his teeth. “I’ll contemplate it if you at least let me get you under a roof. You’re half-soaked. The hotel is only ten minutes away.”

I have a feeling that’s the closest to an agreement I’m going to get from Kit, and considering he has the resolve and patience of a grizzly bear, I’m not looking to argue with him for the rest of the night.

“Okay,” I acquiesce. “But you have to *promise* to think about it.”

Kit holds his pinky out to me. “I promise.”

I hesitantly hook my pinky with his, letting myself get lost in the wilderness of his umber eyes. There’s warmth nestled in the inner rings, but with it comes a dash of concern.

Fuck, Faye! This could've all been avoided if you just focused on yourself, your career. If you stopped chasing after guys to fill that hole in your heart.

I pull back, severing our arrangement. “I should’ve *done* something.”

“Stop,” Kit snarls, the intensity behind the command alone shaking me to the core. “This is *not* your fault. You need to understand that.”

Kit leans over the center console and hooks his forefinger under my chin, his thumb tracing the edge of my jawline. “This is *his* fault, okay? This is all on *him*. *He* took advantage of you. This small-dicked asshole took your freedom, your choice, and he’ll be paying for every second of it for the rest of his miserable life.”

“Why do you care so much?” I blurt out before I can stop myself.

The first smile of the night surfaces over his extremely kissable lips. Extremely kissable, and extremely dangerous.

“Because we’re friends.”

Friends? I’ve never hated one word so much in my entire life.

BAD DECISION CENTRAL

F *riends.*

Did I seriously just say that? Why did I say that? Why couldn't I just tell her the truth?

I want to be so much more than just friends.

Those beautiful brown eyes of hers haven't stopped staring at me, and she bats her lashes bashfully. God, I want to kiss her right now. So badly. But I can't. I can't, and the pain of it smothers me like a weighted blanket.

Not just because I'd be betraying Hayes, but because I would never take advantage of her vulnerability. The last thing she needs is for me to come in and make her life a thousand times harder. I have to be here for her as a friend. It can never be anything more.

Unspoken words press against my throat, wanting a one-way ride off my tongue, but they refuse to budge. Great. She's made me inarticulate. My nerves have never been so out of control around any girl before.

Just being in her presence lures me to the edge of a steep cliff, baiting me to plunge into the roiling waves below, to let my body be flung every which way upon the soft chirp of her voice or the flick of her finger. She has a hold on me that she'll never realize. A hold that, no matter how hard I fight against, is about as strong as tungsten and just as unrelenting.

She's still curled in on herself, looking three times as small as usual in the seat next to me.

As much as I wanted to see Faye during my trip, this is the last circumstance I ever wanted to meet her under. It's taking everything inside of me not to hunt that fucker down and make him eat his own intestines. Faye doesn't need me playing vigilante though, and I'd just upset her more if she found out her date's body was discovered rotting in a sewer pipe.

Swallowing my anger down, I start the ignition. "It's late. You should get some rest," I say.

Faye rams her teeth into her lower lip. "Okay."

I don't bother with making small talk, knowing how exhausted she must be. So we sit in silence for the ride to the hotel. It's the longest silence I've ever experienced, every second torturous, every hitch of her breath sparking a foolish hope that it might turn into a sentence. I occasionally steal a glance at her, hoping that her furrowed brow and downturned lips will magically right themselves. They don't. In fact, she keeps her body angled toward the window for the rest of the drive.

When we make it to the hotel, it dawns on me that I might've made the worst decision of my life, because when I flick on the light...it illuminates the single queen-sized bed in the middle of the room.

Fuck. How could that important piece of information possibly have slipped my mind?

When I bid a look at Faye, her eyes are wide, like she's a deer caught in headlights. She looks scared, and I can imagine why after the trauma she just relived.

"I can take the couch," I blurt out, panic swooping low in my stomach.

Even though my legs are guaranteed to hang off the edge, I'll have no room to roll over, and my muscles will probably scream at me for a hot shower in the morning, I'd take days' worth of neck pain to make sure Faye is comfortable.

She gives me a stunted shake of her head, her long, caramel hair swaying with the movement. "It's okay. We can

share the bed,” she says, though the tremor in her voice betrays her.

I hate seeing her like this. So...drained of her natural light. Faye’s the embodiment of everything pure in this world, like the furry, white heads of blooming dandelions swirling away in a summer breeze, or the way seafoam laps between your toes before dissolving into damp granules of sand.

I know—that’s some sappy, poetic shit. I’m not sappy; I’m not a poet. In fact, the only compliments I usually give girls focus on how big their ass or tits are. If they’re lucky, I’ll throw in some shit about getting lost in their eyes.

I’ve never had great relationships with women. Well, *emotional* relationships. Growing up, my parents never provided me with a model of what a healthy relationship is supposed to look like. They fought all the time, rarely ever spent time together, constantly blamed one another for the most trivial things, and never showed any affection. And all of that translated to the way I treat women—no strings attached, no consideration for their feelings, no effort invested aside from wrapping it before I tap it.

But with Faye...it’s like she’s personally redesigned my fuckboy DNA. Ever since I met her at Hayes’ initiation party, I’ve had a little bit of a thing for her. She’s drop-dead gorgeous in that girl-next-door way, funny as hell, and can bring any grown man to his knees.

But I never pursued her. One, because Hayes would probably murder me. Two, because I’d convinced myself it was nothing but a crush. I tricked myself into believing that she was just another girl and I’d eventually switch my infatuation with her for a supermodel or a B-list celebrity.

But this...*crush*...it’s been gnawing at me for four years. I haven’t been able to shake it. Every time I’m with a girl—whether I’m inside her or sucking her tit—my mind can’t help but stray to the freckle-smattered little sister of one of my best friends.

And now she’s here. In my hotel room.

I roll my jaw. “Faye, I want you to be as comfortable as possible.”

She doesn’t say anything. She’s shivering despite the room being warm, and that’s when I realize she’s still in her tiny scrap of a dress.

“Do you want to take a shower?” I ask, lightly touching her bicep. She doesn’t entirely flinch, but I can feel her muscles tense under my fingertips.

Her bloodshot eyes blink up at me, cheeks concaved from a pent-up breath. “I don’t have a change of clothes.”

“I can lend you some,” I coax, walking over to the dresser and fishing around for a soft, cotton shirt. I also pull out some baggy shorts for her. Both of which will probably be too big.

She hesitantly takes the folded pile from me, scuttling toward the bathroom. The door snicks shut, and after a few minutes, I hear the shower turn on.

While I wait for her to finish, I starfish on the bed, the mattress dipping under my weight. The digital clock on the nightstand blares a daunting 3:45 a.m., and I can feel exhaustion pull at my limbs as my eyelids shutter closed.

The whole night replays in my mind, and I’m a memory away from a migraine just waiting to squeeze my brain until my thoughts themselves turn into splinters of fiberglass.

The second I hear the door open, I haul myself up. Steam filters out, along with a pall of hot air, and Faye’s five-foot-five body emerges from the impending fog, the hem of my shirt ending at her knees. Her hair is in slick tangles, the dew from the shower lifting some color onto her face, and the shirt—which fits her like a dress—muffles her slender curves.

Jesus. I want to hug her, touch her. I want to hold her in my arms and never let go.

I absentmindedly rub the edge of the comforter between my fingers, but it does nothing to abate the nerves rumbling inside me. “How are you feeling?”

She ponders my question as if it's the most confusing thing in the world, then murmurs, "I'm, uh, I'm okay."

I scoot to the side to make room for her on the bed, and she tentatively makes her way over to me. She sits down on the mattress, barely making a dent.

Even though she's just washed away the remnants of the night, I can still smell the faint oven-baked peaches scent that lingers on her. Whether that's from her shampoo or body wash, I don't know, but it's addicting, and it makes me want to nestle my nose into the crook of her neck.

Her unconvincing words percolate through my mind. I don't think she'll be okay for a long time. I don't think she has been in a while, and I wish I'd been aware enough to notice.

The gaping maw of guilt sinks its teeth into me. "I'm headed back to California tomorrow, but I don't want to leave you alone," I tell her, keeping my hands to myself, though they itch to finger the corkscrew of hair by her ear.

"You don't have to stick around for me, Kit."

"I don't like the idea of you being by yourself while you're working through this."

She sighs. "I've been working through this by myself for a long time."

Fuck the professionalism.

I take her hand in mine, interlocking our fingers, doing my best not to crush her bones in the process. "I hate that you've been carrying this all by yourself," I confess, the words like ash on my tongue, sickening my palate.

I'm half-surprised she doesn't pull away from me.

"Kit—"

If I wasn't currently holding Faye's hand or two thousand miles away from home, I'd be beating the ever-living life out of my punching bag. "I wish you would've told me, Faye. I wish I'd been there for you. You don't have to do this all by yourself. You shouldn't."

“I’m used to it,” she insists, the gloss over her eyes barely there, but visible enough to make me want to dry her unfallen tears.

“You shouldn’t have had to *get* used to it,” I retort.

Sensing my poorly veiled anger, she withdraws her hand, exchanging the comfort to pluck her necklace—a nervous habit she’s seemingly perfected whenever I’m around. Her fingers twist aimlessly in the silver chain, so much so that I wouldn’t be surprised if there’s a line of discoloration around her throat.

The sight of her so helpless, so broken, barely hanging on by a thread...it’s a fucking sucker punch to my gut.

“Things like this happen, Kit. A lot of girls have to live with this.”

I’m not sure if that’s a poor attempt to get me to calm down, but it only riles me up more. Before I regret saying the wrong thing, I opt for a word vomit that I’m partially certain will have Faye running for the hills the first chance she gets.

“Come back with me to California. Just for the summer,” I say.

PROCEED WITH CAUTION

Did those words come out of Kit Langley's mouth? Did any words come out of my mouth?

I don't think they did. In fact, I think I snorted. Like, a full-on pig snort.

"What?" I exclaim, feeling my heart leap into my throat.

His words, albeit straightforward, aren't easy to digest. This is a serious proposition. Short-term commitment, even platonic, isn't in Kit's wheelhouse. If he invites a girl back to the house, it's for one reason, and one reason only. Being in the same square footage as him for months...it doesn't seem like a good idea.

What if I fall for him more than I already have? Not just head-over-heels, but head-over-body, tripping until I fall into a sad pretzel shape on the ground. What if I accidentally walk in on him showering? Yes, that scenario is hypothetical, but it's not unlikely. I'm not strong enough to resist whatever freaky mojo the gods have blessed Kit with. He's like catnip, and I desperately want to rub myself all over him.

I've seen the Hemsworth body Kit has, with an insane amount of abs and enough muscle to make him pop out of any normal shirt like dough from a Pillsbury can. And don't get me started on his endless, droolworthy tattoos. Those renowned tiger eyes on his forearm have given him his hockey nickname of "Big Cat," and his reputation definitely precedes him. He's a force to be reckoned with on the ice, with skill,

strategy, and strength that can't be matched by any other player in the league.

I won't physically be able to resist him. And I can pretty much hypothesize that I won't be able to resist him emotionally, either. All this coddling...it's not Kit. He's never shown me this much compassion. I don't think he's ever shown *anyone* this much compassion. I thought I would like it, but I don't. I feel like he sees me as some problem he needs to fix.

Not to mention the fact that if I do agree to go with him, my brother will be curious as to why I'm really staying. I always let him know if I plan to visit him beforehand.

"Let me take you back to California. We can tell the guys that you got some time off work and wanted to come up and visit. You can stay in my room, and I'll take the couch."

This whole idea doesn't even scream proceed with caution. It screams: TURN BACK NOW BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE.

Unable to bring myself to outrightly reject his offer, I do the next best thing and try to dissuade him.

"Kit, this sounds ridiculous." Exasperation slithers between each drawn-out syllable, and that schoolgirl part of me is wishing he'll call my bluff, sweep me off my feet, and kiss me with enough passion to set off a Fourth of July fireworks show.

He doesn't do any of the above. Just frowns.

God, even his frown is attractive. No matter how tightly he cinches his lips, that bottom one will forever be in a plump, protruding pout. It should be illegal to be this handsome.

"Why? We're friends."

"Uh-huh. I'm aware." I stab my finger through a fraying hole in his shirt.

Confusion blooms across Kit's expression. "Is something wrong?"

Lungs flaming, breath sparse, stomach doing an unnatural flipping motion, I don't sugarcoat my next sentence. And in

hindsight, maybe it could've done with a little bit of sugar.

“You’re just treating me so”—I pause, making a wild gesture with my hands—“weirdly.”

His eyes track my awkward flapping, and he gives me a piercing stare that could melt me into a puddle of goo.

Note to self: don’t look into Kit’s eyes unless you want to spontaneously combust on the spot.

“I’m not treating you”—he clears his throat, imitating me in a high-pitched voice— “weirdly.”

Indignation oozes through me, hot and sticky like tar. “You are,” I counter. “You’re not this type of person. You’re treating me like I’m fine china, about to break at any moment. I know you may look at me differently because—”

“I don’t look at you any differently, Faye.”

I spring to my feet with a groan, beginning to create a trench in the carpeted floor as I pace back and forth. I need to move, or I’ll end up ripping the hole in Kit’s shirt two rings wider. “You do. You might not be able to see it, but *I* do. I’m not some problem you need to fix.”

Kit keeps his tone measured. “Who said you’re a problem?”

I ignore his question. “I called you because I trust you. I knew you wouldn’t make a big deal about this like my brother would. I didn’t ask for princess treatment.”

Rationally, I shouldn’t be angry with him. He’s worried. He’s just trying to help. But I am angry. I’m angry that I got myself in this situation in the first place. I’m angry that now I’m debating with Kit about temporarily moving in with him. I’m angry that I couldn’t handle this myself—that I had to rely on someone else to pick up my shattered pieces and try to hot-glue them back together.

One person. One moment. That’s all it takes. One second, and suddenly, it undoes all the progress I’ve made since the night I was eighteen. I’ve been doing good by myself. I’ve been keeping up with school and work, living on my own,

only calling my brother monthly. The night of the assault was shoved to the farthest recesses of my mind, but now it's floated back up to the edges.

“You're mad at me because I care?” Kit exclaims.

When he puts it like that...

“Yes? No? Ugh! I just want things to go back to normal. I don't want our friendship to be so serious. I don't want you to know about my fucked-up past. I don't—”

In all my blabbering, my awareness must've taken an impromptu vacation, because I don't notice Kit stand up, nor do I register that he's holding my face before it's too late.

His touch silences my aimless tirade. Kit's large palms cup my cheeks, his thumb flirting along the silk of my lip, inches away from invading my mouth if he so wished. He stares down at me with those nightshade eyes of his, hunching his broad-framed shoulders.

“Things can't go back to normal, Faye. And that's okay. I'm thankful you trusted me with what happened to you,” he says, and as mad as I want to be at him, I'm not.

I feel the anger deflate from my body, escaping my half-open mouth in a whoosh of exhaled air, evaporating into the atmosphere.

“I'm sorry if I'm coming on too strong. You're not a problem. I just...I care about you. A lot more than I care about most people. I want to be here for you. I want to offer you support when you need it, even if you're adamant about pushing me away.”

Tears bead on my lashes, waiting for me to blink so they can leave track marks over my skin. Pain takes shape in my throat, a golf ball that hinders any and all words.

I've never had someone go out of their way this much to help me. And having that person be Kit makes all my hormones go haywire.

Kit thumbs a stretch of skin below my eye, which means I must be crying right now. If I am, I'm too numb to feel it.

“Just because you’re used to taking care of yourself doesn’t mean you should be. Accepting help isn’t a sign of weakness; it doesn’t diminish your strength or resilience. You’re stronger if you acknowledge you need help,” Kit coos softly, making my heart flare brightly in my chest, so much so that someone could probably use it as a homing beacon from miles away. “You’re so content with carrying all this weight on your shoulders. Now let me carry some of it for you.”

And for the second time that night, I lose to my emotions, letting the body-racking sobs rupture the silence of the hotel room. Kit steadies me in his arms, envelops me in his warmth and safety, and presses his lips against the crown of my head. He’s whispering something, but I can’t hear what he’s saying. When I eventually get past the hiccups, I pull back, not bothering to wipe the snot off my puffy face.

“It’s late. You’ve had a long night. Let’s get some sleep and see how you feel in the morning, okay?” he proposes, leading me over to the side of the bed.

He pulls back the covers and helps me get settled, disappearing briefly into the bathroom only to return with a glass of cold water. I take the drink from him and gulp it down greedily, relishing the coolness flooding my esophagus, ridding me of my parchment-paper tongue.

Kit turns off the lights before I watch him climb into bed, but I can feel his Sasquatch body sidle up to mine, though his arms don’t wrap around me.

I wish they did.

NEXT STOP: CALIFORNIA

When I wake up in the morning, sunlight toasts the tops of my shoulders, slanting over my face and compelling me to crack open an eyelid. The room is already starting to heat up, made evident by the clump of sheets pooled at the foot of the bed. I glance toward the digital clock, which says, 9:05 a.m.

Considering I passed out the moment my head hit the pillow, I haven't had a lot of time to think about Kit's proposal. Speaking of Kit, I peek over my shoulder to see how he's faring on his side of the bed, and that's when I notice that he's pants-less. He must've shucked them off because of the heat, and now all that greets me are two large, round globes of ass barely contained in the thin covering of his boxers.

Oh my God.

I stifle a squeak and immediately turn back over, squeezing my eyes shut like the image will just magically poof out of existence. Don't get me wrong, it's a fantastic ass. But it seems...wrong to be ogling him this early in the morning. Or at all.

Aeris, my brother's girlfriend, told me about hockey butts, but I never really believed her. Until now.

You could fully bounce a quarter off that thing. Or use it for insulation in the winter.

I roll onto my back and stare up at the ceiling, reprocessing everything Kit told me last night. Though it's pretty hard to get my mind to focus on anything when the hard, muscled plane

of his back is taunting me. Ridges and hills, all tanned to perfection, rippling slightly with each rise and fall of his breath.

Kit wants you to stay with him. Not just at the house, but in his room. He wants to spend the summer with you.

He wants to keep an eye on me.

He likes you.

He pities you.

Since hockey season is over for them (the Reapers made it to the playoffs but lost in the conference semifinals), the guys are all on their off-season, which means that me physically being there won't interfere with any of their schedules. Honestly, being around family might be a good distraction for me. I can't waste my summer by worrying over what's already happened.

One downside of this plan is lying about only coming up because I missed everyone. It's true, but it's not the full truth. I don't keep secrets from my brother. Hayes and I are close. It feels wrong keeping this from him, showing up to the house under disingenuous circumstances, but telling him isn't an option. And now, it looks like staying in Pennsylvania isn't an option either.

Kit's offered to look out for me; he's relinquished his room. He's putting in a lot of effort to show me he cares, and I didn't ask him to. He's rearranging his schedule to make room for me. This matters to him. And I'm beginning to think it matters to me too.

While I'm dealing with the insane spiderweb of thoughts in my head, I feel something warm settle over my stomach, and it breaks me out of my bubble of anxiety. Kit's tree-trunk arm has braceleted itself around me and, judging by the soft snores still emanating from him, I don't think he realizes he's half-cuddling me.

Holy shit. What do I do? Uh, uh, uh. Do I move him?

I shimmy to the best of my ability, not wanting to startle or wake him, but I barely even touch him before my whole body

is yanked into his torso. He brings my back flush with his chest, arm still protectively draped over me, all while mumbling incoherently under his breath. When the rustling ceases, Kit's body is an immovable mountain next to me.

Oh my God. I think he's spooning me. I get a good whiff of his cologne as it clouds around me, and heat radiates off him in waves. It feels good to be in his arms, despite them crushing me.

I turn slightly to face him, my spine creaking from the throes of sleep. "Kit," I whisper, prodding his shoulder with my hand.

He stirs, and although the movement is minuscule, my hammering heart ducks behind my ribs. Do I want to wake him up? Do I want to subject myself to a Kit-less cuddle? I...

Suddenly, Kit's eyes fly open like he telepathically sensed my creepy staring, and the second they land on mine, they grow comically wide. His arms retract and he instantly jackknives to a sitting position, blurting out a rather disjointed apology.

"Shit. Sorry." The words rush out.

I've never seen Kit blush before. So I'm a bit shocked to find him as red as a beet.

I mirror his position, splaying my back against the headboard. "It's fine," I say, trying to diffuse the tension with a nonchalant hand flap.

He scratches the nape of his neck, the action making those freakishly toned abs of his flex. Four lines, eight squares of muscle, about as hard as those marble statues around UPenn's campus.

Stop looking there. Look at his eyes. His eyes! Where are his eyes?

I wipe away what I'm hoping is drool from sleep and not lust, successfully locating his eyes and forcing myself to hold his gaze.

Seemingly unaware of my ogling, Kit cards a hand through his disheveled hair. “Did you sleep okay?” he asks.

His voice has the right amount of grizzle to wake my lady bits from hibernation, and I have to remind myself that no matter how badly I want to jump his bones, doing so will result in a downward spiral for both of us.

“Yeah, I slept alright,” I reply, my fingers drifting up to my necklace, searching for relief. It’s how I alleviate a lot of my anxiety.

My whole body swims with nerves as my pulse capers, sweat beginning to trickle from my hairline down to my forehead.

A tiny divot develops at the corner of Kit’s lips. “That’s good.”

“Yeah.”

“Yep.”

“Mm-hm.”

Oh my God. Why is this so awkward now? No, no, no. If this is how Kit and I interact, I can’t be stuck with him for the whole summer.

I finger the birthstone laying against my chest. “I’ve been thinki—”

“Do you want breakfast?” Kit cuts in, reaching across me to grab the room service menu on the nightstand.

“I—what?”

He pretends to pour over the menu. “What do you feel like? Omelet? Bagel? Sausage and bacon?”

My eyebrows hike up. “I’m okay, thanks. But I think we should talk about—”

Kit swings his legs over the mattress, stretches, then saunters over to the phone, giving me an unobstructed view of his sculpted and squeezable ass. Even though his face is hidden from me, I can tell he’s harboring a lot of tension in his shoulders.

“God, I’m starving. Maybe I should just order one of everything. Are you allergic to anything?”

Moving faster than I think I ever have in my life, I appear right behind him, waiting for him to turn around. And he does, the phone hovering a few inches from his ear.

My knees are about to collapse beneath me. “I want to come with you. To California,” I say, my gut plummeting to the earth’s mantle. The second those words materialize between us, they quickly turn into an inextinguishable silence, and I begin to regret letting them spew out.

The phone clatters to the floor, and Kit stares at me like I just confessed to a murder.

“Are you sure?” he inquires quietly, as if he doesn’t want to be asking.

I pause for a moment. This summer could change everything. Am I ready to take that risk? Am I ready to deal with the consequences if it backfires? I have to believe that the good outweighs the bad. I have to.

“I’m sure,” I affirm confidently.

A CRUEL SUMMER INDEED

I didn't expect Faye to take me up on my offer. In fact, I wasn't even sure if I'd see her during future holidays because I had to go and make things awkward between us. But by some miracle, she said yes, and now she's standing scarily close to me.

Sun-dappled and glowing—even despite sleep trying to mute her beauty—Faye stands at the height of my chest, staring up at me, enthusiasm playing in her russet eyes. Golden light, as soft as silk, outlines the profile of her face, dusting over her barely there freckles.

She looks beautiful.

My gaze gravitates toward her eyes, which might seem like safe territory if it wasn't for my desire to get lost in them.

“I honestly didn't expect you to say yes.” The reality of the situation hits me square in the chest like a boomerang. The side effects of my proposition—namely anxiety and uncertainty—take turns folding my stomach into an origami crane.

Faye looks up at me through her lashes, a smile rounding her lips. Lips that I would give anything to kiss right now.

“You made some good points,” she explains, reaching down to pick up the phone. When she leans past me, I catch a faint blush spill over her cheeks. She puts the phone face-down in the handset, effectively ending the call.

“I could use a distraction from all of this. And you’re right, you know. I need to work through this around people I trust.”

Am I retaining what she’s telling me? Not really. Am I memorizing whatever is responsible for her heavenly peach smell? Yes. Am I memorizing the speckles of honey strewn throughout her brown irises? Very much so.

She suddenly sobers, pushing her lower lip out and crossing her arms over her chest like she means business. “You just have to promise me something.”

God, she looks cute even when she’s trying to be intimidating.

“Promise?” My voice cracks—which I didn’t think was even possible anymore—and I pass it off as a throat clear, which may or may not be very convincing.

“Promise me you won’t tell Hayes about what happened here,” she says, something formidable lurking in her eyes, threatening to probably snipe me where I stand if I don’t agree to said promise.

Hayes is one of my best friends. No, I don’t feel great keeping the truth from him. But, given the situation, it seems justified. And it’s not really my secret to divulge.

“I gave you a chance to mull over my offer, and you accepted. You’re giving me a chance to mull over your offer, and I’m willing to do whatever I can to make this summer easier for you. If that means keeping your secret, then I, Kit Patricia Langley, promise not to tell Hayes what happened here,” I pledge, planting one hand over my heart.

Faye cocks her head, snickering. “Your middle name is Patricia?”

“Unfortunately, yes. And none of the guys know that, so I’m praying you won’t say anything.”

That spark that I know lives within Faye—the one I’ve always admired from afar but now have the privilege to witness up close—lights her up brighter than any goal lights. It’s like, in this fleeting moment, she’s sloughed off the pain, and I can see through to the depths of her very essence. And if

you ask me what that essence looks like, it's a radiant, glowing ball of fire, one that has every possibility of charring me alive.

But I don't think I'm afraid to get a little burnt.

Her eyes hood to catlike slits, her voice roughening to a husky whisper, one that makes my dick perk up in my boxers. "I don't know. I kind of like the idea of causing a little trouble."

Fuck. Trouble with Faye sounds like the perfect pastime.

I swallow thickly, my Adam's apple bobbing in my throat. "You wouldn't dare."

She catches her bottom lip between her teeth, feigning innocence. "How else am I supposed to keep myself entertained this summer?"

I don't know how, but she's somehow moved even closer to me, her breasts practically brushing against my chest. This weird, primal urge washes over me to pull her closer and kiss her with abandon, using my tongue to map the inside of her mouth and the suppleness of her skin and the swell of her curves. I wonder if her pussy tastes as sweet as I've imagined—glistening, pink, begging to be defiled.

"You're gonna make this summer hell for me, aren't you?" Nervous energy thrums through my veins.

"You're telling me that the big, bad Kit Langley is afraid of a little trouble?"

"When it's fun sized and dangerously addictive like you, I am *very* afraid."

Easy laughter breezes out of her, lyrical sounding, soft enough to cushion my eardrums. "I never would've thought it'd take someone like me to bring you to your knees."

Uncurbed desire simmers deep in my gut, popping like oil against blistering steel. "If you wanted me on my knees, Faye, all you had to do was ask," I drawl, taking advantage of the proximity to ghost a knuckle along her jawline.

Her breath hitches from my touch, her eyes falling closed, like she's soaking up every last second of us being alone

together. “You can’t say stuff like that,” she whispers.

“Say stuff like what?”

Faye’s eyes pop open, and her short-lived smile flatlines. “Kit...”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable.”

I want to say I didn’t mean it, but I did.

“It’s not that. I mean, this is all just some harmless flirting, right? It’s not like anything’s going to happen between us.”

Ouch.

Emptiness saws through me with jagged edges. My heart’s always been half-empty, and I used to fill that hole with booze and girls and hockey. But with Faye, just an arm’s length away from me, I think she could be the cure for my perpetual heartache. Except she doesn’t want this...*me*.

“Is that what you want? For nothing to happen?” I ask, my world giving out underneath me.

Please don’t say yes.

“If we complicate things between us, it could put a strain on our friendship—on the group. You don’t want that, do you? You couldn’t possibly want me.”

My heart blips in my chest, singing out for her. Except as loud as it sounds in my ears, it’s a noiseless mumble in hers.

I should be careful with what I say, but it’s like my brain short-circuits whenever I’m near her. “I could, and I do. Nothing has to change. We don’t have to let this thing between us uproot the friendship we’ve already built.”

Tears pool in her Bambi eyes, her entire body trembling, and even though I want to reach out and silence her tremors, she’ll just steer away from me. “I don’t do casual, Kit. I’m not some conquest you can just toss aside when you get bored. I’m not interested in fucking for the sake of fucking. I want to mean something to someone.”

Faye means more to me than she’ll ever know.

It feels like all I've ever known is chaos—having to deal with the aftermath of my parents' divorce, trying to prove to the entire hockey world that I'm more than a trust fund baby, never letting myself grow close to someone because I don't know if I could ever truly love them. I don't know much, but I know one thing for certain: winning Faye Hollings' heart isn't a game. It's the end of the line.

“I would never ask that of you.”

It dawns on me that Faye will never believe a word I say unless I prove it to her. So I do just that.

Adrenaline skyrockets through me, tipping me to Faye's lips, and I swallow her in a kiss that seems to stop both time and my heart. She meets my mouth with hesitancy at first. I wait for her to pull away, but to my surprise, she retaliates with an intensity as blinding as volcanic lightning. Electricity pulses through me, and when my tongue finds hers, she lets out the most delicious moan.

That tiny taste of a sound—orgasmic in all the right ways—makes my cock strain painfully against my boxers, weeping at the mere idea of being inside of her. Just thinking about her tight pussy clenching around my girth, moving me deeper with her slick arousal, has me harder than I've ever been before. I'm pretty sure there's pre-cum staining my underwear right now.

My hand comes up to root in her hair, and I bring her into my body with a forceful pull, loving the way she fits around me like we were made for one another. Her arms slink up my back, and I'm grateful for my lack of shirt, granting me full feeling of her fingernails scoring into my skin. She clings to me like she doesn't want to let go, like breaking our connection will make the heavens themselves crumble to dust.

I don't want to let go, either.

But eventually, one of us has to. And Faye does.

When she pulls back, her cheeks are splotchy, and her lips swollen. Then she starts whacking me on the arm.

“You kissed me!” she screeches, not ceasing her onslaught.

I wince and try to shoo her away like she's a pesky fly. "Yeah, I was there! Why are you hitting me?"

"Because"—slap—"you"—slap—"kissed"—slap—"me!"

When I unfold from my standing fetal position, she's huffing and puffing, red in the face from exertion.

"It seemed like the right thing to do at the time!"

"It wasn't!"

"That's not what your body was saying," I argue, gesturing to the erect state of her nipples against *my* T-shirt. And yes, I'm fully aware that my dick's at full mast right now.

She gasps and immediately covers her breasts.

"Oh, yeah? Well, you're no better!" Still keeping her arm plastered to her chest, she waves at my engorged crotch with a stiff hand.

I don't even bother looking down. "No shit, Faye. I'm so fucking hard right now that I can't think straight. *You* do this to me. No other girl does, okay? All of the girls I've been with haven't held a candle to you. You're all I ever think about, and it kills me that I can't have you."

Faye's expression drops like a stone in ice-cold water, the frustration leaching from her eyes. Her arms fall to her side, and I want to smooth the little crease between her brows.

Her voice is quiet and wobbly. I almost don't hear it over the boisterous clamor of traffic outside.

"Do you really mean that?"

I caress her cheek, beginning to believe that I might wither away if I don't touch her. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you sooner. I didn't know what you would say. I was worried it would scare you away."

"I'm just as much at fault as you are," she says, her lashes kissing her brow bone as she stares up at me.

I show her some eyeteeth. "Then I guess we're both big idiots."

I manage to elicit a genuine laugh from her, and I'm pretty sure my heart grows two sizes just from hearing it.

Her hand rests over mine as she leans the slightest bit into me. "My brother's going to kill me, isn't he?"

"If he's going to kill anyone, it's going to be me," I admit, and upon seeing the frown twisting her lips, I quickly fire back, "But it's fucking worth it."

Faye sighs out the weight of the world, which doesn't seem humanly possible given how tiny she is (at least compared to me). I expect her to keep arguing with me, but she doesn't. All she does is hug me, her small arms wrapping around me, her nose smushed against my pectorals.

I have no idea how something so simple, so ordinary, could bring me such immense pleasure.

We embrace for what feels like an immeasurable amount of time, until my stomach grumbles audibly and we break apart.

Faye's eyes round in realization. "I cock-blocked your breakfast, didn't I?"

"Maybe a little, but it's perfect. I want to take you to breakfast. At a real dining establishment that sells full-sized sausages instead of mini wieners."

She does a double take. "You want to take me to breakfast?"

It kills me that she seems so surprised, like she couldn't understand why I'd want to spend every second of my time with her. I'm obsessed with this girl. I'd give her anything she wanted. If Faye asked me to make her a dining table from scratch, I'd make her that goddamn table, even with my one woodshop class worth of experience.

Butterflies skitter inside me, creating a small windstorm with how much they're flapping their wings. "You're spending the summer with me, Faye. Eating breakfast with me is a requirement."

**THE SISTERHOOD OF THE
TRAVELING PROMISES**

Kit wasn't kidding about taking me to breakfast. Nor was he kidding about the freakishly large sausages at Crêpe You Later.

It's only a Wednesday, so the café isn't too packed. Crêpe You Later is a staple in Philadelphia. Low-light sconces line the walls of weathered bricks, tables are draped in checkered cloths, and a motif of wired whorls intricately weave themselves into the backs of chairs. Sunlight fans across the wooden floors, spilling down from a huge skylight in the ceiling. A plant fixture hangs from the pyramid shaped glass, a forest of green vines twisting over an auburn-colored, potted rim. Today, the display case is overflowing with a variety of pastries, from brown-butter raspberry tarts to maple-cinnamon muffins.

I always stop here before heading to work for a pick-me-up. Usually by myself. But I'm not by myself this morning. I'm sitting across from a famous NHL player who has crowds of fans screaming his name. I have a classroom of kids screaming mine. Kit doesn't belong here, just like I don't belong in California. I'll let myself have the summer, but the minute the leaves turn brown, this little fantasy of mine will be over. Kit and I would never work in the real world.

God. Never in a million years did I imagine this is how my life would turn out, in some weird situation with my brother's ridiculously attractive teammate.

"Earth to Faye?"

My gaze scrambles up from my strawberry and Nutella crêpe to reach Kit's eyes, and I do my best to ignore the spot of cinnamon lingering at the corner of his lips. As if receiving some telepathic mind waves from me, his tongue peeks out to clean the skin, and I involuntarily squeeze my thighs together.

"Sorry, uh, I was just thinking." I pick up my fork and stab at the golden-crust ed flour, spearing a cloud of whipped cream in the process.

Kit digs into his one of many breakfast plates, piling up squares of crêpe, syrup-slicked strawberries, and a spoonful of freshly ground cinnamon. His whole spread takes up the majority of our table—three crêpes, a side of sausage, scrambled eggs, hash browns, and a giant glass of pulpy orange juice. And he's already hoovered up most of it.

"Are you having second thoughts?" he mumbles through a mouthful of food.

The thought of consuming any more sugar makes my stomach clench. "No, no. I was just..."

"Because you can always back out, okay? I don't want you to feel like you're trapped. And I definitely don't want to make you feel uncomfortable at any point."

A wash of pink seeps into my cheeks. "I'm excited, Kit. Really. It'll be good to see everyone," I say, reaching for my water in hopes that it'll cool my burning throat.

"You know it'll be a two-day road trip, right?" Kit reminds me.

Two days. Two days being trapped in a car with the man who I want to ruin me in every thinkable way. It's always been hard for me to have sexual feelings when it comes to guys. I haven't even been sexually involved with anyone since the rape. But with Kit, it's a different story. *Everything* with Kit is a different story.

"I think I can survive two days in the car with you." I laugh, though it's nearly impossible to tame the quaver in my voice.

Kit doles out a blinding grin. “You know, I’m a pleasure to be around. Funny, handsome, conversational, a great big spoon. You’re getting the meet and greet without having to pay me anything.”

“I didn’t realize you were pursuing an escort job,” I joke.

“Oh, Faye. I would never charge you. You can have all this”—Kit gestures to his romance novel-esque physique, making a show of flexing every muscle he can—“for free.”

My mouth waters, and it’s not because there’s a half-eaten dessert on my plate. The pressure in my chest shifts a bit, now determined to crush my lungs.

“Please, you’re no Brad Pitt.”

“You’re right. I’m way better looking than that guy,” he drawls, snatching a strawberry from my plate and popping it into his mouth.

“I can think of some departments you could work on.” Lies. He probably exceeds in every department there is.

Kit stretches his arms above his head, making the hem of his shirt rise above that magnificent V arrowing down to the promised land in his pants. “I’m all for bettering myself. But I have to warn you, I’m more of a hands-on learner.”

He has the fucking gall to wink at me. WINK!

I roll my eyes as a diversion, but my resolve doesn’t last long when I get a quick glimpse of the dark hair trailing from his navel. Then his shirt billows back into place, and it’s goodbye, muscles.

“I don’t remember you being this cocky,” I tell him skeptically.

“That’s because I’m only on my best behavior when I’m around you.”

I snicker. “Is that what you call it?”

Voice molasses thick, Kit waggles his eyebrows, the lust in his eyes breaking through the surface, like a delicate fog lifting. “Considering you’d have a heart attack if you knew

what actually went through my mind, it is *definitely* my best behavior.”

Gulp.

I need to stop talking before I enter unsafe territory that I can't escape—i.e. talking about how dirty of a mind Kit has and then asking him to spell it out with his banging body.

The conversation stalls for a bit, only the murmur of the café filling the space between us. I've been too busy picking at my napkin to notice that Kit's been staring at me for God knows how long, an indiscernible expression looming on his face.

My spine immediately straightens, mental sirens going off in an obnoxious wail as embarrassment captures me in an icy grip. “Oh, God. Do I have something in my teeth?” My hand flies to my mouth, and I run my tongue over the front of my teeth.

Kit shakes his dark locks, little curls of ink knocking against his temples. “You have something...uh...on your face.” He points vaguely to my mouth.

“Kit, if this is one of your, ‘Oh, that’s just your face’ jokes...”

Kit snorts, then quickly composes himself. “No, no. It’s right by your lips.”

My finger gravitates toward one side of my mouth, but I don't feel anything.

“Your left.”

“This is my left.”

“My left.”

“So, my right.”

I'm pretty positive I've touched every square inch of my face at this point, and yet, no “something” to be found.

“Let me get it,” Kit offers, and before I have the chance to screech and disappear into my chair, he leans across the table, brushing his thumb over my bottom lip. His touch stokes a fire

deep in my belly, one that only grows brighter every time we're together.

A dot of chocolate decorates his digit, but instead of wiping it off like a sane person, his lips suction around his thumb, and he sucks it with a skilled mouth. Oh my God. Is thumb sucking café appropriate?

As attracted as I am to Kit, it's weird how my body—which has been conditioned to flee or fight whenever in a sexual situation—feels no danger in his presence. Getting intimate with another person has been hard for me given my past, and every time I allow myself to indulge in my fantasies, I always come away feeling shame and guilt. Sometimes I can't even get my body to cooperate with my mind. I view every pursuer as someone capable of hurting me, so I close myself off, never letting anyone get close enough.

But Kit's bypassed all my fortifications. Heavily defended fortifications, at that. And now he's in the heart of my kingdom, and I don't think he's planning on leaving any time soon.

"Got it," he announces with a lopsided simper, quickly shoving his hand back in his lap.

Still slightly shocked, any articulate sentences wane on my tongue. "Thanks." My heart's pounding like crazy, and if I was hooked up to a hospital monitor right now, that little zig-zag line would be zigzagging all over the place.

Kit stacks his empty plates and wads his napkin up. "So, we need to stop by your place and get your things, and then we can head out. I told the guys we would be on our way soon."

The guys. Right. The secret. One wrong move, and this entire summer blows up in my face.

I stare down at a little lake of syrup. "I don't have much to bring with me. Just the essentials. I don't want to take time out of your day—"

"Hey, there is no rush. I want to do this, okay? I want to be here with you."

Believing that someone genuinely wants to spend time with me is hard. I've always felt like a responsibility to Hayes. I just imagine how much better his life would've been if he didn't have to look after me. He could've been a teenager. He could've gone to parties and dances and done fun and stupid things. But instead, he spent his weekends at home, making me dinner and helping me with homework. I can't help but feel like I'm just a responsibility for Kit too...one *I* burdened him with.

Kit's brownie batter eyes drink me in, every hard line of his features softening. "You're getting in your head," he says.

I violently shake my head, as if that will somehow fling me out of my depressing mindscape. "I'm sorr—"

"And you need to stop apologizing." His tone is growly, brooking no room for argument, and I can feel the bass vibrate all the way in my bones.

"If it makes you feel any better, I've always felt the need to apologize. You know, as a woman in society."

"I don't want you to feel like you need to around me," Kit says quietly, and suddenly, it's like the whole café has been submerged underwater, chatter warbled and images distorted, with me and Kit in our own pocket of air. Crisp. Untainted. Something entirely our own.

"How do you always know just what to say?" I ask, and I don't think I'm fully aware that the question took on a life form of its own.

A gulp ripples down Kit's throat. "I don't. When I'm around you, I usually can't find the courage to say anything. You...intimidate me."

I intimidate *him*? Is he on crack? Kit—six foot five, who has never cried at a Disney movie in his life and is covered head to toe in tattoos—is intimidated by me, Faye, five foot five, who cries whenever she sees roadkill and has never done anything permanent to her body?

The math doesn't add up.

I frown, wishing human emotions could easily be decoded through some universal equation. They can't. Trust me, I've tried.

"That doesn't make sense."

Kit shrugs a shoulder. "Nothing makes sense when it comes to you."

His admission has my insides turning over. His words—tender as a bruise and just as lasting—echo in the cavern of my mind, and I bark out a fake laugh.

"Yeah, I can be a lot to handle," I murmur under my breath.

"I don't know if you've noticed this, but I have two hands. Big hands. Hands big enough to handle a sweet little thing like you." As if to prove his point, Kit crosses his arms on the table, the large hand in question resting against the crook of his elbow.

And now that I'm aware of how big his hands are, I can't stop thinking about them acquainting themselves with every curve and dip of my body. Our kiss alone awakened the feral animal inside of me, and now it's doing everything in its power to claw itself free.

I crinkle my nose. "I'm not that sweet," I huff.

"Princess, you're the sweetest thing I've ever tasted." Something heady falls into Kit's eyes, darkening them, and there's an imperceptible tic of his jaw.

Princess? That's new...and I don't *entirely* hate it. If I was called that by any other guy, it'd be an instant turnoff for me. But when Kit calls me that, it does unspeakable things to my ovaries. Things that I feel like I should only admit in confession.

I pray that my blush isn't that noticeable, but considering the lights wash me out, I wouldn't be surprised if I was as red as a cherry tomato.

Kit roughs his hair with his hand, the faintest groan catching in his throat. "Fuck, you're gorgeous when you

blush,” he says.

I know the socially acceptable response is to thank him and smile, but I can't get myself to do either of those things. Nobody's ever complimented me this much before, nor did they mean it as deeply as I know Kit does. He's so certain of everything. He always has been. Even after admitting how nervous I make him, how lost for words he is sometimes, he speaks with a decisiveness and truthfulness that comes from the heart.

The farther I fall down this Kit rabbit hole, the more likely I am to get stuck. Something festers deep within me, warning me that I need to think with my head instead of my heart. I'll never forgive myself if our friendship experiences irreversible damage. Not to mention that I couldn't live with myself if I betrayed my brother's trust.

With a conflicting mess of emotions inside me, I slide out of my chair, extending an outturned palm. “Come on, Casanova. Let's get this show on the road.”

**MOM, I THINK I MADE A BIG
MISTAKE**

How much luggage could one woman possibly need for the summer?

Apparently a fuckton, because the entire trunk of my car is bulging with miscellaneous suitcases and carry-ons. Every time the Jeep sways or stutters, something pings around back there like a pinball in a machine.

Faye seems a lot more relaxed than she did at breakfast, which is weird considering that it's just dawned on me how real my summer's about to become. I'm internally freaking out. I might've said a lot of charming stuff at the café, but oftentimes when I speak, I usually have zero recollection of what came out of my mouth. And whatever confidence was instilled in me during that blissful crêpe coma has dissipated into thin air.

Faye has her toned, tanned legs propped up on the dashboard, her dirty sneakers discarded on the floor, and each time I glance over at her, the hem of her Daisy Dukes has somehow risen even higher on her thighs. She insisted on changing when we got back to her place. If it wasn't for the air-conditioning, this summer heat would've already taken both of us out.

She keeps most of her attention on the vegetation outside, beams of sunlight casting shadows across her face and over the defined dip of her strawberry-stained lips.

Focus on the road, dude!

The drone of the radio makes for a distracting backing track in the cramped car, but it's so quiet that all I can hear is the heaviness of my exhales, the unending racing of my heart, and the shuffling of Faye's denim on my leather seat.

I let the silence stretch between us for a few miles, more than content with *not* making any small talk, but she pushes me out of the comfort of my nest like I'm a baby bird with its wings still glued to the side of its body.

"So, what do you guys usually do during off-season?" she asks, and I'm not sure if it's my imagination or the beating sun, but I swear I see her eyes sparkle.

My nerves break out into acrobatics, my fingers gripping the steering wheel at a rather aggressive ten and two. "I wish I could say we just sit around and play video games, but we're working out most of the time. Some of the guys golf, some of them swim. Anything that'll keep us in shape for the upcoming season."

Faye chuckles, and it sounds like the crunch of gravel under foot. "I don't think you need to do much to stay in shape."

I nearly gun the gas as embarrassment licks the back of my neck. The lurch of the car doesn't go unnoticed, and Faye flings out her hands to steel herself, one planted on the passenger door and the other planted on...my arm.

Her touch, even with no romantic intention, makes warmth blossom in my belly. I don't think that's a normal reaction to have. That's like—at least in my eyes—the equivalent of blowing your load just from a girl giving you some over-the-clothes action. I can't be a one pump chump.

I school my expression to the best of my ability, but that doesn't stop a distressed noise from escaping me. Like a sad, not fully formed, very unmanly squeak.

Faye immediately removes her hand. "Sorry."

My chest broadens as I load my lungs with oxygen. "No, no. You're fine. Sorry for the turbulence."

A coquettish smile teases her lips. “I thought turbulence was more of an air thing.”

“Considering you’re the one with an Ivy League education, you’re probably right.”

“Hey, don’t sell yourself short. UMich is a top-ranked university.”

My brows swoop together. “How did you know I went to UMich?” I ask, and those restless butterflies start to stir again. The only plausible explanation is that she stalked me on the internet.

She stiffens as her fingers, yet again, swirl around her necklace, rubbing the tiny amethyst like it’ll stomp out whatever unwanted feeling she’s warring with. “Oh, Hayes told me.”

“Hayes. Right.”

“Do you and your brother usually talk about me?” My voice has a teasing timbre, one that nudges her mouth into a perfect *O*.

Faye ducks her head away from me, that blush of hers coming back in full force. She needs to stop being so beautiful. God, this woman is like an itch I need to satisfy, a scratch that I can feel in the marrow of my bones. She’s unshakable.

“Of course not!” she refutes, sticking her tongue out. “It’s not like you’re the center of every conversation I have with my brother.”

Fuck. I want to bite her tongue, leave behind teeth impressions, mark her as *mine*. Give her a princess treatment she’ll actually enjoy. If I wasn’t being held back by this fucked-up situation, I’d pull over right now and spend the rest of the day worshipping every inch of her body. But even kissing her—without tongue, might I add—is a bad idea.

Hayes is my friend. I respect him. I live with him. We play on the same team. If he finds out I even *looked* at Faye a certain way, he’d have me eating ice for every foreseeable game in the future. And with a little more blood to the *correct*

head now, I also don't want to put Faye in such an uncomfortable position, no matter how badly I want her.

“Hey, no judgment here. I'm a great talking point.”

Something unreadable brews in her eyes, and it's blatantly obvious to me that I haven't been doing a good job of mitigating her worries. I can't even earn a half-hearted laugh from her.

“I can't believe I'm keeping a huge secret from my brother.” With a bow of her shoulders, she buries her face in her hands. “I didn't think it would be that big of a deal, but all of that's going to change when I'll be seeing him every day.”

I want to reach out and comfort her, but I'm pretty sure that would do more harm than good right now. I feel for Faye. I can't imagine going through something so traumatic, then having to deal with the fallout for the rest of your life.

My throat practically seizes shut. I have a feeling I know what she's trying to tell me, and I don't think I'm ready to hear those words yet.

She runs a hand down her weary face. “Maybe...”

The Jeep chugs forward a bit before I narrowly miss the bumper of the vehicle in front of me, revealing a sea of traffic that extends all the way into the hills we were scheduled to swerve through before it got dark. But judging by the number of cars, we might be here for a while.

“Maybe what?” I pry, trying to keep my impatience from spilling out.

“Maybe we should...”

“Should?”

“Never mind,” she finishes noncommittally.

I fight the urge to roll my eyes, tacking on a softer tone in hopes that it'll coax her out of her shell. “What is it?”

She plays with the stringy threads on her shorts, her leg bouncing like she's ingested three cups of espresso. “Maybe we should cool it with whatever's going on between us.

Keeping one secret is going to be a lot, but I don't think I can handle keeping two."

Whatever's going on between us.

Shit. There isn't even an actual word to describe what *is* going on between us. That has to mean it loses credibility, right? It's not a relationship; it's not a fling. It's not...anything. It was just a declaration and some mutual pining between two people who are foremost friends.

I knew her words were gonna have some kick to them, but I wasn't expecting them to be a goddamn loaded chamber against my temple. Can I even mourn something that never happened?

With my stubborn streak, I always fight to get what I want. But this time, it's not really up to me.

"Okay," I relent, afraid that if I elaborate, I'll say something that makes this ride a thousand times more awkward than it already is.

"Okay?" Faye parrots in disbelief.

Don't worry, I'm just as shocked as you are.

"If that's what you want," I say, digging my half-bitten fingernails into the leather of the wheel. The pressure isn't anywhere near strong enough to distract me from the feeling of my heart being sliced to pieces.

She turns away from me, and I barely hear her whisper, "It's not what I want. It's just what needs to happen."

In the past forty-eight hours, I've confessed my feelings, kissed the woman of my dreams, and somehow lost her. That has to be a fucking record.

"So, we should just pretend like I didn't kiss you." There's no venom in my tone—no *anything*. It hasn't hit me yet. I'm waiting for the weight of the situation to collide into me like some doped-up defenseman with a bodychecking agenda.

She chews the inside of her cheek. "Probably."

I shouldn't have kissed her in the first place.

“Okay, then.”

“I’m sorry, Kit.”

My breath trembles, and despite feeling sick to my stomach, I shake away the gray storm cloud hanging over my head. “You have nothing to be sorry about. You’re right. It’ll be easier on everyone if we stay friends.”

Faye hesitates with her mouth parted, like the word is foreign to her. “Friends.”

Traffic begins to disperse as the tension between us follows suit, and I force myself to focus on the road ahead instead of the disappointment clogging my arteries. Physically, she’s close to me, but emotionally, she’s a universe away.

I’ve never been a smart decision-maker. I’ve slept with girls I had no business of involving myself with. I’ve made dumb decisions during games that cost my team wins. I’ve said terrible things that I never should’ve uttered to another person.

But this...this has to be the worst mistake of my life.

**JUNIOR MINTS DON'T FIX
EVERYTHING**

“F aye.”

I bristle and nuzzle my head into the hard interior of the car, sluggishly trying to find the least painful angle to rest my neck. I don't know how people sleep in cars. They're so uncomfortable, and the rocking movement is giving me motion sickness.

Shaking.

The car's shaking.

Either a sinkhole is opening up under us, or someone's trying to rouse me from my non-REM sleep. I'm not sane enough to be awake right now. Mentally, physically, or emotionally. I'm running on two Red Bulls, a bag of Life Savers Gummies, and some questionably flavored beef jerky.

Maybe I shouldn't have been so...brazen with Kit. Maybe I should've waited to discuss our arrangement. I feel bad, even though I know I did the right thing. He hasn't said anything to me in hours, but that could also be because I've been pretending to be asleep. I want to go back to easy banter with him. I want to forget all this awkward tension between us. It makes me want to strangle myself with my seat belt.

“Faye.” That incessant voice, coupled with an impatient inflection, stabs at my ears.

I crack one eyelid open to test the waters, and when I see Kit's face occupy my entire line of sight, I freeze. Even drenched in darkness, his handsomeness glimmers like the

silver lining of a cloud. His breath is minty fresh, and there are notes of masculine undertones in that bergamot scent of his, making him still smell fantastic after eight hours in a car.

“I got you some Junior Mints,” he says, shaking the white box for emphasis. “I didn’t think you’d want a gas station hot dog.”

He’s right. In general, gas station food that’s not packaged or manufactured has no business being sold for public consumption.

Hunger echoes in my belly. “How did you know I liked Junior Mints?” I ask, accepting the candy from him with a grateful smile.

He deposits the rest of the snacks—except for a Kit Kat—in the back of the car, among my scattered luggage. “You were eating them at Hayes’ initiation party,” he explains, as if it’s the most obvious thing in the world.

“That was over four years ago.”

Kit unwraps his chocolate, breaking the spine of the Kit Kat. “Don’t you remember the catered desserts we had? You could’ve had any dessert you could imagine, yet you stuck with your half-melted purse mints.”

Halfway to popping said mint in my mouth, I wait to toss it down my gullet. “Is that the first impression you had of me?”

A roguish grin flourishes over Kit’s lips. “Oh, yeah. I was wondering who invited the old lady to our rookie’s party.”

“Hey! I’m not an old lady. Carrying candy around is a hip thing to do nowadays.”

“First off, only old people say ‘hip,’” Kit argues, not bothering to close his mouth as he chews. “Second off, you could’ve at least picked a more appealing candy.”

“More appealing? What’s wrong with Junior Mints?”

“What’s wrong with them? You’re telling me that when you go to the movies, you intentionally buy Junior Mints? Like, not as an alternative because they’re out of everything else?”

I clutch them to my chest like they're my own flesh and blood. "You know, you're very judgmental for someone who I saw eat a Hot Pocket after it fell on the ground."

"In my defense, that was a well-earned Hot Pocket. And it was the last one. Of course I still ate it," he exclaims, narrowing his eyes at me, though he's doing a piss-poor job of disguising his smile lines.

I place the hard, smooth outer shell on my tongue and crunch down on it, relishing the gush of mint over my tastebuds. "I'm just saying that I should be allowed to enjoy my 'old person' candy in peace if you're allowed to eat food off the floor like a dog."

Kit raises his arms in surrender. "You're right. I should be thanking them for getting rid of your skunk breath," he jests.

Gasping, I do a quick breath test—which I pass with flying colors, thank you very much—then I jab him in the ribs with my knife hand. "You take it back!"

He winces dramatically. "Ah! Why are your fingers so bony? And why do you always feel the need to resort to physical violence?"

I threaten him with another attack. "Because you're the only person in this entire world that incites enough annoyance in me to *need* to resort to physical violence," I grumble. I think the fumes of my irritation are poisoning my sensibility, because my fingers have this itch to leap into the hard curve of his side and discover whether or not he's as ticklish as he looks. And that's bad information for me to have. In fact, anything having to do with Kit's body is a topic that needs to be stuffed in a safe, smothered in chains, and thrown into the deepest reservoir.

"Being annoying is my friend-given right," he declares with gusto, devilry twinkling in his eyes.

I swallow another piece of candy, though the sugar doesn't seem nearly as overpowering as the flame-hot desire boiling in my chest. "You know, I can revoke that title at any moment."

"You could, but you like me too much."

He's right. He's right, and I hate it. I don't think Kit fully understands the effect he has on women. I'm pretty sure all he needs to do is bat his lashes and toss in a few flirty smiles to attract hordes of women to him like seagulls flocking to a piece of bread. I bet his pheromones could be weaponized.

"You're infuriating," I complain, stowing my Junior Mints in the door compartment. Feet free and legs tingly, I draw my knees to my chest, attempting to find a comfortable position for the next few hours.

Kit flicks his candy wrapper to the floor, then starts the car. "You're adorable."

I scoff. "Flattery will get you nowhere."

"Flattery gets me *everywhere*."

Dear God. Breaking things off is easier when your body isn't fighting you every step of the way. The concerning high heart rate, the jolting pulse, the sweaty palms, the dry mouth. Kit doesn't realize how bad I have it for him.

"Not with me," I say, but my pitch fluctuates to an embarrassing register. "I'm a hard woman to please."

A knee-weakening smirk strikes me down like a bolt of lightning. "I wouldn't be so sure about that."

I feel the aftershocks in the tips of my toes and fingers, feel the subsequent swell of heat reside beneath clammy skin. For the first time, I don't have a snappy comeback. All I can think about is the kiss we shared in the hotel room—how our lips met each other like long-lost lovers, how our bodies melded together with each stroke and sentiment, how I wanted to chase that Kit high for the rest of my life.

Road weary and in need of a good night's sleep—or three—I allow myself to drift into unconsciousness as dusk rolls through the sky. The bump and swerve of the road becomes home to me for the rest of the journey, with the occasional stop for the bathroom or more snacks.

The closer we get to our destination, the more nervous I become. This is set for inevitable disaster.

NOT FOR THE FAINT OF HEART

Two hours out. Two hours, and then I'll have to share Faye for the rest of the summer.

Even though she's been busting my balls this entire road trip (in more ways than one), I wouldn't trade our time for anything in the world.

She looks so peaceful when she's sleeping. The slight rumble of her snore, the rise and fall of her chest, the way she curls further in on herself whenever we hit a pothole or sharp turn. I'm crazy about her. So crazy that my heart hurts whenever I remember she's not mine to have.

I pull into a parking spot right in front of Starbucks, kill the engine, then spend about two prolonged minutes staring at her. I haven't been able to get that kiss out of my mind. It was life-changing in so many ways for something so simple, so human. I've never felt more at peace than when she's in my arms. She's my sun, and I'm the idiot orbiting around her.

I gently wiggle her foot, and it takes about a second of consistent shaking before her eyes snap open and she pins me with a withering glare.

"Can I help you?" she grouses, the groggy rasp of her voice making my boxers suddenly feel way too tight.

"I'd be a lot nicer to me considering I'm the one driving you," I say.

She simply rolls her eyes and stifles a yawn, shoulders the door open, then stretches out her legs like she's the one who's

been suffering from a lack of legroom. “How close are we?”

I mirror her with a stretch of my own, but unlike her, I crack about every bone in my body. “About two hours out.”

“Are you sure the guys are okay with me crashing their summer?” she asks, flattening down a rumpled tress of hair sticking up on her head. She checks for any other deviants in a preening manner, then smooths down her tiny tank top. The embroidered daisy in the center of her shirt, right between her small, perky breasts, catches my wandering eye. The neckline has fallen a bit, revealing the tops of her neon-colored bra cups—which I can see anyways through the practically translucent fabric.

A frown cuts across my face. “Of course they are. They can’t wait to see you,” I reassure her.

I hold the door open for her, receiving a small smile as she steps into the bustling coffee shop. The aroma of coffee grounds waft through my nostrils, luring me to a display case of overpriced pastries and breakfast sandwiches. Not worth it, but substantial after days’ worth of junk food.

She shies behind me. “But I probably ruined their bachelor plans.”

“Bachelor plans?”

“Yeah, you know, the Three Bs: booze, boobs, and bed,” she explains matter-of-factly with a cocked hip.

Amusement threatens to split my lips into a beaming grin, but I tamp it down. “You think that’s what we do for the entire summer? Drink, fuck, and sleep?”

She deadpans. “You’re a house full of mostly single, professional hockey players.”

I shuffle forward a bit as the line dwindles, the chatter of the shop growing in volume as names and orders are shouted from behind the register. Flashes of green uniforms teleport around the packed space, and the hiss of machines only adds to the chaos of the Friday morning—patrons ranging from students with deadlines, authors with writer’s block, and

everyday customers with a hankering for watered-down caffeine.

“Ye of little faith,” I tsk, shaking my head. “*I* would never be so reckless, or so promiscuous.”

Faye bursts out into a loud goose honk, doubling over, even wiping invisible tears from her eyes. “Oh, God. That’s funny. Which is saying something since you’re very unfunny.”

“I’ll have you know, I am *very* funny. You just don’t understand my charm.”

“Is that what we’re calling it these days?”

“I’m going to leave you stranded here.”

“I’d like to see you try. I bet you wouldn’t even get that far before missing me.”

She’s got me there.

Without saying anything, I bide my time by looking over the chalk-scrawled menu, deciding on a sausage, cheddar, and egg sandwich, a blueberry muffin, and an Americano, while Faye settles on some cake pop monstrosity, along with a sugary, pink drink that gives me a cavity just looking at it.

I eye her as I swipe my credit card through the card reader. “There’s not a lot of protein in that,” I say, nodding to the cake pop now gripped in her hand.

“Must you comment on everything I do?” She takes a big bite just to spite me.

I grab the little baggy that has my sandwich and muffin. “I’m just looking out for you, Princess.”

Okay, I’m aware that pet names aren’t really keeping things “platonic” between us, but I can’t deny that it doesn’t suit her. Blame it on a Freudian slip. I don’t see her as some damsel in distress that needs to be saved; I see her as a princess who deserves to be adored, to be spoiled, to be tended to at her beck and call. And fuck, I’d give anything to be her prince.

While we wait for our drinks to be made, Faye and I stay a good distance apart, but it doesn't feel natural. We're close enough that it's obvious we came together, but not close enough to reveal the nature of our relationship. No brushing of shoulders or hugs from behind. No discreet smiles or mindless talk. Just...space.

It's too early for me to be awake, much less for my nerves to be eating away at me. "What do you want to do this summer?" I inquire, catching her off guard.

"I haven't really thought about it," she answers, swallowing the last of her dessert and tossing the stick into the garbage.

My free hand scopes the start of stubble peppering my jawline, and I faintly remember the way her palm felt brushing over it. "This is your summer, Faye. No school, no work, no responsibilities. You can do whatever you want. It's like a vacation, but in a more disgusting part of California that has zero beaches and an influx of heroin addicts."

"Hmm, when you put it like that..."

I wait for her response with anticipation, my eyes doing a slow drag over her pursed lips, the fold of her arms that just so happen to conveniently push up her tits, the nervous twitter of her foot against the tiles.

"A day out on the water would be nice."

"That's it?"

"Yep," she replies, keeping her focus on the stressed barista behind the counter. Faye's standing right next to me, but she's staggered herself a bit—maybe in a futile attempt to escape this conversation.

I don't have to move much thanks to my long stride, and I stop right behind her, dipping my mouth to the hollow of her throat, a single breath away from making contact. "Don't you want to do something more...*exciting*?" I whisper, watching a shiver unravel through her body. I don't touch her. I hover like a specter, either waiting for her to fight or flee, but the raised

hairs on the back of her neck are warning enough that she'll do the latter.

She opens her mouth to say something, but we're interrupted by the frazzled barista yelling out my name.

"Kit! Kit's drink is ready!"

I reach past Faye and grab both of our drinks, offer a pageant-winning smile to the woman who looks like she constantly gets fucked by twelve-hour shifts in the soul-sucking heart of capitalism, then usher Faye out the door.

As she makes a rather exaggerated traipse toward the car, she slurps noisily through her straw. "Why can't you just leave me to read and rot for the summer?"

"That's how you want to spend your summer? Inside, hiding away from sunlight like you're some vampire, staring at a bunch of words?"

"I don't want to go into anything with expectations. I want to relax. I want to take things at my own pace. I don't want to be treated like a—"

"—princess," I finish, opening the passenger door for her.

She narrows her eyes. "I can open my own door."

I keep my hand firmly planted on the door. "I'm a gentleman."

A loud groan pops out of her as she climbs into her seat, and I get an indeliberate face full of ass. I didn't realize how short her shorts were...*back there*. Faye's too busy buckling herself in to notice that my face has drained of all its color, so I take my time rounding the car, trying to leash the runaway thoughts that beckon me to say *fuck it*, and let my inhibitions fly.

"You're a lot of things, but a gentleman isn't one of them." Faye chuckles, stirring her straw amongst a pink sea and floating buoys of ice.

I set my drink down in the cup holder, then get to working on the steaming sandwich calling my name. "You're really bad for a guy's ego, you know that?"

“Oh, I know.”

She takes another long pull from her drink, her lips tinted from the dye, her cheeks hollowed. She overestimates and sucks too much liquid out, resulting in a few drops dangling from the hole of the straw. I shouldn't be so invested. I shouldn't be watching her. None of this should be sensual. Her tongue flicks out to catch the droplets, and I have to tear my gaze away before I'm too hard to drive.

I shouldn't think about her tongue tracing the length of my dick, lapping at the crown before repeating the process until I'm leaking for her. I shouldn't think about the heat of her mouth as she engulfs me, the little noises that slip out of her, the way her nose presses against my full and aching balls. And I definitely shouldn't think about talking her through it—her choking me down until she can fit every inch inside her perfect mouth, saliva pooling and stringing from the corners of her lips, her hand pumping me at the base with equal enthusiasm —

“Ugh, it's like talking to a wall sometimes.”

Faye, who's ditched her drink, has her arms crossed over her chest in her usual Kit-you're-an-idiot look, complete with two laser beams shooting from her eyes.

“Shit. I'm sorry. I totally spaced,” I say, fairly certain that she either gave me a heartfelt monologue or admitted some deep, dark secret.

I don't know if it's the guilt exuding off me or the perfect puppy dog pout, but her face softens incrementally.

“You're forgiven. But only because you bought breakfast,” she mutters.

Phew. Crisis averted. For now.

I quietly begin to tuck into my meal. “Please repeat what you were saying,” I implore, my tastebuds rejoicing at the first flavor rush that doesn't seem to be overly seasoned or sweetened.

“It's not important.”

Sausage, cheddar, and egg? A great combination. Sausage, cheddar, egg, and that sour pit in my stomach? Not a great combination. “It is. Anything you say is important.”

She makes herself at home again, toeing off her sneakers and throwing her legs up. “I was just talking about how thrilling reading can actually be. It’s relaxing but stimulating. You’re in this other little world, experiencing it for the very first time. You don’t have to worry about your shitty desk job or the errands you have to run tomorrow. You can just... *escape*.”

I finish my food in two more bites and brush the crumbs from my hands. “Is that what you like to do? Escape?”

“I think so. My life hasn’t always been that great, and during times when it isn’t, I look for a way to get out of it,” she explains in neither a sad nor happy tone.

“What do you read?”

She looks at me strangely, like she can’t believe I’m engaging in something *she* finds interesting. I don’t blame her—I’m not very well-versed in compassion or empathy. I’m trying to be better. I’m trying to think of others before I think of myself. It’s easy when I have someone like Faye, whose whole job relies on emotional connection, to teach me not to wish death upon people who inconvenience me.

“It’s embarrassing.”

I flap my hand. “I bet it’s not. Hell, you could tell me you read porn, and I wouldn’t judge you.”

Faye grows deathly silent, evades my eyes, and blushes so brightly it looks like she’s glowing.

Holy shit.

My jaw drops open. I wouldn’t be surprised if my tongue lolls out either, because picturing shy, sweet Faye reading some of the dirtiest things in her books has my steel-hard cock stressing against the zipper of my pants. I adjust my legs as discreetly as I can, but I’m pretty sure my high-pitched, prepubescent-sounding voice gives me away.

“Didn’t know you could read that now,” I croak.

She continues to eschew eye contact. “Yeah, it’s very popular in romance books nowadays.”

“Mmm” is all I can manage. And not an, oh-that’s-so-interesting-tell-me-more “mmm” but a please-stop-talking-or-my-dick-will-explode “mmm.”

I have two hours for this boner to deflate. And then I’ll have two months of trying to convince her, Hayes, and myself that I’ve never been more unattracted to a woman in my entire life.

HOME SWEET HOME

When we pull into the driveway, anxiety sneaks into my heart, conducting a cacophony of beats. I know that Kit said the guys were excited to see me, but now that I'm here, my feet are cold.

The house is as beautiful as always, except this time, the browning stalks I remember from my trip in November have evolved into beautiful blooms painted in pastel colors, with lush foliage covering every last bare swatch of land. It's so hot that I'm certain I could fry an egg on the sidewalk, and the balmy air isn't helping, either. My skin can't decide between sweating Pennsylvania out of me or cracking from the glaring dryness. I forgot how hot California is.

Kit insisted on carrying my luggage in for me—saving me the wheezing that usually accompanies any heavy lifting I do. I told him I could at least grab a bag, but as usual, he declined. So much for *not* getting treated like a princess.

I'm not sure what's waiting for me on the other side of the door. Knowing Hayes, probably just a hug. Knowing the rest of the guys, possibly a welcome banner, balloons, and a confetti popper waiting to temporarily blow my eardrums out.

Here I go. This is it. Faye's Super Awesome Fun Time Summer starts now.

Opening the door just a smidge, I hesitantly stick my foot over the threshold, mentally preparing myself for the social stimulation I'm about to undergo. But much to my surprise, when I get all the way inside, my hearing remains intact, and

my social battery doesn't drop to red, get-me-out-of-here territory.

No one is here. No decorations. No...nothing. The whole house is empty.

Huh. Maybe they're all doing something? I have to admit, it's kind of nice not to be the center of attention. It's nice to just...move all my things in without having to entertain an audience. No questions. Just complete and utter silence—

Kit bursts into the living room like a hotheaded bull, his bulging forearms lined with bags varying in size and weight, my two suitcases gripped in each of his unnaturally large hands. Every bag hits the floor simultaneously, and the collective noise reverberates through the empty living room, making me cringe.

“Eight bags,” he grits out, catching his breath. A trip like that would've destroyed me, but Kit is barely even sweating. His arms are red, though. And veiny. *Very veiny*. Have they always been that veiny?

“I offered to carry some of them.”

He ignores me as a rumble rips through his throat. “The guys said they'd be here.”

I dance my fingers along the back of the couch, reveling in the cooled atmosphere and the lack of UV rays trying to burn my skin. The house is huge, but it seems even bigger without hulking hockey players inhabiting every square inch.

“I'm sure they're just busy. Honestly, it's nice not to have a welcome party,” I say, channeling relief through a deep exhale. “I don't want to be treated any differently.”

A low-key summer sounds pretty nice. For once, my usual state of anxiety has ebbed to a hardly noticeable hum.

Kit tangles his fingers in a shock of midnight hair. “I'm sorry. I swear I told them our ETA.”

He brandishes his phone and opens up the Find My Friends app, where tiny little icons are scattered across the map, far away from the house.

“Kit, it’s fine, really. I don’t expe—”

A rambunctious clamor comes from upstairs, ear-piercing and house-rocking to the point where I’m sure the whole block heard what sounded like a mini earthquake juggling the furniture. My blood freezes, my heart does eighty in a sixty, and sweat breaks out in places I didn’t even know I could sweat.

Kit drops his phone when he snares my wrist, and he yanks me from out in the open, pulling me into his hard, warm body as we hover in the shadows. My hand is glued to his chest, where I can feel his own heart scrambling for safe passage.

“There’s someone in the house,” he whispers, and upon seeing my eyes widen, his hand comes down over my mouth, trapping my gasp.

Even though I always feel safe in Kit’s presence, whether he’s holding me or not, right now, I’m seconds away from pissing my pants. There’s an intruder. In the house. Oh my God. Do they have a gun? Are we about to die? Will anyone find our bodies?!

Fear twists my stomach as bile threatens to eject from my mouth. Kit’s strong arm cradles me, gripping so tight that I can feel his nails imprint my flesh. My spotty vision tunnels, my breath lapses, and my teeth click-clack together from the violent shakes convulsing through my body.

“Stay here.”

My brain—already under immense stress—boots up a few seconds too late before realizing what “stay here” means. Kit’s halfway to the stairs by the time my fingers claw at his arm, wrenching him backwards with a surprising amount of strength.

“Please don’t go up there,” I plead.

“I’ll be fine,” he promises, resting his calloused palm over my knuckles. His hand is rough, like sandblasted concrete, and I don’t know how to describe it, but it just *feels* like home. I grieve when his touch leaves me, when that familiar safety and security is stripped away.

I don't know what I'd do if I lost Kit.

He cautiously, meticulously climbs the stairs, so quietly that I'm not even sure he's breathing. Tendons protruding, shoulders reared back in a ready swing, I watch him walk his way to potential death.

I don't know why I don't just dial 911—like any sane person would do in an emergency—but instead, I plod after him, taking advantage of my brief adrenaline rush. It's not until I overestimate the distance and bump into him that he whirls around, realizing I've defied his one and only order.

We're right outside the room that's the source of the noise. Any hint that we're on the other side of the door, and it could ruin our leverage over the intruder. I can tell just how enraged Kit is, though—no verbalization needed.

More rustling reverberates from the room, less deafening than before, but still concerning enough to have Kit reaching for the handle. Treading uncharted waters, my guts tighten and squeeze in response. His other arm blocks me, and then, on the next crashing sound, he bursts through the door like the Kool-Aid Man.

I wasn't sure what to expect. I was ready to encounter a psycho with a chainsaw or a crazed Reapers fan, but what we find instead is a thousand times more terrifying.

A lamp on the floor amongst sloven debris, the main culprit of the noise most likely the toppled chair on the ground. It looks like the place has been ransacked. And I would think that if it wasn't for the two perpetrators at the scene.

My brother, Hayes, and his girlfriend, Aeris. One of whom is completely naked—that *whom* unfortunately being the person I'm related to.

My gaze pirouettes around the room, taking in the traumatizing sight of Hayes' wrists tied to the headboard and a blindfold over his eyes. Aeris, who I've grown to love like a sister, stands in a black corset, thong, thigh garter, and heels,

wielding a shoe in her hand and huffing like she just ran a mile.

Oh my God.

I can't decide whether I'm about to scream or puke. Scruke? Pream?

My haunted shriek permeates the air, and I fall to my knees, rubbing my fists so deeply into my eye sockets that I'm determined to scrub away everything I just saw. I shouldn't have complained so much. A welcome party would've been fine. A murderer would've been fine. Anything would've been better than witnessing my brother with his...*thing*...out like it's fucking Nude-A-Palooza.

Beside me—I think, I'm still vision impaired—Kit cackles maniacally, and I hear the shutter of his iPhone camera go off.

“Faye!” I hear Aeris squeal.

“Faye?!” Hayes bellows at the same pitch.

Still refusing to open my eyes, I lengthen to a wobbly stance, slurping in centering breaths. *Please be clothed. Please be clothed. Please be clothed.*

This is my worst nightmare, and that's surpassing the nightmare I had about my Furby becoming sentient and hunting me down to make a fashionable scarf out of my intestines. At least I was asleep for that.

I send one last prayer to the man upstairs, and then I peel my eyes open, even though every cell in my body is warning me not to. Aeris hasn't bothered to change, but Hayes has at least been given a pillow to cover his privates.

She runs toward me and envelops me in a bear hug, unfazed by the fact that she's missing a few crucial elements to her outfit. The sharp skeleton of her corset digs into all my fleshy parts, and she's got some surprisingly strong arms. Arms that are giving my spine a chiropractor treatment.

“Aeris,” I wheeze, feeling my face turn blue and my brain lose oxygen.

“Sorry!” she rushes out, immediately letting me go, her enormous breasts swaying from the movement. They’re big. *A lot* bigger than mine. I’d be lying if I said I wasn’t checking my brother’s girlfriend out. She’s gorgeous, sue me.

Aeris and my brother have been dating since September. Ironically, just like with Kit and me, it started with a secret. Or I guess a lie is a more appropriate word. Hayes made a questionable, alcohol-fueled decision one night, and he believed the only way he could better his image was to get into a relationship to show Reapers’ fans that he wasn’t the sleazeball everyone thought he was. Except his dumb ass didn’t tell Aeris their relationship was fake. But then, after a bunch of groveling and some pricey purchases, he earned her forgiveness. Now they’re living happily ever after together on the road to marriage. I think. I hope. I’d love to have Aeris as a sister-in-law.

They’re sickeningly perfect for each other. Complete opposites, but perfect.

“Why is the place a mess?” Kit pipes up, poking at a fallen vase with the toe of his shoe.

Aeris shakes the flip-flop in her hand menacingly, growling a little. “I saw a fucking spider! In the bedroom! And then I kept trying to chase it, but the little bugger got away from me. I swear they’re getting smarter.”

A full belly laugh soars out of Kit. “Hayes, anything to add?”

Hayes strains against the silk restraints, addressing the invisible people in front of him since the blindfold has yet to be removed. “Is my dick still out?”

“Your dick is not still out,” Kit confirms.

“Oh, that’s good. Not because I’m self-conscious or anything. It’s just...there’s a time and a place.”

I make an exaggerated gagging noise, though I’m not sure how much of it is exaggerated. “Please don’t talk about your dick in front of me.”

“Oh, Faye. How was the drive?” Hayes asks nonchalantly, trying to wiggle his way underneath some of the sheets without flashing everyone in the room.

I shield my eyes with my hand—for his sake and mine. “It was fine. You know, super boring. Just your average road trip.”

Not your average road trip. In fact, the most sexually frustrating road trip I’ve ever been on.

I can’t make it seem like I was excited to spend time alone with Kit, though. One crumb revealing my true feelings, and Hayes will sniff the truth out like a bloodhound. The leftover adrenaline from the maybe-intruder situation has let a hornet’s nest of nerves loose in my body.

Am I standing too close to Kit? Do I look too happy? Hayes can’t even see me right now, and I’m worried he’s telepathically reading my mind.

Aeris finally unties my brother’s wrists as she teeters on one heeled foot. “We weren’t expecting you until tomorrow,” she says.

I spare a puzzled glance at Kit. “What?”

With full mobility now, Hayes sheds his blindfold, subsequently massaging the redness out of his wrists. “Kit told me you guys were coming back tomorrow,” he clarifies, sitting up under the safety of the covers.

Kit’s teeth scrape together. “I said Friday. Today. June fourteenth.”

Aeris bends down to retrieve my brother’s pants—*shudder*—and tosses them in his direction. In one smooth motion, he swings his legs over the side of the bed and yanks them up to his hips, all while situated away from us.

“You said Saturday.”

“No, I said Friday.”

Hayes reaches for his phone on the nightstand. He turns it on, scrolling a bit before showing both of us his screen, which has their group chat displayed across the front.

KIT: Coming back Saturday.

“Ooh,” I say, turning to Kit and giving him a supportive pat on the shoulder. “That does say Saturday, buddy.”

Kit scoffs. “I meant Friday. I’ve been sleep deprived for two days, okay?”

Hayes chuckles as Aeris disappears into the adjoining bathroom to change. “Uh-huh. Right. Definitely not because you can’t tell the days of the week apart,” he mocks. “I don’t blame you. They all end in ‘day.’”

I don’t know if it’s the bloodshot eyes or the one protruding forehead vein, but Kit looks feral.

“If your girl wasn’t in the other room, I’d give you a suitcase wedgie.”

“I see those anger management classes I bought for you haven’t been working out.”

Kit makes a noise somewhere between a snort and a sneer, wheeling me away from my obnoxious brother. “I’m going to help you get settled so I don’t end up strangling your brother,” he whispers to me.

“I’d honestly help you.”

I don’t expect that to garner such a genuine laugh from him, but it does, and the melodious sound parades through my ears, ephemeral in nature but lasting in effect, like a brand on my heart.

Once Kit schleps all my bags upstairs, I get to work unpacking, occasionally fighting guilt when I see my very colorful, very girly clothing smushed beside Kit’s very dull, very plain clothing. It’s like a giant glitter bomb has gone off in his bedroom. I feel terrible for exiling him to the couch, but he insisted on giving me space.

After my comically extensive line of skincare has been put away, he comes to check in on me, doing that dreaded thing where he leans against the doorframe. This is one of my romance books come to life. Except Kit Langley is more attractive than any woman-written book boyfriend in

existence. A Brazilian heartthrob. He doesn't even need to flex for me to see every muscle through his clothing—from the defined washboard of his abdominals to the way the bulk of his chest stretches his shirt thin-tight. Broad shoulders that impede my line of sight, biceps big enough to crush my head, a robust back that's been handcrafted from stone, a tapered waist that brags the largest appendage hanging between his thighs.

I know I shouldn't be looking...down there. But when he was hard at the hotel, I got a clear outline of *everything*. His dick is like a goddamn third hockey stick, probably as thick and long as my forearm. So huge that I'm pretty sure I'd need to use an entire bottle of lube, or he'd have to break my legs over my shoulders—

“You done unpacking?” Kit asks, snapping me from my reverie.

I nod, tight-lipped, my stomach tumbling in a gold-winning gymnastics floor routine. I can feel the muscles in my face working, holding a smile, but with the curious look Kit's throwing my way, it doesn't seem to be very convincing.

“The rest of the guys just got here. I think Aeris is cooking dinner,” he relays.

“Aeris can cook?”

Kit shrugs. “I have no idea, but she wanted to have a special family dinner since this is your first night here.”

I think he expects me to jump for joy at the sound of food, but my unremitting anxiety's been sponging up my hunger for the past hour. I pinch my lower lip between my teeth.

“If this is all too much, I can just tell them to cool it.”

Sometimes even the best environments can be overstimulating for me, and I'm sure it doesn't help that I'm preoccupied with a lot on my mind.

“It's not that,” I sigh, fingering the thin, silver chain around my throat. “A lot's just happened these past few days. A lot of change. I don't deal well with change, which is ironic because nothing in my life has been very permanent.”

Boyfriends, parents. I've always had to adapt to change, but it's like pulling teeth for me. And now I'm here, on a vacation where I should be relaxing, when all I can think about is how I'm keeping this secret from my brother. It was easier when he wasn't physically around."

Kit sits down next to me. "You think he'll be mad?"

I want to laugh. I almost do, but my brain doesn't quite get the signal. "I don't know. I'm just...ashamed more than anything. I haven't reached out for help. I haven't told *anyone*. Nobody except for you, Kit," I confess, tears clumping on my lashes. "My dad wasn't around to care. And I just...I felt like my brother wouldn't understand. I think that he'd try to, but deep down, nobody could understand unless they've experienced the same thing. I don't trust therapists. I don't want people knowing this happened to me."

"But you told me."

"I did."

"Do you regret it?"

The static between us crackles, traveling from the base of my spine to the tips of my fingers, which I yearn to transmit into Kit's mouth, to fill him with the same surface-of-the-sun warmth that circulates through me. But then I glance at the ajar door, remind myself I can't go there, and that newborn flame gutters.

"I—"

"Dinner!" a voice calls from downstairs, capturing our attention.

I do my best to blink away the tears, glad that I hadn't entered the sniffing stage yet. "We shouldn't keep them waiting."

FRIENDS WITHOUT BENEFITS

Dinner is rowdier than usual, no thanks to Fulton's usual foot-in-the-mouth comments. The only salvageable thing is Aeris' surprisingly decent food—fully cooked, which I realize is a low-hanging bar.

Faye hasn't spoken a word since we all sat down. My eyes keep straying to her from across the table, watching her stab forlornly at a small portion of heavily drenched salad. The mixed greens are practically waterboarded in ranch, and she's stirred them enough times that I'm positive she has no interest in eating them.

Everyone else seems rather oblivious to her gloominess, but maybe that's because they don't know what I know. I'm honestly surprised Hayes hasn't picked up on her body language. I'm starting to understand that no matter what I say, nothing will alleviate her pain. It's a helpless feeling—a feeling I've never had to familiarize myself with, because I've never experienced it. I hate it. I hate not being able to help her. I hate watching her shut down. I don't know how to pull her back to me.

“Sorry we weren't here to give you an actual welcome,” Casen apologizes, quashing the noisy side conversations.

Dazed, Faye registers that she's on the receiving end of the conversation and perks up from her sulking. “Oh, it's okay. You guys really don't have to do anything for me,” she insists.

Bristol shovels a piece of steak into his mouth. “Of course we do. You're our guest. And our favorite Hollings.”

“I’d be offended, but they’re right,” Hayes agrees, pointing the tines of his fork at her, then biting the crispy potato on the end.

Fulton nods. “We were surprised you were coming at all.”

Gage kicks him underneath the table—which I only know because he does that frequently, and every time, Fulton winces like he’s been hit in the balls.

“Not in a bad way! We’re happy you’re here,” he corrects himself. “We just didn’t expect your next visit to be for a while.”

Faye’s face turns ashen, and the sight of it makes my heart jerk. “I just missed you all so much, you know? And my boss granted me some time off work since a lot of our students weren’t enrolled in summer classes.”

“I have no idea how you survived in a car for forty-eight hours with Kit.” Gage waves a hand in my general direction, smirking to himself while he kebabs a potato, a piece of meat, and some lettuce. “Dude has some of the worst jokes.”

“My jokes are hilarious,” I grumble.

“They aren’t *that* bad,” Faye murmurs quietly, a blush peeking out from the neckline of her shirt.

I’m staring straight at her like I have X-ray vision, wishing I could see those big, chocolate-brown eyes looking back at me. A smile would be nice, too, but that’s wishful thinking.

“Did he pay you to say that? Are you being held at gunpoint underneath the table? Blink twice if you’re in trouble, Faye,” Gage says.

I give Gage the middle finger, but all he does is blow me a kiss.

“Aeris, when did you learn how to cook?” Fulton questions, hovering his dinner up like the plate will be yanked from him at any moment.

Aeris fans herself. “Oh, I mean, it’s no five-star Michelin meal, but Hayes has been showing me a few things.”

“That’s not all he’s been showing her,” Gage quips under his breath, yet somehow loud enough for the whole table to hear.

Hayes chuckles, and I know that chuckle—edged with absolute madness. “Tell me, G. How’s *your* sex life going?”

“Great, thank you. I do it twice a day.”

“That explains why your arm’s looking bigger.”

The dining room erupts into laughter, Fulton red in the face at his friend’s expense. I even feel some of the tension in my shoulders loosening. I miss easy nights with the guys. I love the camaraderie that’s been created in this house. Even Aeris has been a great addition to our group— a sweet, no-nonsense kind of gal, who unfortunately has to put up with a lot of our immaturity.

Aeris rolls her eyes, pivoting the conversation. “So, Faye, we were thinking it might be fun to throw a pool party here at the end of the week. We’d invite the whole team as a way to kick off the summer. Would you be up for that?”

And...tension resumed. The food I just scarfed down is working its way back up. Pool party. I don’t think Faye’s in the right headspace for a party environment. I know what she’s going to say, though, even if she doesn’t want to do it. She’s going to say yes, because Faye is a people pleaser, and she would never want to be the reason for capsized plans.

“That sounds fun,” she responds with a tepid smile, the *scree* of her fork on her plate sounding like a silent plea for help.

“Maybe we should keep things low-key,” I chime in, hoping that the suggestion might mollify her. Usually I’m all for a wild Reapers party, but that’s the last thing Faye needs right now, and surprisingly, I couldn’t be less interested. Since I saw her sitting alone on that gas station curb, I’ve felt protective over her. In reality, there probably isn’t any harm in throwing a party. But I never think very clearly when Faye’s involved.

“Low-key? Coming from Kit Langley?” Gage’s brow arches, chaos blazing in his eyes. “This has to be a summer blowout.”

“How big of a blowout?” Hayes asks, sharing an implicit look around the table that says, *Little sister present, make good choices.*

Aeris reaches over to give his arm a squeeze. “Nothing too crazy. Right, guys?”

Everyone around the table gives a nod of agreement except for me. And that’s when every head turns, giving me the much-unwanted spotlight. I’m halfway through chewing a rather gristly cut of steak.

I swallow. “What?”

“You didn’t nod,” Gage notes.

“I did nod.”

“I didn’t see your head move.”

“It was a subtle nod.”

“Uh-huh.” His eyes stay narrowed on me, observing. Agh. I can feel him crawling underneath my skin.

Faye finally starts eating, nibbling daintily on her salad. “It’ll be great.”

Her voice is laced with a certainty that should chill me the fuck out, but her words from earlier stick in my mind, dredging up that protectiveness. Nobody told me that... infatuation... would feel like light flutters in your stomach or a bad case of indigestion. It makes me want to shield her from all the bad things in the world and take the brunt of the pain for her. I’d do it, you know. I’d go through the worst human experience in existence to make sure she’s okay, to see her eyes shine the way they usually do. And that’s when it hits me: Faye Hollings isn’t someone who drifts through your life. She’s someone who lingers, stays, and remains in your heart. And I think she’s carved her goddamn name on me.



AFTER THE DISHES are washed and the guys are in their respective rooms, I head upstairs to check on Faye. My back's currently mad at me for the less-than-stellar sleeping situation, but a few stretches and I should be as right as rain. I've had to sleep on the couch plenty of times when my room was occupied by strangers. Strangers I didn't even bring into the house.

I gently knock on the door, but when I don't hear anything, I open it to find my bed missing a tiny person. The sheets are thrown back like there's been a wild animal piling them together for a comfortable nest, and some of Faye's things have taken residence on the floor.

I'm about to call her name when she appears in the bathroom doorway, her toothbrush hanging out of her mouth, wearing nothing but a tank top and underwear. Wait a second...*underwear?*

I know the respectful thing to do is look away or cover my eyes, but I can't. I can't move. She's hexed me, broken my legs on a voodoo doll version of me. I'm immobilized.

"Kit!" She flings her toothbrush to the carpet, her hands immediately covering her lace front. Her shirt—I've discovered a theme—is alarmingly short, barely concealing the stiff peaks of her nipples, and ending just above her navel. Which leaves the most delectable sliver of stomach on display, begging me to kiss, taste, lick.

The lace of her panties is a bright fuchsia, riding high on her hips, no doubt revealing the most perfect backside. Perky and small, like a Georgia peach. I can only imagine the way it'll bounce when she rides me, how red her cheeks will be when I spank her and mark her as mine. My spit-drenched cock sliding in her asshole as I pull her hair, subdue her, fuck her like the good girl I know she is.

She slides on a pair of sweatpants, but I'm not sure if it's for her sake or mine. Although her thong's hidden, my

fantasies don't end there. No, Faye could be dressed in a trash bag, and I'd still find a way to rip it off her.

She leans down to pick up her toothbrush, her messy bun flopping around. "I'm so sorry. I should've put pants on. I forgot I wasn't living by myself."

Why is she apologizing? She never has to apologize for turning me on.

"Don't apologize," I say hoarsely, walking myself over to the other side of the bed, mainly because my traitorous dick is pitching a four-person tent in my pants.

She minces into the bathroom to spit, the sound of rushing water proposing that a cold shower might benefit me.

"Don't worry, I promise to be fully clothed from here on out."

I wish I could tell her how much I *hate* that idea. I adjust the bulge in my pants before she comes back into view. Her first night staying here, and my self-control is off the map and crash-diving somewhere in the Maldives. Two months. I'll never last.

She wipes up the spilled toothpaste on the floor. "Thank you again. For letting me have the bed."

I'm hot. It's hot in here. The last time I remember being this hot was when I had a hundred-degree fever. Am I sweating? "No problem. I just wanted to see how you were doing." The excess of saliva in my mouth makes my words sound mushy.

She sits down on the mattress, patting the spot next to her. Since she's half-turned away from me, I can't tell if she's on the verge of tears or not. Is this another serious conversation? I can't do serious right now. Not with...what's happening downstairs.

I stand still.

She pats again.

I don't move.

She looks at me, then looks at the bed, as if I'm a dog who needs to be shown what to do.

I should say something. I mean, she turned me on in the hotel room, but then again, we were both turned on. If I say something now, I'll look like a total creep—which I am. She doesn't want anything sexual.

“Kit.” Her voice goes low, a siren song meant only for me, luring me to her. It's not supposed to be sexy, but it is. And I can't resist her.

Her hand whacks the mattress rather aggravatedly. “Come here.”

Nothing's more embarrassing than admitting you have a boner for your friend's sister, right? Wrong. So wrong. Because the next set of words out of my mouth is...

“I have to shit!” I whisper-scream.

No, no, no. I did not just say that. Mouth, meet brain. Brain, meet mouth. Next time, get motor functions involved and just fast-walk out of there. You don't need to explain. Just leave. When one encounters danger, one flees. One does not reveal bodily movements in a last-ditch effort.

Faye's eyes are as big as saucers. “Uh...”

You can save this. Just excuse yourself.

I slowly start to inch toward the door, making sure my privates are out of view. “Yeah, don't think the food is settling right. I'm just going to go shit. Downstairs,” I ramble, perspiration rolling down my back, heart in my jugular.

Before she can say anything—or I can see the disgusted look on her face—I hoof it out of there and run down the stairs like I'm doing high-knees. I race into the bathroom and slam the door before groaning into my hands. This summer's already off to a bad start.

At least the boner's gone.

**PROMISES ARE MADE TO BE
BROKEN**

Half the week's already flown by. Despite all the years I've known Kit, I have *no* idea what's going on. He's been acting strange. Stranger than usual.

Don't get me wrong, so have I. Fighting the attraction I have for him has been nearly impossible. Just the other morning, when I was making myself coffee, he had to scoot by to grab something, and his hand brushed my waist. The space was small. So small that my ass got pretty cozy with his dick. This is all new territory for me. New, scary territory. Especially with a man so large that he could dominate me without barely lifting a finger.

It took me a second to recover. No meditative breathing or long walks could sate the overpowering animal inside me that hungers for him.

We haven't spent that much time together, but I've chalked it up to him not wanting to come off as too suspicious. Now I'm wondering if it's something I said or did. The dynamic's definitely changed. I was stupid to think it wouldn't.

Aside from the Kit fiasco, everything else has been smooth sailing. My brother hasn't pried, which is a very good thing. Aeris told me that she and Lila want to treat me to lunch soon. In a testosterone-filled house, that's a relief I didn't know I'd need. The guys have been respectful, accepting, treating me like the same old Faye.

But worry rears its ugly head, because I'm currently in a Costco with my brother, shopping for party necessities. I was

caught off guard when the party was first mentioned, but now I need the distraction. Hell, I welcome it. Not working or having school has left me alone with my thoughts, and my thoughts and I don't get along.

Hayes loads the cart up with 24-packs of beers, basically shoving aside the hot dogs, burger patties, and inflatable basketball hoop we've bought so far. My flip-flops slap against the concrete floor as we walk, one of our cart's wheels screeching underneath the sheer weight.

"Jesus. Do you need this much alcohol?" I ask, wrinkling my nose. I only drink on occasion, but I've seen my brother go through cases in a single weekend.

He laughs, digging around for the crinkled list in his terrifying beach shorts. They're bright yellow with printed tropical fish and palm trees. "Did you forget this is going to be a team party?"

"So a huge dong party basically."

Hayes squares his jaw. "Faye, that's disgusting."

"Then even the ratio," I say.

"Low-key, remember? Aeris will kill me if there's a bunch of puck bunnies roaming the house." Hayes pushes the cart along until we get to the condiment aisle, where he sweeps equal amounts of ketchup and mustard bottles off the shelf. As we push our way into a more miscellaneous aisle, he grabs a crossword puzzle book.

"A crossword puzzle?" Hayes doesn't like puzzles. Never has. Says they're manufactured to be unsolvable.

He shrugs. "Aeris likes crossword puzzles."

His comment wrings a smile from my lips, and I sock my brother on the arm.

"Ow!" He glowers at me as he rubs the target zone.

"You're going to marry her, right? I mean, puzzles are a pretty big deal. You don't compromise with anyone."

"I *compromise* with people."

“Stop deflecting,” I hiss, grabbing the ballpoint pen from my brother’s back pocket and crossing some of the items off the list. “Do. You. Want. To. Marry. Her?”

He dawdles, barely pushing the cart, smearing his hand down his face like he’d rather be anywhere else but here answering my inquisition. “Of course I want to marry her, but we’ve been together less than a year.”

“Giving it time isn’t the worst decision you’ve had.” Aversion to complimenting brothers must be a hardwired sister trait.

“Thank you.” Pride hangs between each word, and I roll my eyes.

“Yes, yes. It’s a big feat for someone as stupid as you,” I mock, sheathing the pen in my short’s pocket. Out of the two of us, I’m definitely the more organized sibling. Lists and itineraries make my lady parts swoon, which is why this vacation has thrown me for such a loop. I don’t like things that are out of my control.

We round a busy aisle, passing an overwhelmed mother with a calvary of five children, all of whom are sticky-faced and snot-nosed as they run around like little gremlins. It reminds me of the students I work with. It reminds me of Pennsylvania...of familiarity.

“What about you?” He pushes me into the hot seat, waits for it to heat up, then leaves me to burn alive.

“Me?” I sputter, choking on air. The audacity. How do I unsuspectingly change the subject? Should I lie? Make up some fake boyfriend I have back in Pennsylvania? But then word’s gonna travel like wildfire, and what would Kit think?

We’re not together.

Speaking of out of my control, that’s where my feelings toward Kit seem to be.

“Yeah. How’s your love life been?”

Hah. I can’t help the roar of laughter that bursts out of me, and everyone in the vicinity stops to stare at me. I clear my

throat awkwardly before shooing them back to their shopping.

“That bad, huh?” Hayes says sympathetically, inclining his head, looking like he’s about to pat me on the shoulder and say, “There, there, champ.”

I reel back from any potential consolation. “Nuh-uh. No way. Don’t look at me like that,” I demand, keeping my upturned hands between me and him in case he...*hugs*...me.

“Look at you like what?”

“Like a Disney cartoon dog begging for food,” I say with exasperation, wholeheartedly wishing I could uncork all my tightly wound feelings for Kit and let them go free into the world. Have someone else deal with them for a change.

Hayes leans his mile-wide shoulders over the cart to snatch some napkins. “Fine. I won’t sympathize with you.”

“Good,” I mutter triumphantly, blacking out the word NAPKINS on our list.

A bottled-up sigh. “At least tell me that Kit’s been a good host.”

Kit. Fuck.

RED ALERT! RED ALERT! WEE-WOO, WEE-WOO. BRAIN IS NOT EQUIPPED TO HANDLE SUCH SENSITIVE INFORMATION.

The punch of my pulse drowns out any other noise in my ears except for the resounding smack of my heart against my ribs. Is this what dying feels like? “Yep. Super great,” I force out, wiping my clammy palms on my frilly shorts.

Oblivious—thank God—Hayes’ eyes scan the shelves, looking for our last item on the list, which happens to be the coveted SPF 50.

“It was nice of him to drive you up.”

“Oh, uh, yeah.” Real nice.

“Why didn’t you tell me you were thinking of visiting?” he asks as we meander through a throng of people. All of the

aisles are beginning to blur together, or maybe that's due to my body overheating.

The lie pierces my throat like some kind of amateur tracheotomy. *Why didn't I tell you? Oh, just because it was a spur-of-the-moment kind of thing. Yeah, reliving a traumatic experience can make you do some crazy things.*

"I wanted it to be a surprise," I blurt out, picking up my pace, desperately hoping to end this shopping spree as soon as possible, or at least get in the car where I can use music as a diversion. Where is the fucking sunscreen? Why are aisles in Costco not labeled?!

My brother frowns. "You know I hate surprises."

AHHH!

"It was Kit's idea."

Hayes freezes in his tracks, ponders me, then lets out a long groan. "Of course it was," he mutters, shaking his curtain of blond hair, not bothering to move the fallen strands out of his eyes.

When in doubt, blame it on Kit. Always.

"Just promise me something." His voice adopts a brotherly tone, one that I only hear him use when things are serious. Skin snow white and sweaty, pulse lost somewhere in purgatory, tension bunched in every muscle, I regard him.

Promises got me into this mess—the worst kind of promise too. Promise is a strong word, a commitment, something I'm not capable of right now. I can't promise myself not to fall for Kit. I can't promise Hayes whatever he's about to ask; I can't do anything.

My stomach burns with guilt. "What?"

"If at any time you want to go back home, you tell me, okay? If you just need to get away, or if the guys are too overbearing. All I ask is that you talk to me about how you're feeling. I know how you can get when an environment is too overstimulating."

I barely even register that Hayes has acquired the SPF 50. I don't pull out the list and cross it off. I don't move. I don't breathe.

"Yeah," I lie, my feet fumbling for friction as the rug gets pulled from beneath me. "I promise."

**LET'S GET PHYSICAL! (WITH
EACH OTHER)**

The house empty, Hayes' words on the back burner of my mind, yoga mat stowed safely under my arm, I head to the living room in search for an escape. Yoga will get some blood flowing to my head, right? I just need some time to myself...to think. Every day, it's like I'm getting closer to telling my brother the truth. Close, toeing the cusp, but never fully committing to sticking my foot in the deep end.

Kit and I haven't really talked since the first night. Sometimes I'll catch him glancing at me when he thinks I'm not looking. Sometimes I'll be the one watching, and he'll catch me before I have the chance to turn away. If we brush past each other, there's always some hand on some body part—whether it's intentional or not. But despite all of this, we haven't spent time alone together. My brain knows it's for the best, but my desert-dry vagina protests. The only time I'm ever wet nowadays is when I'm in the shower. I need to channel this sexual frustration into something, otherwise I'll fucking explode—little, sad pieces of Faye splattered on the walls.

The guys are at the rink right now, so I have the house to myself for the first time since I arrived. It's nice. It's peaceful. I don't need to chant a calming mantra to myself to lower my blood pressure.

Or maybe I do, because when I round the corner to the living room, I run into a solid wall of muscle, making me practically spring back from the impact. There's a hand on my arm as I blink back blurry constellations, and when I look

down at whoever is gripping me, the corrosive touch makes so much more sense.

Kit's large hand assaults my eyes, stark, blue-gray veins snaking over the ridge of his knuckles like vines. My mouth dries up when our gazes meet, my heart pumping wildly in my chest.

"You're here," I squeak, my yoga mat unfurling and dropping to the ground. "What are you doing here?"

So much for a Kit-free afternoon. I battle the anxiety cresting inside me, the close proximity of our bodies launching my lust into full throttle. He smells good. I mean, he always smells good, but something about a day's worth of musk has a pulse throbbing down below—insatiable, insistent, inconvenient.

Kit's megawatt grin showcases those pearly whites of his. "I live here."

"I mean, why are you here? Why aren't you with the guys?" I don't mean to sound so brash, but this is really putting a kink in my plans. I can't get anything done with a tempting, six-foot-five distraction like Kit.

He leans down to retrieve my mat. "I came to check on you. But I see you're...busy?"

I snatch it from him with a lip curl. "I am, yes." I march my way to the center of the room, sprawling out my little slice of paradise—a slice that he's disturbed. He pads behind me, not bothering to keep a respectable distance between us.

"You've been avoiding me."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," I say, clicking the television on as I search for a quick YouTube yoga session. I didn't think I'd be sweating this much. I haven't even done any yoga yet.

"Oh, really? Then why haven't you stopped to look me in the eyes?" he asks, the rugged rasp in his voice turning my core molten, each stretched and heavily played syllable a methodical endeavor to make me tick like a waiting time bomb.

To spite him, I flash him a glare that could put him six feet under. “I’m looking at you.”

“I didn’t know you did yoga.” His bourbon eyes give me a once-over, dropping to my tight-fitting leggings and crawling slowly up my body until he reaches the slight V of my cleavage.

“I do it when I’m stressed.”

“You’re stressed?” A frown weasels its way onto his lips, concern clouding his expression. His worry would be heartwarming if it wasn’t for the irritation prickling the back of my neck. He knows damn well why I’m stressed.

Squatting down to the mat, I start stretching my legs out to my sides, my tense muscles groaning, and I second-guess if I should switch my workout for a hot bubble bath instead. I haven’t done yoga in months, and if Kit’s going to sit on the sidelines and watch me, I’d rather not embarrass myself in front of him.

I don’t answer him. My silence should be answer enough. Instead, I lean over my other extended leg, feeling a nice stretch in my side body.

“Is it because of Hayes?”

A slow blink. An *are-you-stupid* blink. More stretching. More silent chastising.

“It’s because of me,” he concludes, mouth in a grim line, arms crossed over his impressive chest.

After I work through the kinks in my legs—and pray not to get a cramp midway through my session—I plant my heels into the mat and rise into downward dog, the backs of my calves aching with a fiery burn. He’s still staring at me.

“This isn’t a free show,” I snip. “You wanna talk, you do yoga.”

“Whatever you say.”

I’m well aware Kit doesn’t have a mat to practice on. I’m also well aware he’s probably going to half-ass the poses. He

situates himself directly behind me, and although I can't see him, I know that he's staring at my ass.

His voyeuristic gaze births butterflies, and for a second, I imagine the heavy weight of his dick against my butt, the sturdy meat of his thighs bumping against my own in a suction of sweat and cum, how his fingers would feast on my sides and stay there to leave bruises. His breath pluming on my back, his voice a husky whisper, his—

“Why are you mad at me?” Real Kit interferes with imaginary Kit.

Stupid real Kit.

I snort, leaning back as I switch into child's pose. “I'm not mad,” I gruff before the mat absorbs my hushed grumbling. I try to focus on the curve of my spine, try to imagine a tether pulling me down into the ground, making me heavy.

“You sound mad.”

Three words you should never say to a woman. *Ever.*

Of course I'm mad. Horny plus stressed equals mad. And confused. And maybe hurt at how unfazed he is by this distance between us.

I lift my head up. “There's not this much talking in yoga.”

“Tell me why you're mad, and I'll stop talking,” he negotiates, surprisingly following through with the pose being shown on the seventy-inch flatscreen. Granted, his child's pose is more of a roadkill opossum, but at least he's putting in effort. Hockey players are more flexible than I thought. Ugh. What I would've given to discover that a different way.

I know I was the one who set boundaries. I know I've been the one avoiding him. I just...I thought he would've at least tried to fight for me a little. Maybe it was easier for him to give up. But Kit's stubborn. He gets what he wants. So when he just accepted us staying friends, it confused me. And that night after family dinner, he couldn't even be in the same room as me.

After talking with my brother, I should be more stringent about our arrangement, right? Wrong. My guilt isn't as strong as the emotions I feel for Kit. It's bad, but it feels so good. I shouldn't dream about sneaking around with one of my brother's best friends. But that thrill of not getting caught...it sparks the tinder in my belly and grows into a raging inferno.

A warning growl low in my throat. "I told you, I'm not mad." I'm about to lob my yoga mat at his big, fat head.

The peppy lady on the screen goes into cat-cow, her shrill voice drowned out by the nonargument argument we're having. I mirror the pose, palms flat against the mat, my back cycling between a curve and an arch. And Kit is, of course, looking like an idiot doing a feminine—and slightly suggestive—pose with his big, burly body. I don't doubt that his ass probably looks spectacular though.

"Faye, please..."

My anger comes to a boil, spewing out at full speed, lighting a ring of fire around us. Still on my hands and knees, determined for this cat-cow to snap, crackle, and pop me, I look back at him. "You want to know why I'm mad? You're making it impossible for me to stay away from you. You're always there, staring at me too long when you don't think I notice, purposefully grabbing my waist to move past me in the kitchen."

"You're mad that I'm not staying hundreds of feet away from you?" Kit snarls, maintaining the same cat-cow pose, his cold exterior frosting over even further. The only difference is the stacks of tension crammed into his back and shoulders, muscles writhing beneath a tight compression shirt.

"I'm mad that you don't seem very affected by any of it!"

"I chose to respect your decision and stay away from you. I didn't want to complicate things for you. And after *you* chose to keep things platonic between us, I've been trying to deal with the fact that this is gonna be our norm."

I whip my head around toward the screen to see what the next pose is, and to my horror, it's a stretching exercise that

requires two people. Two people, in close proximity.

I'm going to soldier on with this two-person pose, even if I want to claw Kit's face off. This is *my* yoga time—precious and seemingly rare with the way everyone's been helicoptering over me. Kit interrupted my time, and I shouldn't have to pay for his blatant disrespect.

“Why are you making me seem like the bad guy?” I hiss, yanking him over to me with a strength I didn't know I possessed, gesturing to the pose on the screen with a stabbing arm. Growling like a caged animal, Kit scoots over to me, taking up the majority of the mat.

“You're not the bad guy,” he gets out through clenched teeth.

The nearly impossible pose—and definitely not one for beginners—involves two people sitting on their butts, extending their legs upwards to form a V shape, with their arms interlocked on the outside for extra balance. Given Kit's and my height difference, this may look more like a malformed N.

I grab Kit's wrist hard enough to bruise, start to get into position, and wait for him to use that walnut-sized brain of his to mirror me. His limbs are like putty, flailing all about, as if every hockey warmup he's ever done has been erased from his memory. I'd be lying if I said his struggle didn't bring me immense joy.

When he finally manages to somehow contort his body to look like mine, we hold the pose for two minutes, staring into each other's eyes, hands on forearms. His legs dwarf mine, making them rise at different levels, and our backs aren't completely straight, but I'm surprised we could replicate the pose at all. Indignation shreds an acidic hole in my gut. Look at him—oblivious, unaffected. He's thriving, while I'm dying inside.

“Aren't I, though? I'm the one who ended things. I'm the one who's regretting it. I'm the one who's suffering.”

Kit's grasp wavers. "You think you're the only one suffering?"

My core is on fire (and not in the good way). I seesaw for balance, letting my sexual frustration fuel me, refusing to surrender for a second time.

"Yes! Yes, because you seem super cool with just being friends."

His tone is a knife's edge of rage so sharp it could wound me. "I'm not 'super cool' with just being friends, Faye. I fucking hate being your friend. You have no idea how hard it's been for me to control myself around you—how hard it's been not to jack off to the thought of you. Just the other night, I had a boner the size of Texas because you weren't wearing any pants."

My cheeks warm. "That's why you ran out on me?"

Kit's legs begin to shake, and I can see his abs contract through his shirt, though he finds his balance rather quickly. "Jesus. Yes," he admits quietly, embarrassment evident in the flush of his collarbone.

"So, what? We're just gonna keep our distance for the rest of the summer? Act like we're not even friends?"

"I don't think you're ready to be more than friends."

I hate the power Kit has over me. He's got my heart in a stranglehold, and he's not planning on letting go any time soon. I'm a grown woman. I can't let some hockey player bring me to my knees. I choose when to get on my knees, and for whom.

"Fuck you," I spit, dropping the pose. I don't have time to deal with this conversation.

My arms shoot out behind me to support myself, but instead of falling backwards like me, Kit leaps forward onto his knees, right between my spread legs, his arms bracketing my sides.

"Fuck me?" His mouth hovers near mine, our breaths a kiss away from unreturnable, the bulge in his pants grazing the

inside of my thigh. I have nowhere to run, to hide. His lips are poison, his tongue forked, everything about him spelling **DANGER** in big, bold letters. One hit off him and I'm an addict for life.

My heart freefalls into my stomach. "You don't want this," I whisper.

"I don't remember what it feels like to *not* want this."

I barely know what happens next; it's all a blur. One minute, I'm in control of my body. And the next, my lips are attacking his, the taste of him transporting me back to the hotel room. Our mouths move in synchrony—a dance guided by lovesick hearts—teeth taking turns grazing and pulling. His kiss strokes the desire seated inside me, and when he cups the side of my cheek, I thaw for him. His tongue weaves around mine, then flicks out to my bottom lip, where he paints the skin with saliva. I swallow, needing more, starved to the point where the hollow ache of not having him can ruin me beyond repair.

Sensing my desperation, the loving caress of his calloused palm gets traded for a harsh tug of my hair, and when he yanks my head back, he laves the soft give of my throat, branding me with a hickey. I squirm and mewl, my nails clawing his shirt, wanting so badly to destroy every barrier between us until we're skin to skin, heart to heart. I only put a thong on to help conceal my panty lines, and I'm now realizing it was a terrible idea because the gusset isn't anywhere large enough to hold my arousal. I can feel my wetness coating the inside of my thighs.

"Is this what you want, Princess? For me to eat you out right here, where anyone can walk in and catch us?" Kit's voice rumbles in my ears, shakes my foundation, and he uses one large hand to part my legs as wide as possible. He emits a tortured groan at the sight of the damp spot on my pants.

"You like the idea of being watched, don't you? You're a fucking whore for it."

My entire body quivers as need races to the surface, ready to explode like pressure in a well-shaken can. And the second

Kit's hand strokes over my clothed pussy, I detonate, tearing down the walls I've reinforced to guard my heart, blowing them to smithereens. I buck my hips into his palm.

"Be a good girl," he growls, taking a single finger and tracing my clit. "Use your words."

"Your hand. Inside me. Please," I gasp out brokenly, my spine writhing in pleasure as he tends to the outer lips.

His sturdy hands come up to slowly roll down my leggings, leg by leg, taking his time to watch the way I unravel for him. Once he gets me out of those circulation-cutting death pants, there's no pretense or light teasing when he plunges two fingers in, the squelch of my arousal the only sound to be heard over pants and labored breaths.

"Fuck, you're so wet. And it's all for me. That painful throb in your pretty cunt, the gush on your legs, that's all mine, Faye."

Kit spirals his fingers around, flutters them against my swollen walls, experiments with a fast and slow pace as he studies the contortion of my face, my greedy moans, the way I rut my hips for more friction. He helps me wrap my legs around his torso, bringing me so impossibly close to him that he'd be balls deep inside me if his cock was out. I can feel his thickening length, and no matter how hard he tries to keep a straight face, rapture nearly pulls his grimace into a grin.

His thumb circles my drenched flaps, and he drags his nail in a figure-eight, evoking waves of tingles that crash through me, like the rippling of water after a stone has been dropped into its depths. My legs shake uncontrollably, and the pleasure is so intense it's almost painful. With no pillow or mattress to grip onto, my fists find tufts of carpet, though it hardly anchors me. I'm floating higher and higher into the sky, with no intention of finding my footing on Earth.

Kit brings his digits to his sensual mouth, opens, and sucks, not caring to silence the loud noises pouring out of him. I don't miss the uncharacteristic whimper in the back of his throat as he slurps up my juices. He looks like the epitome of perfection, smells like masculinity in its rawest form. I can't

believe this is finally happening. I've waited so long for this moment, and it's better than any melatonin-laced dream version of him I could've conjured up.

He kisses me after quenching his thirst, and the salty taste of my own arousal on my tongue has blinding sparks of electricity hurtling through my veins. My orgasm is so close. I want—*need*—to feel that release. I need it more than I need my next breath of air.

“Do you want to drench my fingers, Princess? Do you want me to make you come so hard you can't see straight?” Kit asks, that teasing tone of his condescending in a way that makes my belly clench.

His fingers have stopped their torturous circles, their girth alone enough pressure to get me there if I move with precision. Even with half-lidded eyes, I can tell that me getting off is getting *him* off. His painfully erect dick is practically bursting at the seams, and pre-cum stains his crotch, calling my attention to the not-so-discreet flex of his upper muscles.

“Yes, Kit,” I cry out.

“Fuck me.” He throws his head back and his eyes fall closed, his throat working upon my admission. I bask in his vulnerability, not sure when I'll see it again, trying to commit it to memory. When he comes to, he reapplies his mask and challenges me. “Beg for it.”

That pulse in my vagina hasn't stopped as fire tumbleweeds through every inch of me, scorching me from the inside out. “What?”

“Beg for it,” he demands again, this time withdrawing his fingers to drive the point home.

I internally scream at the loss of contact, the loss of fullness. I don't beg. I'm above begging. But am I? Because Kit's fingers felt like heaven inside me. I need him. More. “Please...” My voice is quiet, so quiet the sound of a pin dropping would be louder.

His head drops, his dark hair cascading down to frame his face. “You know that's not what I want.”

“Please, Kit. Please fuck me with your fingers,” I beg, surprised at how loud my voice is now, how desperate.

“There she is. There’s my girl.” His fingers spear back inside me, determined to complete their mission, curving at an angle right near my G-spot. He’s taunting me, torturing me, seeing how far he can leave me teetering on the edge before I hit my breaking point.

My walls spasm around him, pleading for more. I’d blush at my body’s reaction if I wasn’t so distracted.

He leans forward and presses a kiss to the inside of my thigh. Sucks, teases with his teeth, soothes the newly formed bite. “God, I love your fucking pussy. So pretty, so pink, so greedy for my fingers. You’ve been such a good girl, Princess. How about I give you something bigger to work with?”

My eyes widen at the realization. His huge cock. His huge cock that will most definitely split me in half.

“Kit...”

His fingers stall inside me, and I know he’ll still make me come with whichever appendage of his I choose. “Only if you consent, Faye.”

I squeeze my eyes shut. I’m not thinking about the consequences of my actions. I’m leading with my heart instead of my head. “It’s not that. You’re so...”

“I’ll be gentle,” he replies. “You set the pace.”

Stop thinking, Faye. This is what you’ve always wanted.

Am I ready for this? What if I freak out on him?

Leap. He’ll catch you. You know he will.

I don’t want all my sexual experiences to be synonymous with the rape. I want to be able to enjoy sex again. I want to be able to lose myself in someone without the fear that they might not give that part of me back. I want to lose myself in Kit.

I want his hands to be the ones I remember on my body.

I only manage to nod because words elude me. That challenging tilt of his head, along with the devilish glint in his

eyes, are long gone. All that remains is softness, understanding, and a smile that I always come home to.

Pants and underwear abandoned, he picks me up and carries me effortlessly to the bedroom. He gently sets me down on the mattress, hands supporting the small of my back, his tactile touch drawing a guttural groan from deep within my throat. The polarizing difference of my soft body against his hard one makes me lightheaded. Once I'm situated, he rolls his pants down, letting his aching cock spring free. It's as long and thick as I've imagined it—red from neglect, littered with veins, the head soaked with a bead of pre-cum—accompanied by two large, dangling balls smattered with wiry hair. I salivate just looking at his dick, wanting to know how it feels when it hits the back of my throat.

When his shirt comes off, I'm met by the billboard-worthy sight of Kit Langley. A razor-sharp jawline and cheekbones that could cut me, inked sleeves on bronze skin that tell stories of the past, an acreage of abs, burgeoning biceps, and thighs that flaunt a strict workout regime. His long, dark lashes match the fullness of his finger-swept hair, the bridge of his nose slightly crooked from a few too many breaks, plump, collagen lips bordering prominent incisors and perfect, straight teeth. He's so handsome it physically pains me.

I must've been gawking for at least a good minute, because judging by the impatient curl of his lip, I need to take my own shirt off before he comes over and rips it down the middle.

The second I'm naked, he positions himself over me, and that night comes flashing back to me. The painful way he held my face against the mattress, the body-rocking thrusts, the tears spilling down my cheeks when he took me harder.

I petrify, my mental and physical brakes engaging. In the moment, I forget that I'm with Kit. I'm transported back to that grungy hotel mattress, waiting for the pain to seize me.

“Hey, hey. We don't have to go any farther,” Kit whispers, rearing back from me to give me space.

Fear steps into every inch of me, but the sound of his voice guides me back to the present like a kerosene lantern in

a room of complete darkness, projecting a safe path for me. His smell enriches the surrounding air, the feathery touch of his hand providing me with the comfort I've grown to know and love.

“I want to. I...I'm sorry. I'm okay. I just panicked for a second.”

Concern weighs his brow down. “Are you sure? I don't want this to be stressful for you.”

He's not going to hurt you, Faye. He's going to be with you every step of the way. You deserve this. You deserve to feel safe in your own body. And you've wanted this for so long. You've wanted him.

“I'm sure. I'm safe. I trust you, Kit.”

He ponders me for a minute, maybe waiting for me to take my statement back, but when I don't, he tentatively leans back over me. I don't miss the roil of his muscles or the nervous tug in his throat, though.

His lips travel the lines of my abdomen, an intimate march toward imminent pleasure, and they make their way up to the swells of my small breasts, worshipping the very flesh with a lap of his tongue. My head lolls back as I arch into his chest, begging for him to suck my nipples, use them as playthings for his teeth, bruise me where only I can see.

I can feel the heavy steel of his cock against my thigh, and the close proximity has my pussy fluttering. As if he can read my mind, Kit's mouth engulfs my nipple eagerly, pulling at the puckered bud between his teeth, flicking his tongue back and forth. My hips instinctively snap up, and my hand tethers itself in his hair, pulling it with the same power his lips are exacting over me.

My breath comes to a screeching halt. “I want you...now.”

With a satisfied noise, he pops off my breast to rifle through the drawer in his nightstand, practically moving at the speed of light. When he acquires an XXL condom, he gives me front row seats to a lascivious show, slowly rolling it down his twitching length. I've never been so turned on in my life.

The torturous waiting has my lower stomach cramping. Once he's covered, he crawls over the bed, that monster between his legs dragging along the sheets.

“Which position, Princess?”

“Missionary,” I decide, pleading to whichever gods are listening right now that I don't die from the size of him.

He situates me until my head is against the pillow and I'm in a comfortable position, and then he boxes me in with his body, one hand braced against the wall.

Kit uses his other hand to part my legs, fingers etching crescent moons in the meat of my thighs. “Can't wait until I'm sliding into this gorgeous cunt. Can't wait to paint your tits with my cum, write my name in it so you remember who the fuck you belong to.”

Even despite my nerves, I'm still as wet as the Pacific Ocean. The anticipation is killing me, my thighs are quaking, sweat is falling into my eyes, and I'm sucking in my belly, waiting for the brunt of him to hit me.

“Tell me what you need,” he purrs.

“Gentle.”

“I've got you,” is all he says.

I don't have time to master my fear before he plunges slowly into me. My vagina fights the initial breach, pain spidering out from the intrusion, and my breath hitches as he stills. I don't think he's even a quarter of the way in.

“Are you okay?” Worry worms its way into his tone, and his grip on my leg softens.

I grind my molars. “I'm okay. Keep going.”

With a pause, he continues, sliding in all at once to lessen the pain. My pussy stretches, creating a low ache in my abdomen, but the sharp, stabbing pain is replaced with a warm, hardly noticeable pressure. As my body relaxes around him, he drives a little deeper until his ball sack rests against my clit.

Slowly, he starts at a rhythmic pace, my body rocking with each thrust. I'm afraid to move too much, so I let him guide, basking in the fullness of him.

"Oh, God," I murmur, feeling his dick bully my core. It feels as if my entire body has incinerated into flakes of ash, the heat from his touch leaving thermal prints all over me. Hot tears leak from the corners of my eyes.

An animalistic growl pervades the room. "Fuck, Faye. You're so tight. You feel so good. I was made for your perfect cunt."

He was made for *me*. Like I was the one who existed before him.

His strokes are precise, methodical, but I need the rush of rough, passionate sex. I need to prove to myself that I'm not going to let my fear of sex keep me from experiencing it with Kit. I know he's holding back. I want the real him—raw, primal, unfiltered. This whole time he's been treating me like a fragile flower.

"Can you go harder?" I ask.

"You want me to go harder?"

I bob my head. "I think so."

"Princess, I don't—"

"I want you to have your way with me, Kit. I don't want to be able to walk tomorrow. I want you to fuck me senseless, punish me for all the times I've had a smart mouth, indulge in every fantasy you've ever had."

I can't believe those words just came out of my mouth.

"Jesus Christ. You're sure?" A pornographic groan, forged from unspoken yearning.

"I need you right now. The real you. I need to *feel* you."

Something inside Kit snaps. His grip is tighter than ever, squeezing, suffocating, but I somehow want him closer, embedded under my skin until no amount of shaking can dislodge him.

“Turn around. Bite the headboard,” he growls.

He slides out of me as his cock unsuctions from my heat, our mixed arousal glossing his length and wetting the sheets beneath us. I don't ask questions. I don't contemplate. When I go to move, he spansks my ass, the loud noise ricocheting in the small space. I let out a shaky exhale as the stinging refuses to subside, but the thought of his handprint on my butt makes me giddy.

I turn my head back as far as it'll go before subjecting my teeth to a new dental plan. “Why do I—”

“It'll muffle the screams. We can't afford any more noise complaints.”

I scoff. “I don't scream.”

He sweeps my hair away from my face, pressing his mouth against the shell of my ear, his breath making the hairs on my neck rise. “You will when I'm inside of you.”

Heat coils in my stomach, my anxiety escalating to a crescendo that drowns out the sharp intakes of air and the buzz in my brain. I tentatively bend over and attach my teeth to the wood of the headboard. My teeth feel brittle already. If Kit's going to be penetrating me with his massive dong, they'll crack. But I do as he says in hopes of reaping the benefits.

Kit gives me a silent warning as he squeezes the flesh on my lower back before lining himself up with my wet entrance. This time, there is no careful intrusion, no compassion—he slams his dick inside me. Upon the first head-spinning entry, white-hot flames of passion waltz around the charcoal underbelly of a slow-burning pyre. It takes me a few seconds to adjust to his size, thankful that my sexcapade from earlier has provided me with enough natural lube to lessen the pain. His hand snakes up to massage my tit, his lithe fingers tweaking my nipple before he begins to pump hard and fast inside me.

A string of moan-gasps assails the wood, and I sync up with his timed strokes, my pussy bearing back down on him, milking his ever-growing erection. Wet noises bubble up from

our sweaty, interconnected bodies. He weighs my breast in one palm, and he rumbles his delight at my submission, the way I bathe his distended cock in gushes of cum.

“I fucking love how you squeeze my dick,” he praises, his hand migrating to my ass to give it another spank. “You’re so responsive. Every little touch, lick, kiss. God, you’re intoxicating.”

When he relentlessly plows into me again, he hits a spot that makes my vision gray and my head fill with cotton. Shock after shock unravels in my gut, and even with the barricade in my mouth, I still let out an embarrassingly loud cry. My teeth dig in deep enough to leave shallow bite marks, a lance of discomfort shooting through my gums.

I unlatch myself from the headboard. “Kit, I’m going to come!”

“Let go, Princess.” He’s panting, breathless, so utterly euphoric that it makes his voice sound far away. “Come all over my cock. Wrap me in your scent. I want to watch your cum leak out of you, want to lick every last drop of you off my sheets.”

My walls squeeze his length as his thrusts become sloppier, more urgent. He shunts his dick harder, deeper, until I can feel his bulge in my cervix. I’ve grown used to the pressure now, and I chase it like a cocaine fiend. For some semblance of control, he feeds his hands through my hair, wraps it around his knuckles, and pulls so harshly that my neck suffers from minor whiplash. A typhoon of unadulterated pleasure waits for the moment to wreak havoc, to spur my desire into action.

We’re a conglomeration of love bites, longing, and lost souls, a mixture of components that shouldn’t work but do. Kit Langley has a roadmap to my heart, has marked the pitstops and calculated the time it’ll take to get to my very center, to burst through every DO NOT ENTER sign warning wandering vagrants.

“You’re mine, Faye. Do you hear that? This pretty, pink pussy, this fuckable ass, that perfect, swinging pair of tits,

those flawless legs of yours. Everything about you—mine.”

His words jolt me awake faster than the strongest smelling salts. “I’m yours,” I breathe.

He reaches his hand around my torso and slaps the hood of my clit. “I’m so obsessed with you, do you know that? This is what you do to me.”

To emphasize his point, he flexes his dick inside me, servicing that twenty-four-seven craving I have for him. The ridges of his shaft catch on my velvet walls, the tight clutch of my cunt palpitating around his girth. Jesus. He feels so good. I want this for the rest of my life. My orgasm lingers on the horizon in a bright haze, powerful enough to bring me to my knees if I were standing, so catastrophic that it’ll probably wipe out my speech and conscious thinking.

Fast and aggressive, Kit fucks me like we’re never going to see each other again. I claw at the headboard, my orgasm building, scaling me, until a kaleidoscope of extravagant hues torches my eyelids. My whole body goes slack as my vagina throbs in a rhythm, and I come all over Kit’s dick with a keening wail.

His pace falters for a split second, but it’s so short-lived that it’s barely noticeable. “Such a good fucking girl.”

He’s close. I know he is. And as much as I love the feeling of him inside me, I want him to mark me outside of the condom. Since I don’t have an IUD, I think of the next best thing, because no way in hell am I putting my future in the hands of a tiny little pill.

“Come on my face,” I say.

Kit stills inside me mid-pump, which has to take some kind of superman levels of self-control. “What?”

“Do you seriously need me to elaborate?”

“Shit. Fuck. No.”

I feel him pull out of me hastily, the warmth of his body tapering in the cool atmosphere. Although he’s only a few inches away, it feels like an ocean separates us—one too

tumultuous to cross. He takes a second to compose himself, to catch his breath, and I slide to the edge of the bed where he stands, his inflated cock in his hand.

“Are you sure?” he asks, giving his length a firm rub.

I lean back on my palms, my breasts jiggling from the movement. “Kit, I’ve never been surer of anything.”

He mutters something under his breath, and then the latex is off in one fluid motion, discarded somewhere on the floor to be dealt with later. The contour of his muscles tense in the ochre sunlight of the afternoon, his hungry gaze roving over me, memorizing me, as if he’s seeing the real me for the first time.

With a one-finger touch, he guides my chin down, positioning himself to get the best angle—which shouldn’t be hard given I’m right at the height of his hips.

My mouth waters like it’s a goddamn Pavlovian response, desperate to taste him. He pumps himself hard and fast into his fist, and he roars through his orgasm in one final thrust, the first splash of cum hitting my right cheek and webbing down the side of my face. Then stream after hot stream splatters my nose, runs into my mouth, and dribbles down my neck in runnels. The entire room is bathed in his smell as ropes of his arousal slide down the tops of my tits, mixing with the sweat already there.

And when his groans subside and the heat on my skin cools just a bit, I open my eyes to find his muscular, glistening body heaving from the exertion, limp cock hanging against the inside of his thigh in contentment. He’s looking at me like there’s no one else on this planet that’s worth gracing with his gaze, like I’m the answer to every desire and question he’s ever had.

He then takes his pointer finger and presses it gently against my sternum, tracing an obscure shape into the thin glaze of cum on my breasts. “You’re incredible, Faye Hollings.”

I can't believe I just asked him to do that. I'm not a crazy person in the bedroom, at least, not before the rape. Vanilla is safe, good, reliable. But this—everything with Kit—tests the boundaries I've set for myself and obliterates them completely.

I dazedly look down at whatever it is that he decided to write on my chest, and I can just faintly make out the shape of a K.

“Really?”

“I'm a man of my word,” he replies smugly, sucking the excess seed off his finger before plying me with a crop of kisses. His mouth envelops mine, as do the words of praise he whispers into the slim canyon of space between us.

In that moment, the expiration date I put on our summer fling begins to fade. I don't want Kit for the summer. I don't want to sneak around with him for the rest of my life. I want him forever, out in the open, guilt-free. The taste of him, the scent of him, the essence of him—it's mine. Not shared by my trauma or my past. It's mine, right here and now, in the present, and maybe in every parallel universe.

**A GAME OF CAT AND MOUSE,
WHERE I'M THE MOUSE**

If it wasn't for the bruises on my breasts and thighs, I would've thought sex with Kit was nothing but a wet dream. It took me thirty minutes to cover up the mauve markings, and even though a pool party isn't a party without the *pool* component, I made a vow to myself not to tread any bodies of water in fear that I'll get bombarded with questions pertaining to the identity of the vampire who sucked the life out of me.

I'm in a good place right now. Better than good. Kit's made me happier than I've been in a long time. And he's shown me how fun sex can be. Roughness isn't always a bad thing, not when it's consensual between both parties. There's something about his possessiveness that makes me want to embrace my own sexuality.

I can't stop thinking about how life-changing yesterday was, and that includes the consequences. People do bad things all the time, right? Way worse than keeping an itty-bitty secret from your brother.

I'm just trying to avoid a fight. Fears haven't stopped filling my head. What if I ruin Hayes and Kit's friendship? What if I somehow ruin the team dynamic? Hockey is both of their lives, and what I just did could destroy all of that.

Yet despite the guilt, all I can think about is the next time I get to be alone with Kit.

The party's been in full swing since one, the bass from the stereos and the ruckus from hundreds of voices shaking the

foundation of the house. It would be an understatement to say I'm brimming with nerves right now. Nerves about seeing Kit. And not just any Kit, but a *shirtless* Kit. A shirtless Kit is an Avengers-level threat for women everywhere.

Kit is an attractive, competent, talented, and wealthy guy who women have fawned over probably long before me. After all the time we've spent together—after being with the Kit *I* know—I forgot about the other side of him that's projected to the public. The playboy hockey player who has a new flavor of woman more often than a person changes their bedsheets.

Great. Now I'm worrying about where we stand.

When I step out of those sliding glass doors, feeling overly naked than I already am, I'm greeted by the picturesque scene of rotating twenty-somethings talking, kissing, or swimming. From my first once-over, I can make out a few familiar faces from the hockey team, but I can't pinpoint the identities of the plethora of coeds filling up the spacious backyard.

The surface of the pool glistens from the sweltering sun, refractions of light branching out in aqua ripples, only occasionally splashing against the edge of the sodden concrete. The vibrant shade of the grass matches the saturated color of neighboring trees, their leaves flitting about and casting shadows, boasting a plushness only achievable through generous increments of rain. The humid air snaps around me, and even though I'm shaded by an overhang, I can feel the heat beating on my skin, already slicking me in a fine sheen of perspiration that my deodorant is actively fighting against. With gales of wind comes an enticing waft from whatever meat product is cooking on the grill.

You'd think that Kit would be easy to spot in a crowd given his size, but he's not. Or he is, but he just isn't here right now. I'm about to turn tail and search inside when a hand clamps down on my wrist and pulls me into a death grip of a hug.

"Faye!" a disembodied voice squeals, squeezing me even tighter. I'm pretty sure my heels lift momentarily off the ground.

There's only one person who's consistently happy to see me and who embraces me like a crocodile doing a death roll in the water.

"Aeris, hi," I wheeze, and upon knocking the breath out of my lungs, Aeris sets me down with an apologetic smile.

She brushes nonexistent dust motes off me. "Ahh, sorry."

I wave her off. "I love your hugs. I just need a warning next time."

Lila, Aeris' best friend, catwalks over to us on six-inch heels, balancing a juicy wedge of watermelon in one hand and a cocktail in the other. She looks stunning with her waves of blond hair falling to her lower back, the natural brush of makeup over her prominent bone structure, and the tiny bikini accentuating every well-proportioned asset of hers. Curves in all the right places, toned muscle definition, an enviable height, sun-kissed skin. It makes sense that she's a model.

"Faye, you look gorgeous," she says, enveloping me with a lot less strength. God, she even smells amazing. I pull away before she realizes that I'm sniffing her.

"*You* look gorgeous! Are you guys enjoying the party?"

"It's incredible. Just the summer kickoff we needed," Aeris replies, leaning over to take a sip of Lila's drink.

Lila glares at Aeris as she takes a prolonged pull, but she doesn't dare cut her off. "We wanted to take you out to lunch sometime next week if you're up for it."

A large grin snags the corner of my mouth, warmth broiling in my chest, a far cry from the mess of hormones I was only a few days ago. "I'd love that."

"Perfect!" Aeris claps her hands together, the heat-treated curls of her hair bouncing against her shoulders. "It's been so long since either of us had a girl's day! I just need a break from the testosterone, you know?"

Oh, do I. I haven't been living in the house for more than a week, and already I've craved more female interaction than I have in all my life. Living with six guys is not for the faint of

heart. An overflow of unwashed dishes, underwear in places underwear should not be, sometimes pee on the toilet seat—which is weird since I thought hockey players were supposed to have good aim.

“We want to hear all about what’s going on in your life,” Lila adds, rubbing her hand down my arm in a motherly fashion.

My life? Oh, God. Before I have the chance to make up some bullshit excuse and get the hell out of whatever I just agreed to, Aeris gives me a kiss on the cheek.

She loops her arm through Lila’s. “We’re going to make our rounds, but come find us later.”

And then I watch as the two get swallowed up by the crowd, leaving me alone at the threshold of the party. I contemplate finding Kit, but the universe decides for me when it delivers him up on a silver platter right before my eyes. The moment he sees me, something strange distorts his expression. I can’t tell what’s going on in that head of his, but it doesn’t seem to be good as he bulldozes through groups of people to get to me.

I’m beginning to think I have some sign taped to my chest that says “PULL HERE,” because for the second time this day, my arm gets yanked out of its socket. Kit leeches my balance, leading me to a more private sector of the party, his body so close that if someone were to see us right now, they might be smart enough to put the pieces together.

“What—”

When we take refuge away from potential spectators, he releases me. I know I should be questioning his urgency, but my thoughts seem to crack and disperse when I get a glimpse of his naked torso—brawn packed into muscles that bear subdued strength.

I remember the way he practically rearranged my guts with his giant cock. We burn fast and bright like a shooting star, a once-in-a-life kind of experience, so rare that a connection like this doesn’t happen for just anyone.

His own train of thought seems to have derailed. “Fuck.”

“What?”

“Your bikini.”

I glance down at my party-appropriate attire. “What about it?”

“I...it’s...well...you...” Kit croaks, the tips of his ears turning crimson. It’s smaller than something I’d normally wear, and I guess the tiny piece of fabric only covering my nipples could warrant some lewd stares.

I tighten the black bikini strings twisted around my torso self-consciously. Polyester strips wrap around me three times, creating a skin-revealing cutout, complementing the equally revealing bottoms. “I...?”

“You’re going to ruin me,” he whispers, barely loud enough for me to hear.

What?

There’s a pregnant pause, then Kit shakes his head emphatically. He adjusts his swim trunks ever so slightly. “That’s not why I came over here.”

There’s a visible fight ensuing on his face, oscillating between guilt and conviction. “We need to talk,” he says, his bravado chilling me to the core despite the temperature being in the steady nineties.

My distracted mindset is completely eviscerated in the span of two seconds. He sounds serious. Kit’s never serious. Something’s wrong.

“Is everything okay?” Bile cradles the back of my throat, rising up from a sour stomach lining.

His biceps strain, the inked tiger eyes on his forearm undulating from minuscule muscle movements. I don’t expect the next words that come out of Kit’s mouth. They catch me off guard, and I have no emotional capacity to digest them.

“I don’t think we should do this anymore.”

Whoa, what?

I freeze at the roughness in his voice, the one that peels open a sore on my heart, that batters me from all directions. Shock responds before sadness does, before self-pity coerces tears to dam my eyes.

My blood coagulates, my confusion palpable. “What are you talking about?”

With a torn breath, his fingers badger tousled strands of his hair, cutting through a raven sea like a shark’s fin, a frown favoring the right side of his face. “Yesterday was a mistake,” he whispers.

I feel my heart stop, feel the goddamn world stop. Everyone around me fades into a blurry background, merging until bodies are rendered indecipherable, chatter a mere shuffle of mouths that don’t convey any meaning. I strangle the dread that welcomes me like an old friend.

Yesterday. Was. A. Mistake. Sex was a mistake. *I* was a mistake.

I can’t...I...

My mind’s playing host to millions of questions right now, yet not a single one makes it from my brain to my mouth. How could he have changed on me so fast? Is he being blackmailed? Was this all some sick game to him? I don’t know what to think right now. He got what he wanted, and now it’s time for him to move on—like he always does.

God, how could I have been so stupid?

Pain bolstered, I involuntarily inch backwards, my back hitting the side of the house, forbidding me from going any farther. I don’t want to hear what he has to say. I don’t want to be having this conversation at all. He doesn’t list closer to me. He stays a reasonable distance away, as if entering my personal bubble will deliver some kind of shock to his system.

“What?” My voice is small, just like it was that night at the gas station. I keep convincing myself that I’m getting better by the day, acknowledging that I’m in control of my trauma, yet here I am, back at square one.

“I should’ve never kissed you.”

Five words. Five words that have a cataclysmic effect on my inner world, crumbling the pillars of our relationship, pulverizing the compassion I have for him deep down. No emotion, no display of anger. It's just a statement, and it hurts so much more as a result.

I don't know why my first instinct is to correct him, but I do it to lift the pressure pressing on my sternum. "I kissed you."

"I meant at the hotel," he explains, barely able to hold eye contact with me, his thickset chest ballooning with deep inhaled. The worry lines creasing his skin are anomalies themselves, and I don't remember there being such dark circles under his eyes—eyes that look like they've been drained of life and light and laughter.

The hotel. He regrets everything. *Everything.*

I refuse to believe him, believe he can change his mind just like that. I want to lash out, but the encroaching anxiety makes me muzzle myself. I want to get to the bottom of this, not give him another reason to believe we shouldn't be together.

I drop the strong woman act. "What's going on, Kit?"

There's a crack in his visage, large enough to let me peek in for a split second. But then it's gone, and those walls come right back up, a physical barrier that will always stand in my way. "Nothing. I just think we should nip this in the bud before it becomes anything serious."

"It's fucking serious," I retaliate, my tone smoldering with undue ire. "You've led me on this whole time. Do you realize how messed up that is?"

"I'm sorry. I never meant to lead you on, Faye."

There's probably an inkling of truth in there, but it's buried beneath a toxic waste of lies.

"I don't know what's going on with you, but I know this isn't what you want. We're in a good place, Kit. Why do you want to ruin that?"

He flings his arm wildly between us. “*This* was never going to work.”

He can’t even say “relationship.”

“So everything you’ve said to me has just been a lie, then? How much you care about me?” I hit him where it hurts, wanting him to feel the pain he’s causing me, wanting it to hurt so badly that he can’t eat or sleep because he’d rather feel nothing at all. He knows how badly I’ve been hurt, yet he has the audacity to say this to me? The one person who broke down my walls and helped me heal from my past is now leaving me with more scars than my rapist.

My cheek is the first victim of the crystalline tears that rain down, streaking through my foundation and sluicing down my neck. Betrayal and heartache engage in a dogfight where neither one is guaranteed to win. The back and forth leaves me disoriented, delirious, and instead of having one overarching emotion take the reins, I’m bazooka-blasted with too many emotions to differentiate. My heart romps from the adrenaline rush, and my stomach knots. I feel like I’m about to be sick.

“I didn’t want to hurt your feelings” is the pathetic response Kit gives me.

The one I give him is just as pathetic. “This isn’t the Kit I know.” As hard as it is for me to keep my vision clear, I wipe globs of tears away to look him in the eye, to force him to watch as he breaks my heart.

“If you’re going to fucking talk to me like that, you’re going to look at me,” I growl, using what little strength I have left to grab his jaw and spin him toward me.

His eyes slide to mine. Dark pools of obsidian that couldn’t be more devoid of warmth, of the gentle tenderness that’s kept me whole for the past week.

“This has always been me,” he counters in a clipped tone. “I’m selfish, and I play to get what I want. If I want a win, I play hard on the ice. If I want sex, I play girls. It’s how I operate, and you know that.”

“You’re more than that.”

“I’m not. You were just so blinded by something you could never have.”

Could never have. He means him. He means a healthy, long-term relationship. He means love. He means I was never good enough for more than sex.

My wrath relights over and over again, but when it’s finally drowned beneath my sadness, there’s no chance of it surviving. I’m collapsing; my body is shutting down. I can’t... I can’t deal with what’s happening right now. I can’t accept it.

“Why are you doing this to me? To *us*?” My stilted words pelt him, but as if they mean nothing, they slide off him like torrents of rain off a waterproof coat. I foolishly believe that this is all one terrible nightmare. A nightmare that I’ll wake up from with Kit’s reliable arms wrapped around me.

“There is no *us*. There never was. This was all a means to —”

“Sleep with a warm body,” I finish for him, indignation gleaming on my tongue, an incoming migraine knocking on my skull’s doorstep. My head is fuzzy in all the wrong ways, and I feel faint, the wall I’ve been clinging to the only thing keeping me upright. If I wasn’t so afraid of making myself look even worse, I’d fall to my knees.

The hint of a snarl weighs his lips down. “Like I said, it was a mistake.”

“What about everything you’ve said to me? How I confided in you? Was being *friends* all a lie too?”

For the first time in our argument, Kit’s eyes flash with realization. It’s brief, probably unnoticeable to anyone not paying attention, but it’s there. The Kit that was treating me differently? He’s gone. This is the Kit I should’ve worried about. The one who charms, fucks, then moves on. I don’t know why I believed that I’d be the exception.

This is the last tug of an elastic band, the final stretch before it snaps completely. And I’m right there. Two broken halves that Kit Langley has destroyed with his bare hands.

He opens his mouth to answer me, but nothing comes out.

“I hope it was worth it. I hope this was *all* worth it,” I say, wishing I could shout and scream at him right now, throw a tantrum, do *something*.

Even when fighting, even when my world is falling apart, we remain in the shadows. That’s all this will ever be. Something that will never see the light of day. Something to always be hidden away from prying eyes.

I don’t give him a chance to respond. I pick up the last remaining pieces of my dignity and flee the scene, pushing past partygoers as tears stream freely down my face. But this time, I know Kit isn’t right behind me. I know he isn’t calling my name.



I SWIRL my feet in the cool water, watching tiny whirlpools form. I’m glad that everyone is too encompassed in their own lives to pay much attention to the girl crying her eyes out. I can’t get Kit’s words out of my head. Just like that, at the hands of a single person, my summer turns to complete and utter shit.

I’m so tired of feeling. I’m so tired of always wearing my heart on my sleeve. I wish I could turn my emotions off. I wish I could stop feeling.

I’m about to say *fuck it* and retreat back to Kit’s bedroom when a large shadow occludes the sun cocooning me. With a grimace, I glance up through bleary eyes to see a figure towering over me. I can’t make out any defining features until the stranger comes into view. A handsome man whom I’ve never seen before sits down next to me, suspending his own rolled-up pant legs into the pool.

He’s conventionally attractive with wild curls of hair peeking out from a backwards baseball cap, clear skin that looks like he’s never experienced the pain of a blind pimple, and a lean body that belongs on a walkway. His cheeks round with a smile, a dimple popping at the corner of his lips. But

despite how handsome he is, he does absolutely nothing for me.

“You look like you could use some company,” he says.

I bite the tissue of my cheek, adamant about keeping my eyes down, partly because I don’t want him commenting on my tears. I will them to subside, wetting my throat of its dryness in case I have to speak to him.

“What? Cat got your tongue?”

More like Kit got my tongue.

Awkward tension bobs between us before guilt eclipses me, and a sigh precedes my response. “Sorry. I’m not really in the mood for talking.”

“Could’ve fooled me,” he teases, brushing his pinky toe against my ankle.

His touch doesn’t have the same effect that Kit’s does. It’s not life-altering and electric. It doesn’t make my heart trip or my nerves spike. It’s...unwanted.

I don’t want to drag this conversation out. I don’t want him to think I’m interested. I’d make a beeline for the house if that was a socially acceptable way to escape a situation.

The stranger reaches into his pocket, pulling out a small baggie of God knows what. Either he’s as dumb as a doorknob, or he doesn’t understand social cues. He’s about as persistent as the wedgie I’m getting from my bottoms right now.

“I think you could use this.” He shakes the mysterious thing in his hand, and I credit my curiosity to my shortage of sensibility—thank you, Kit.

What looks like white powdered sugar swishes around in the bag.

“What is that?” I ask, though deep down I think I have a very clear idea of what he’s offering me.

“A pick-me-up. Something to help you have some fun.”

My spine snaps straight, the cadence of my heart speeding up. I might not be a big party animal, but I'm a college student. I know what drugs look like. I try to steer clear of them because the thought of being out of control terrifies me, but I've known plenty of peers who swear by Adderall before midterms.

I can't believe I'm actually considering his offer. The all-consuming pain from my talk with Kit continues to chafe me, to rub my emotions raw.

"What is it?"

He opens it, dangling my ecstasy escape in front of me like a carrot on a stick. "A little friend of mine named Molly."

My brain misfires. Molly? Dear God. The only "hard" drug I've ever done was marijuana, and that was only because I accidentally ate a pot brownie at a party once. I then spent the rest of the night curled up on the bathroom floor, having the worst trip of my life. I made a promise to myself to never dabble in drugs ever again.

But here I am—at a fork in the road. The high road tells me to distance myself, to confront my emotions in a healthy way. The low road—which looks very appealing right now—tells me to take the drugs, stop feeling, and forget about Kit Langley. Maybe this wouldn't be such a bad idea. I deserve a break. Plus, I'm surrounded by people. I doubt anything bad will happen to me.

People do Molly all the time, right? And they don't end up in the emergency room.

I'm walking a tightrope, hundreds of feet up, not sure if there's water beneath me to break my fall. Maybe falling is the least of my worries. How much more damage could my body sustain after Kit's death blow? One hit shouldn't hurt. If I'm lucky, the pain will disintegrate.

"Do you want it or not?"

I nod.

When he holds out the daunting bag, I wet my index finger, dip it into the snowscape of powder, and stick it into

my mouth.

DON'T DO DRUGS, KIDS

T *HIRTY MINUTES EARLIER*

Faye Hollings is the closest thing I have to infinity right now. I want to stay in her arms until my body memorizes every touch, every indent of smooth, pliable flesh. I want to hear her voice on repeat in my mind, be able to pinpoint her raspy inflections in a faceless crowd. I want to douse myself in her peachy scent, drag it through my nostrils, bottle it up whenever I need to revisit that warm familiarity that lies within her very being.

I can't get enough of her. And even though I know we shouldn't be doing this, sneaking around is insanely hot. The thought of kissing her around a darkened corner, where anyone could stumble upon us. The thought of clamping my hand over her fuck-me lips when she comes loud enough to alert the neighbors. The thought of making her ride my face when we're pressed up against the bathroom door, all while there's a line of people waiting outside. I've never felt desire this strong, this seismic before.

I haven't been able to get our sexcapade from yesterday out of my head. Every time I close my eyes, I'm transported back to the bedroom, and my cock convulses when I think about the way she cried my name, the sounds our combined arousal made with the accentuators of slapping skin, how she came so hard she soaked my dick and the sheets beneath her.

I'm in public right now. I don't need to be sporting a half chub. *Especially* not around her brother. I haven't seen Faye

all day. Then again, I've been busy helping the guys set up for the party. People are slowly starting to file in.

She's probably getting ready upstairs, slipping into a nanoscopic bikini, running lotion up her long, tan legs. I want to be the one on my knees for her, lathering shea butter over her flawless skin, watching as she tips her head back blissfully, how her top shifts just enough to give me a view of the underswells of her breasts. Jesus, I need help.

I'm about to head inside to look for Faye when Hayes stops me, a pack of beer hugged underneath his arm.

"Hey, man. Can we talk really quick?"

My fantasy version of Faye pops like a sad balloon.

Talk? Talk about what? Oh my God. Does Hayes know? No, that's impossible. If he did know, he'd be losing his mind. He's calm right now, and he isn't trying to stab me with barbecue tongs. But if he doesn't want to talk to me about *that*, then what does he want to talk to me about?

"Yeah, sure." I think my voice sounds steady, which is good because my stomach is currently in the process of overturning.

We don't have to search for much privacy since the backyard is barely crowded. I lean against the sliding glass door, letting it take my full weight, trying to look as nonchalant as possible—not like I'm about to shit my pants.

"What's up?" I ask, crossing my arms over my chest, feeling my heart kick against my ribs in an erratic tempo.

"I just wanted to..."

I brace myself for impact, mentally cursing the nerves superseding any confidence I came into the conversation with—which was low from the beginning. My mind staggers with every possibility that might spew out of Hayes' mouth. Am I about to become the keeper of a very disturbing secret he's keeping from Aeris? Is he about to not-so-subtly kick my ass after finding out I accidentally shrunk one of his T-shirts during my load of laundry? Is there any way in this universe that he actually *knows* what happened between me and Faye?

“...thank you,” he finishes, donning a smile rather than the frown I was expecting.

Say what?

“Thank me?”

“Yeah. For everything you’ve done for Faye. Driving her here, giving up your room. I didn’t ask you to do any of that.” He sets the drinks down beside his feet, giving his muscles a rest. “It’s been so long since we spent the summer together. And I just...I love having her here. So, thank you.”

I blink owlshly. Wait for him to laugh and say, “Gotcha,” maybe come out with a camera crew from World’s Biggest Liar, but he doesn’t.

“Oh, uh, it was no big deal.” I shrug off his gratitude, hoping that my expression looks more indifferent than constipated. People—mainly Fulton—have commented that my resting face has this so-called “weird strain” to it.

I’ve never kept a secret from Hayes. Not just because we’re close friends and I respect him, but because I don’t keep secrets. I believe in the philosophy that people should just be open and direct. It would save time, hard feelings, and the chance of miscommunication. And it was easy for me not to have any secrets because guilt was never an emotion I was familiar with. I do shit full-out, with no remorse or regret.

I never realized what a toll keeping secrets takes. Or how moral I’ve apparently become. Faye’s made me soft—my personality, not my body. I now have this normal-sized heart rather than my usual shriveled up one.

Hayes is oblivious to my discomfort, to the sweat covering my forehead, to the fact that I might be seconds from blowing chunks everywhere.

“It is a big deal. I seriously owe you one. Faye...she hasn’t had the easiest past few years. With me joining the Reapers, I haven’t seen her as much. You know about my deadbeat dad. I was Faye’s sole caretaker for a long time, so when she was old enough to look after herself, I always felt this nagging worry to make sure she was okay.”

You're a terrible person, Kit! Terrible!

I nod, running my finger disinterestedly over the rubber seal of the door.

"I like knowing that she has other people looking out for her," he explains, another warm smile settling over his lips.

A rumble in my throat. I clear it. "Mm-hm."

"She honestly hasn't been this happy in a long time. I think the last time was maybe her first year of college? And high school was a shitshow for her."

Please stop talking. I need to get out of here before I say something that I shouldn't. I desperately search for an escape route, but all of my teammates are gathered over near the pool, so I can't catch a ride with them to freedom. And if I keep telling people I need to shit in the middle of a conversation, they're going to start thinking I have IBS or something.

Hayes stoops down to snag a beer from the pack, popping the can open and taking a hefty swig. "I mean, obviously the pressure to get into a good college was a lot. But her social life wasn't always that great. Her choice in guys was fucking abysmal. I hated every single one of her boyfriends. Pieces of shit that didn't know how to treat a woman right, let alone treat *her* right. They were..."

He pauses, then looks me up and down.

"Well, they were like you."

Hold up. What?

"Huh?" I falter, trying to ignore the agonizing pain of Hayes' knife in my back.

A laugh springs from his throat, and it's not your run-of-the-mill chuckle. It's a full-fledged laugh that shakes his shoulders and brings his smile lines out. "You know, they were players," he supplies concisely.

Players.

That word lights a fuse in me, an orange burst of fire that ignites in my gut, a point of genesis that scatters static

throughout my veins. I've never had such a visceral reaction to anything before in my life. But hearing the way Hayes' voice curls with disdain truly breaks me a little.

And that break...it starts with tiny pieces. But with time, they become big enough where cracks are easily visible, where the adhesive isn't strong enough to withstand the emotional turmoil.

"They didn't really care for her. They were only focused on themselves, on what they could get out of the relationship. Not that you do relationships. You're all about one-night stands."

I'm not...like Faye's terrible exes, am I? I'm not that bad, right? The last thing I'd ever want to do is hurt Faye.

Fuck. Am I hurting her? Leading her on to imagine this life that I couldn't possibly ever give her? A life of safety, security, certainty. Hayes has reminded me of something that I've seemed to forget—that I'm not that kind of person. I'm not built for long-term relationships or marriage or kids. I jump from person to person after sucking out all the affection they give me. It's a horrible thing to admit.

Thank you, Mom and Dad, for not getting a divorce soon enough when you clearly should have.

If I continue down this path with Faye—if we get closer than we already are—I'm not sure I have it in me to reel it back. And then, when I'm up to my knees in regret, pulling the plug will hurt her so much more. I have to remember that we're not living in some fairy tale, some impenetrable bubble that doesn't also affect Hayes. I have just as much as power as Faye right now, and the responsible thing to do would be to... to end things.

I can't even imagine my life without her in it. Fuck. I slept with my friend's little sister. That's something I have to live with now, a secret that I'll have to take to my grave. It's a betrayal of everything our brotherhood is built on. This wasn't a byproduct of too much alcohol. It was something we both agreed on with clear heads, knowing people would get hurt in the process but not caring enough to resist the chemistry

between us. I, once again, chose to be a selfish bastard, not thinking about the consequences for Faye or Hayes.

I can't make that mistake again. I can't.

But was it really a...*mistake*? Is that how I truly feel? Faye looks at me like I've hung the moon for her, aligned the stars in just the right formation to spell her name, used her favorite colors to paint the night sky, to make it known to the galaxy that she's mine and I'm hers.

I wish that could be me, but it's not.

"She deserves better," I say, my teeth an inch from grating together, a smokiness to my voice that's never been there before.

Hayes polishes his first drink off, crushing the aluminum in his hands. "She does. Hopefully this summer will be a fresh start for her."

I don't reply. I don't even really look him in the eyes, mainly because I'm so disgusted with myself. I need to end things. I don't know what I'm going to say, but it has to be believable. It has to be enough for her to hate me, to never want to be near me. I'd suffer a lifetime of hatred if it meant that Faye got the happily-ever-after she deserves.

Hayes picks up the now-opened pack, gripping a jagged hole in the cardboard. "Anyways, I'll see ya around. Have fun. Don't have sex in the pool," he half-jokes, clapping me on the back with a powerful hand.

My parked feet lurch forward a bit, and I stabilize myself on the see-through partition. I have to find Faye.

This will be the last time I hear her laugh, right? The last time I'll feel her arms wrap around me in a hug. The last time we'll ever be on good terms. I'm about to throw everything away to protect Faye. To protect her from *me*. And as I go in search for her bobbing head of brown hair, I feel my heart shatter into millions of pieces.



PRESENT

Do you know what it feels like to lose a piece of yourself? To lose someone you can never get back because they only came out in the presence of another person? That's what I'm grieving right now—the realization that I'll never have the connection I had with Faye with anybody else on this planet. It's hard, knowing who your person is and not being able to have them. It's one of the hardest things humans have to endure.

I broke Faye's heart. I broke it, and I can't confide in any of my teammates. This is something I have to carry on my own. Fuck, I don't even deserve sympathy from anyone. I'm a piece of shit. I cultivated a safe space for her, allowed her to open up and trust me with her deepest secret, and then left her all alone, just as she was when I saw her sitting on that curb.

I'm fully prepared for whatever beating Hayes is going to dole out to me if he ever finds out. I deserve it.

I need to distract myself. The memory of her is tangled in my mind, this huge mess of loose threads that each hold the sound of her laugh, the color of her eyes, the smell of her hair, the softness of her skin, the taste of her lips. If I allow myself to think about her, I'm going to go crazy. Crazy with rage, grief, insanity.

My first instinct was to lock myself away in my room, but then I remembered that Faye's splayed out all her things like a confetti cannon went off in there, so that would be trapping myself in my own personal hell. If I can't run from my mistakes, then I'll just have to numb the pain. Which is exactly what I'm going to do.

The moment I spot Gage and Fulton conversing animatedly by the pool, I jockey through the congested mass of people, grabbing Gage's drink out of his hand mid-sip. I chug it. All of it. I'm well aware that both of their eyes are on me. My throat burns and my gut curdles from the influx of alcohol, but I finish that fucker with a crush of the can between my fingers.

Gage narrows his eyes. “Dude, now I have to go and get another one.”

“What’s up with you?” Fulton asks, a concerned cleft in the center of his brows.

“Nothing,” I bark, accumulating some alarmed looks from nearby strangers. I wipe away the sticky residue of beer on my mouth.

Gage is in the middle of getting up when he sees the red-eyed Terminator expression on my face, then wisely sits back down. “O-kay. You seem...”

“I don’t want to hear it.”

“I was just going to say that you seem a bit stressed.”

“Thank you for that unwanted observation.”

I busy myself by looking at the horde of people that seems to have gathered to the left of the pool, all talking at obnoxious volumes of excitement.

Fulton mirrors my line of vision. “Do you want to talk about it?” His voice is small, harmless, unlike his companion’s. *Fulton* knows when to shut up. *Fulton* doesn’t push me. Gage, on the other hand, will pick up any stick in the vicinity and poke me.

I bite down so hard on my tongue that I taste blood, traces of iron intermingling with the malty flavor of beer.

“Do you—”

More people split off into the smaller crowd that’s formed. What could be so fucking interesting that it’s captured the five-second attention span of literally every mouth breather at this party?

Some kind of bubblegum pop music greets my ears, contributing to the headache pummeling my brain. My scarlet-tinted vision sways. Fulton’s and Gage’s efforts to calm me are lost when I decide on a whim to storm over and separate the goddamn fire hazard.

I shove my way to the front, fully ready to lose my cool, but the sight of something else halts my personal agenda. The sight of Faye dancing seductively in front of half our hockey team in that pathetic excuse she calls a bikini. Paralytic shock threads through my upper back muscles, and possessiveness washes over me at the unhinged jaws and glossy-eyed stares following her every move. She sways her hips back and forth, her hand trailing sensually up her stomach and over her breast, her wild, mussed hair all over the place.

My first instinct is to get her the fuck out of here. I don't know where Hayes is, and a part of me is glad he's not here to witness whatever's happening. When she goes to twirl around herself, I insert my body into the space, feeling her collide into me. She glances up through her lashes, a dopey smile affixed to her lips.

“Kit! Hi!” She grabs my arm and swings it in tandem with her body.

Fucking Christ. I need to think fast. Every guy on the team is looking at her right now. They shouldn't be looking her. In fact, they shouldn't even be breathing the same air as her.

“We're leaving, Faye,” I tell her, using the hand attached to my arm to try and pull her sideways.

She digs her heels into the ground, resisting me with a lot more strength than I was expecting—which is saying something since my rage has gone from zero to off-the-charts inhumanly fast.

“I'm not done dancing!” she whines, making a very public show of stomping her foot down and throwing a gigantic tantrum.

“Yes, you fucking are,” I growl, the heaven-high flames of my wrath seeming particularly painful as they scorch my chest. “If you're going to fight me about it, I'll throw you over my shoulder right now. Is that what you want?”

I've abandoned my tireless mission of dragging her away. I stand deathly still, all while watching her use every muscle in her body to try and break free from my grip. Nobody

intervenes. My teammates are looking at me like I've lost my goddamn mind—and I pretty much have.

“You're not in charge of me!”

Even though my head's screaming at me, I peel my fingers off her wrist, letting her spring backwards a little from the driving force of her fruitless pulls. And when she thinks she's home free, I swoop her legs over my shoulder and hold the backs of her thighs, enduring a colorful storm of expletives and the banging of small fists.

“Kit! Put me down!” She kicks her feet and wiggles her ass, making the trek inside the house a lot fucking harder than it has to be. I want to spank her. I almost do, but then I remind myself that my whole hockey team just saw me manhandling Hayes' little sister like some kind of brainless monster, and the itch in my fingers settles.

Once we're in the smaller of the downstairs bathrooms, I gently place her back down and lock the door.

She throws her arms up before folding them over her chest. “I can't believe you just did that! Ugh! I-I-I hate you!”

I wish I could convince myself that she doesn't mean it, but she definitely does. At least, right at this moment. I don't want to start a fight with her. I didn't carry her away on some jealous rampage—maybe a little—but not entirely, okay?

Faye's never acted like this before. I'm worried about her.

The only self-medication I have right now is breathing. There's nothing else keeping me from driving my fist through this door. With a loud inhale, I click on the light, hearing the fan clunk to life with its usual, ceaseless hum. Then, and only then, do I sigh.

“I know.”

I tip her chin up so she meets my eyes, which she thankfully doesn't fight me on. Then emotion careens into me like a bruising slapshot. Those irresistible brown eyes with flecks of gold stare straight into my soul, begging me to forfeit everything I've just said to her. Begging me to make her mine again.

But the picture fades, and I notice how dilated her pupils are, how she's looking at me but seems to be a million miles away. Like she's on a different planet.

My eyes flare, my jaw clicking with tension. "What did you take?"

Upon my seriousness, she bursts into a fit of giggles, trying to contain them with the blockage of her hands. "Nothing," she says through her fingers, the blush on her chest carrying to the slope of her neck.

"Faye." My tone hardens, bordering on dangerous territory. I can feel my body start to shake, but it's not from rage. It's from worry. Metric tons of worry large enough to fill up an entire cargo dock.

This isn't your run-of-the-mill wasted. I've been to enough ragers to know the difference between drugs and drinks.

Even in the small space, she floats around on her tiptoes, humming to herself, clearly unfazed by the gravity of the situation. If it's what I think it is and she's taken some kind of drug, I'm not opposed to throwing her in the goddamn car and taking her to the nearest hospital.

I grab her harshly by the shoulders. "What. Did. You. Take." The words all come out separately in a low growl.

She blinks a few times, flinching at my tone. "Why should I tell you? You're just going to yell at me again."

I pinch the bridge of my nose as frustration skewers through me. "I won't yell at you." I relax to the best of my ability, which is harder than I thought. It feels like there's a permanently lit fire running rampant inside of me.

"Do you promise?"

"Yes, Prin—" I stop myself. I can't call her that anymore. "Yes, Faye."

Her cheeks rise with a beaming grin, and she motions with her hand for me to lean down so she can whisper in my ear. As I do, that peachy scent encases me, cloying, and for a split second, the neanderthal part of my brain overrides my

rationality. But it fizzles out, taking with it any lingering carnal desire I have for her in this very moment.

“Marboly,” she whispers, her breath tickling the shell of my ear.

Marboly? What the fuck is that? Is that some new, intense strain of drug that kids are doing these days?

I draw back from her and shake my head. “Faye, I don’t —”

“It’s eucalyptic.”

“Excuse me?”

Even though I have a pretty limited vocabulary, I’m pretty sure what she just said isn’t a word.

“Eucalyptic! It makes me feel all warm and fuzzy inside. Kind of like I did before you went and broke my heart.” Her baby hairs are frizzing up around her blanched face from the humidity, her eyes glassy underneath the recessed lighting.

Ouch.

“Or is it eucaphoric? Maybe it’s that. Is that what koalas eat? Have you ever seen a koala before? They’re so cute, but I heard they can give you chlamydia. Would you hold a koala if it meant you got chlamydia? They look so soft.”

Euca...phoric?

I drill my eyes into her, thoughts whipping into action faster than my rebound time. “Euphoric?”

She thrusts her finger into my pecs. “Yes! It’s that! Oh my gosh. That was going to drive me crazy.”

For fuck’s sake. If I have to play another Guess the Word game with her, I’m going to lose my mind.

I wasn’t a very straitlaced student in college. I drank and smoked on the weekends, sometimes partook in harder drugs depending on the situation. And there have been more than a few times I felt pretty “euphoric” after popping a white little pill.

The thunderclap of my heart is the only noise I can hear over the whirring fan. “Faye, look at me,” I implore, using my index finger to gently pivot her jaw. She does as I say, following the heat of my finger, giving me a smile that sparks an ache in my chest.

“Did you take Molly?” I ask, trying to maintain some semblance of calm, even though I can feel my pulse pounding in my throat.

With a straight face, she considers me for a second, then giggles. “If I tell you, you need to keep it a seeecreeret.”

“Did. You. Take. Molly.”

“That’s what the guy said. I can’t believe I’ve never taken it before! It’s so much fun. And it looked like a bag of snow.” She flitters her fingers in the air, imitating snowflakes. “I love Christmas.”

I’m so enraged that the tremors have started up again, the muscles in my body binding tighter and tighter, sweat wetting the back of my neck. I can’t see or think straight. I’m not mad at Faye. I’m mad at whoever the fuck had Molly on them and gave it to her. No way in hell would Faye go searching for it.

The only solution is for her to ride it out. I’d stick my fingers down her throat if I didn’t think she’d fight me the entire way.

I realize I have no right to say it. I don’t think about it, though, before the pet name leaps from my tongue. “Princess, do you remember who gave it to you?”

I’m *begging* her to remember. If I tell the guys that she’s high as a kite right now, there’s no telling what will happen. It’ll just add more stress. I need to figure this out on my own.

She shakes her head. “Didn’t tell me his name.”

“Fuck,” I curse under my breath, beginning to pace around the small vacuum of space we have, trying to rack my brain to think of anyone I know that carries illegal substances on them like a pack of gum.

Faye flops onto the toilet seat and nervously watches me, twiddling with her birthstone necklace.

My thoughts do a roller-coaster loop as I kneel down in front of her, my arms sandwiching her sides. “Okay, here’s what we’re going to do. You’re going to stay in here while I figure this out. You’re *not* going to leave the bathroom. Do you understand?”

Something chips away at her joyous demeanor and bitters those soft features of hers. “You’re leaving. Again. Just like you were planning all along.”

“Faye...” I murmur, my hand sailing down my face and itching at my scruff.

Her wet-eyed gaze stays nailed to the porcelain tiles, and she doesn’t do anything to banish the tears. “Just go.”

She’s killing me. She really is. I hate that I let this happen. Yes, I know it’s not the end of the world, but it *feels* like it. Would she have taken the drugs if we hadn’t got into that fight?

I work double time to dispel the tension, tracking my finger along the outside of her leg—letting her know that I’m here. “I’m going to bring you some water. You need to stay hydrated.”

All that I can focus on is *her*. Not getting revenge, not the aftermath, not our fight. Her body seems to be handling the drug well. This whole situation could’ve gone a lot differently had it been cut with something stronger, and I’m thankful that she’s conscious and alert.

As I go to exit, she flings her hand out and wraps it around my wrist.

“You’re coming back, right?”

I know she probably won’t remember any of this, and maybe that’s why I say what I say. My heart means it, my head means it, every cell in my body means it. Even with this self-inflicted distance, I’ll always mean it.

“I’ll always come back to you.”

FIRST RULE OF FIGHT CLUB

I pray to God that Faye for once listens to me and stays in that bathroom. Fisting a bottle of water, I carve my way through a throng of people before stopping dead center in front of some of my teammates. I usually prefer to keep my social circle small, only talking to the rest of the guys when we're at practice or during games.

Zaven, one of our fastest skaters, waves me over to the small group he's formed. He's flanked on either side by KJ, a forward, and Sailor, a huge-ass defenseman. I'm surprised to see Sailor in a social setting considering he's one of the most closed off people I've ever met. As for KJ, that guy practically breathes parties, so it makes sense that he's taking advantage of the endless flow of drinks.

I don't want to look like an ass, but I really don't have time to talk. I give them all a stern nod before turning my back toward them, but that's when realization barrels up my spine. Whenever I see KJ, he's always equipped with liquid courage or...drugs.

Fuck. I should've known. There's no one else on our team that indulges in drugs at parties during the off-season as much as KJ. He's smart enough to stay away from them during the actual season, which is why he hasn't gotten his ass suspended from the NHL.

I promised Faye I'd come back. I'm just making a quick detour, okay? This little confrontation will be drama-free and over in less than a minute.

I don't think I realize how truly furious I am when I drop the drink, roughly turn KJ in his stupid hat toward me, and clock him directly in the face. My knuckles ache to hit him again, gouts of blood already clinging to reddened skin—whether it's mine or his, I have no idea. And I don't care. His head snaps backwards, and even Zaven's inhumanly fast reflexes can't stop me from breaking cartilage in another unrestrained hit. There's a nauseating squelch of bone and muscle, followed by panicked shouts whaling on me from all directions.

Adrenaline blots every sound out. The only noises I can focus on are the blood echoing in my ears and the beat of my heart resonating deep in my chest. The rage localizing in my belly kicks into high gear, prompting me to flick my hand out and re-curl it, but before I can give KJ a matching shiner to go with his newly broken nose, somebody jerks my arm back.

“Enough!”

I expect Hayes to be the one on the other end of that arm, but it's Bristol.

Stock-still, fist suspended in the air, my eyes peruse the massacre on KJ's face—the rivulets of blood shooting down his nose, splattering the ground in vermilion raindrops, and the purpling bruise stippling his cheekbone. The whole party has come to a complete stop, scandalized whispers shared amongst gaping mouths. The skin on the back of my hand smarts as ichor races down my forearm, slathering my mapwork of tattoos.

Bristol releases my hand with a growl, his lips wrested back from bared teeth. “What the fuck is going on here?”

KJ cups his face. “He just came up and hit me!”

“If you ever fuck with her again, I'll take my skate and slit your throat with it,” I spit, halfway to launching myself at him again. My traps and delts stiffen, the heat from my internal rage consolidating. I want to hit him again. I don't care if people get it on camera. What was he thinking giving drugs to someone like Faye? Someone vulnerable and impressionable and clearly not in her right mind.

KJ's hand falls away, giving everyone a good view of his bloodied, skewed nose. "I have no idea what you're talking about," he hisses.

Bristol stands between us, vexation tugging at every corner of his expression, a six-foot-two fixture keeping me and KJ from scratching each other's faces off like wild animals. "I don't care what the fuck is going on. You two are teammates. If you have a problem, you come to me. Do you understand?"

KJ's groan morphs into a nasally whine. "He start—"

"Do you understand?"

I don't remember the last time I saw Bristol so mad. Face red, muscles wired, the vein in his forehead pulsing, looking about seconds away from throwing both our asses into the cold pool.

"Yes," KJ accepts without protest, that faux bravado from his voice long gone. The bleeding seems to have slowed, and the colorful contusions have started to soak into his skin.

When Bristol's eyes flash toward me, I rival his glare with my own. "You wouldn't be saying this shit if you knew what he—"

"Langley!" Bristol barks in warning, so loud that he could probably be heard from inside the house. He's coming to me as my captain, not my friend.

The audience we've collected waits for my response, and maybe some of them even jones for another brawl to break out. What are they all looking at? Don't they have anything better to do?

My teeth are set on edge when I eventually relent. "Understood."

With Bristol keeping both of us at bay, he commands the crowd to disperse in that authoritative tone he only uses on the ice. A few complaints linger in the air as the stubborn shamle of feet commences, the invisible spotlight overhead snuffing out, freeing me from any more scrutiny.

“We’ll talk about this later,” Bristol orders, his mouth still stuck in a sneer, a continuation of steam hissing out of his flared nostrils and ears.

I don’t have anything to say. I shouldn’t have punched KJ. Or maybe I should’ve, but I should’ve been more discreet about it. Less than a minute and drama-free, right?

KJ’s crew helps him toward the house—accompanied by Bristol—and when I turn around, I’m struck by the sight of Faye and Hayes in front of me.

Faye, with her pale face, and Hayes, with his you-better-start-talking face, both staring at me, expecting an answer I can’t give them.

Fuck me.

**IF IT ISN'T THE
CONSEQUENCES OF MY OWN
ACTIONS**

“**Y**ou’re grounded,” Hayes says.
“Excuse me?”

“You heard me.”

“You can’t ground me in a house I don’t even live in, dickhole!”

Did I expect to be arguing with my brother while I’m high as balls? No. In fact, I was under the apparently unlikely belief that all of this would be forgotten by tomorrow. But my stupid brother had to barge into the bathroom and catch me sitting in the bathtub, fully clothed, stroking the side of it like I was Gollum protecting the Ring.

He put the pieces together pretty quickly.

I blame Kit. I know *I* took the drugs, but I still blame him. He never came back, even though he promised he would. Then again, he’s said a lot of bullshit that wasn’t true these past few days. I shouldn’t be surprised. I’d punch him right now if I had coordination over my arm.

“It’s not her fault,” Kit interjects, trying to play hero.

Well, it’s too late for that, buddy.

“Yeah, it’s not my fault,” I slur, swaying a bit before I thump my shoulder against the wall, breathing out a sigh of relief that something was there to catch me. My head’s foggy, and my tongue feels chalky. I know I should be more than mad, but the damn Molly is dulling the anger rioting inside of

me, replacing it with tooth-achingly sweet happiness. How is anybody supposed to take me seriously when I'm as intimidating as a cupcake?

"Stop trying to absolve her," Hayes snaps, wagging his finger in front of my face.

It looks like there are little trails of light projecting off his digit, a blur of red and blues, like astigmatism through a windshield on a rainy drive.

"I'm not. I'm just saying that maybe you need to ease up a little."

"Oh, so now you're giving me 'parenting' advice? You have no idea what Faye needs right now."

"She doesn't need you fucking berating her," Kit snarls, hostility tarnishing his voice. Or maybe it's protectiveness.

Each word is punctuated, and my heart bloats, a familiar warmth flowering in between my thighs. My mind's seemed to forget that we're both half-naked, but my body's more than ready to make up for lost time. I also seem to have forgotten that I'm mad at him. But I am mad at him for...for... something. It was something he said.

Hayes ignores Kit. "Do you realize how irresponsible you've been? Taking drugs a stranger gives you without telling anyone?" Anger overwhelms my brother's features, but so does fear. Fear that I've never seen before. It lives in his watercolor eyes, extending all the way down to his very soul.

"You take drugs all the time!" I contradict, fists clenched at my sides, my nostrils stinging from the ammonia-like scent of the bathroom.

"That's different, Faye! And for your information, I only took them a few times in college. Always surrounded by people I trusted."

"How is that any different? Stop treating me like..." Like I'm a baby? Like I'm fragile? Like I'm *broken*?

The words suffer a swift death on my tongue, and for the sake of my sanity and the tears lining my eyes, I don't finish

my sentence. Instead, I sit through a long lecture and a hot-worded reproach, getting the occasional reprieve when Kit butts in to add an unnecessary comment.

If I had a diary—which I should probably invest in after the trauma I’ve endured this year—here’s what I’d write for today’s entry:

FUCK YOU, KIT LANGLEY. I HOPE YOUR DICK FALLS OFF IN A FREAK ACCIDENT.

EPIPHANY, HERE I COME

I'm pissed. And it's a hundred degrees right now. But I'm not pissed because I'm stuck in Satan's hot-as-balls ass crack—I'm pissed because I can't stop thinking about Faye. We haven't talked since the party, and if my calculations are correct, then it's been approximately five thousand seven hundred sixty minutes since we last exchanged any words. I try to give her space, only entering my room if she's somewhere else in the house, but every time I see that weird face roller thing she has in the bathroom or the questionable romance book she has on the nightstand, leaden guilt balls in my stomach.

I fucked up. Simple as that. I said things I can't take back. I said things that made her cry. I said things that I didn't mean. All because I was convinced it was the right thing to do...for her sake. Which is stupid, I know. I can't dictate what's right or wrong for anybody. And now I'm paying for my cruelty, my heart minutes—maybe even seconds—away from bursting.

My grip on the rubber bars in front of me is slipping, slick with an accumulation of sweat from my hour workout. I came in with high hopes that I'd be able to clear my mind, but I have an even more stress-muddled brain. Perspiration rolls down the bare hills of my pectorals and through the rivulets in my abs. My shorts are suctioned to my nether regions, and moisture down there is...a recipe for disaster.

As I elongate my arms out to the side, the burning sensation that's been building in my chest and triceps distracts me momentarily from the mental anguish, but it only lasts for

so long. I push through a few more reps before succumbing to exhaustion, the metal of the chest press machine clanging back into place.

I'm sorry. I never meant to lead you on, Faye.

This was never going to work.

You were just so blinded by something you could never have.

My words razor through my brain, slashing through the fleshy matter, an irrepressible reminder of one of the worst days of my life. A lot of people talk about how difficult it is to be on the receiving end of a broken heart. What I don't hear is how difficult it is to be the one doing the heart breaking, secretly knowing it's the last person you'd ever want to hurt. Knowing that you have to end things because they deserve better, or because they were simply the right person at the wrong time.

Don't get me wrong—I'm a douchebag. No matter how shitty I feel, I know Faye is feeling it ten times worse. And I'll never forgive myself for the way I treated her.

Leaning forward, I reach for my neatly folded towel, wiping the excess sweat off my face. The sound of jovial laughter hits my ears before I see anyone turn the corner into our own private gym room, and then Fulton's and Gage's figures slink into frame, followed by Bristol with a towel draped over his shoulder and a drink in his hand.

The guys know I've been...off. But they've been smart enough to give me space. And, well, Hayes has been giving me the silent treatment ever since we got into the fight over Faye. It wasn't my place to step in and help, but I had to try and avert some of the blame. She got a harsh beatdown. Hayes was furious. I think he still is.

Bristol leans up against the machine, the last of his green smoothie clutched between his fingers. "You finally ready to talk?"

"Nope," I say, staring ahead into space just so I don't have to meet his concern-ridden gaze. I'd rather drop a dumbbell on

my foot than have this conversation. I'm familiar with how scolding works. Yell, cower, yell again, promise to be better. It's a cycle that'll probably follow my troublesome ass for the rest of my life.

Bristol ignores me. "Why did you do it, Kit?" he asks.

A simple question. A simple question with a simple answer. But none of it really is simple, is it?

I pause, trying to gather my thoughts and spew out something believable, but all my heart keeps screaming is "Because I love her!"

Oh, fuck. The L-word? Am I serious? I mean, I've known her for four years. Whenever I think about her, I see my future. It's all there—in the heart line of her palms, the crinkles below her eyes, the curve of her contagious smile, the soft spots on her body that I've tenderized with bruising touches. I can't imagine my life without her in it.

But I don't say any of that.

"Because KJ was being a stupid twat."

Bristol chuckles, his lips cocked into an amused smile. "Because you care about her," he corrects.

I freeze in my disgusting pool of sweat. I freeze as an avalanche of panic heads straight for me, snowballing down a steep incline, set off by the jarring possibility that Bristol may have just dissembled my entire world.

"What?" I sputter.

"We all care about her." He places his hand on my shoulder supportively, and my muscles slacken just a little.

Right. Of course that's where he was going with it.

I finally get up to stretch, blanketing the back of my neck with my towel as my hands grasp the ends. I'm gonna be sore as hell tomorrow.

"Uh, yeah," I offer lamely.

"I mean, did he deserve it? Yeah. Could you have confronted him in a nonviolent way? Probably."

“He’s lucky all I broke was his nose,” I growl, anger streamlining through my bloodstream, all the way to the hub of my body, where my heart beats out a staccato rhythm.

Bristol holds his hands up in surrender. “Hey, I’m not blaming you. If I wasn’t a pacifist, I probably would’ve thrown a few punches myself.”

I’m not going to hold some grudge against KJ. We’re teammates, after all. He learned his lesson, and if he has any intelligence in that pea-sized brain of his, he’ll never make that mistake again. My self-control usually isn’t this volatile. I keep my fights strictly on the ice. But when people mess with those I *care* about, I’ll stop at nothing until they fucking pay for it.

My teeth cage my lower lip. “Faye’s not talking to me, and I don’t know what to do.”

“Because you gave KJ a taste of his own medicine?”

“Because I said some shit to her that I shouldn’t have.”

Admitting that out loud pains me in a way I never thought was imaginable. Instead of the truth bouncing off me like a bullet ricocheting off a bulletproof vest, it fully punctures my chest, exploding my ribs open in a slow-motion, car-crash-dummy kind of way.

I told her it was all a mistake. That *she* was a mistake. Why did I have to be so harsh? I know why. I know why, and I don’t have the right to be asking that question. Because if I didn’t make sure things between us were completely finished, it would’ve made it that much easier for me to crawl back to her.

Bristol tosses back the rest of his drink and swallows. “Did you mean any of it?”

“No, of course not. I was just so worked up with everything going on.”

“Then she’ll forgive you. Probably with time, but she will.”

“I don’t know, Cap,” I sigh, combing my fingers through the front of my wet hair.

I can feel Bristol’s stare burn a hole through the towel on my neck, and I reach down to swoop up my water bottle, squirting a decent stream into my mouth.

“You need to prove it to her,” Bristol tells me.

My cheeks grow impossibly warm, flushed with a feverish haze. It doesn’t help that the sun is somehow defying all laws of gravity and only aiming for my retinas—no other spot in the gym. “You want me to prove what to her, exactly?”

He sets his glass and towel on the ground, focusing his attention on the rack of dumbbells beside him. He squats down to pick up a twenty-pound weight for his warmup, readying himself with a breath. “You have to prove that you didn’t mean any of it,” he advises, curling his lower arm. “Whatever it was.”

Prove to her how much I still care about her. Prove to her that I’m done playing this game. Prove to her that I want the real thing with her for as long as she’ll have me. I pick Faye in every universe. In the ones where we’re best friends, in the ones where we’re sworn enemies, in the ones where we’re strangers who live on opposite ends of the world. *I pick her.*

When she looked at me while I was leaving the bathroom, when she had to ask if I’d come back because she didn’t think I would, it crushed my heart. I’d created this narrative that abandoning her was always my plan from the start, and that was never the case. I can’t have her believing that for the rest of the summer. I know what I’m putting at risk here—my relationship with Hayes. I know I’m choosing her over him. I know I should think harder about all of this. But if she spends another second not knowing that I’m so completely infatuated with her, I don’t know if I’ll survive.

Do you know what it feels like when it hurts to breathe? When you keep sucking oxygen into your lungs in an effort to breathe easier, but nothing seems to be working?

And then you see them standing there, waiting for you, waiting for all the possible adventures you two are about to have and the memories you'll treasure from them, and the breath comes easy. Crisp and fresh and like nothing you've ever tasted before because you've been so used to breathing tainted air.

Is that what love feels like? And if so, am I destined to live a life smothered in a smog-infused atmosphere?

**A LITTLE COMPETITION
NEVER HURT ANYBODY**

If there's one thing my team holds near and dear to their heart, besides our red-blooded love for hockey, it's some good, friendly competition. Usually involving alcohol of some kind. Lots of it.

I really didn't want to be included in the team's annual drinking game—especially with Faye playing—but Gage wasn't taking no for an answer. And now, occasionally catching the glower on her face or the hushed insults under her breath, I'm subjecting myself to whatever ethically questionable game Gage has cooked up for us. Knowing him, I'll probably end the night face-down in my underwear or possibly knocked out cold a mile away from the house. Both of which would be better consequences than having to face the love of my life after brutally ripping her heart out.

Faye looks a lot better than I do. In fact, the waist-squeezing corset she has on right now is making it impossible to concentrate on the rules of the game. Black lace hugging the defined curve of her hips, the tight cinch across her ribs pushing her small breasts to pillow over the sinfully low neckline. And she has this fucking black ribbon threaded in her hair—one that I want to unravel in my fist while I tease my tongue along her bottom lip.

Whenever my gaze flicks to her, I have to ignore the desire in my belly that's a few ill-advised steps away from rocketing to high heaven. I know corsets are hard to take off—that there's a bunch of ties and shit—but at this rate, I'd snap the

thing in two to get even the smallest glimpse of her flawless skin.

Not that she'd probably ever let me. She's pissed, and rightfully so. I know that I wanted to talk to her as soon as possible, but I didn't even take into consideration if she'd give me the time of day. Which, surprise, she hasn't.

Gage has five cups stacked in a pyramid at the opposite ends of the coffee table, all filled halfway with whatever alcohol we've had wasting away in our cupboards. He doesn't always like to disclose what we're drinking, which usually sledgehammers me around my third drink in.

The whole team is here, including Aeris and Faye, who both seem like they're starting to regret partaking in tonight's battle royale.

"Are we playing Beer Pong?" Aeris asks, peeking over the rims of the red solo cups curiously.

An evil grin touches Gage's lips. "Not exactly."

"Gage, I'm not cleaning up any more yack," Hayes says.

"It's a tame game, I promise. Nobody's gonna yack or lose their clothes tonight. Or end up on a mattress in the middle of a lake."

"Yeah, that was a lot less funny when I woke up to find a field trip of fifth graders surrounding me," Casen mutters, a frown underscoring the steel-set glare of his eyes.

Faye doesn't look my way as she laughs to herself, and God, what I would've given to see her eyes glitter with mirth when she did—her deep-cut smile lines, the scrunch of her nose, how she sometimes tips her head back in a candid way that deserves to be captured on camera.

I can't stop staring at her, and I'm not doing it inconspicuously. Pretty sure I have cartoon love hearts popping out of my eyes. I hate that we're lifetimes apart; I hate that we can barely be in the same room as each other. I hate that I'm not the one making her laugh like that.

“We’re playing a combination of drinking games,” Gage announces, placing two ping-pong balls in the center of the table. “Beer Pong, Flip Cup, and Rage Cage.”

That seems...excessive. And possibly dangerous.

Fulton raises his hand sheepishly, already sweating like a pig despite the game not having started yet. Poor guy. I’m pretty sure he isn’t equipped to handle any games besides tabletop ones.

“Yes, Ful?”

“Uh...what does that mean exactly?”

Gage rubs his hands together like a crazed mastermind. “So glad you asked, buddy. Faye, could you help me with the demonstration?”

Every head in the room turns to Faye, and she stiffens, pink cheeked. “Yeah, sure,” she agrees, tightening the bow in rolling hills of light brown hair.

I can tell she’s wary by the tentativeness of her footsteps, by the rise of her tits as she breathes through the unknown, by the flush of her skin as sweat masks the column of her throat.

“Okay, we’re gonna be in teams of four, and the first two partners will be playing Beer Pong. Faye, I’ll have you stand at the end with the cups, and I’ll be the one trying to get the ping-pong ball into one of them,” Gage explains, taking his position across from her.

Her eyebrows bunch. “What do I have to do?”

“You need to give me a backdrop, so the ping-pong ball doesn’t go flying.” Gage tests the imaginary arc of the ping pong ball with one bent arm, closing an eye to gauge the angle he has to throw it to land a shot on his first go. “So just bend over and...push your boobs up.”

My thoughts go into overdrive, and along with the lust niggling inside me, a lifeform of possessiveness resuscitates from his comment. He did not just say what I think he did, did he? I’m gonna choke that motherfucker until he passes out.

Hayes immediately stands up from his spot on the couch, shaking his head. “No way. No. My sister is not ‘pushing her boobs up’ so you can bounce a ping-pong ball off them.”

I feel a growl start to rake up my throat, and as much as I want to agree with Hayes, I know I outwardly can’t. It’ll be too suspicious, and I’ve pretty much lost my right to be protective over her.

Nobody should be looking at Faye’s tits, much less asking her to grab them and squeeze them together. Ah, fuck. That’s an image I really don’t need right now.

I’m not sure what I expected Faye to say, but for the first time tonight, she slowly scrapes her hickory irises over me. Her cheeks tick with a smile, and then she palms the sides of her breasts and pushes them up—not that they need much volume given the corset. “One boob wall coming up.”

Of course she’s going to make this fucking difficult.

You know how I was talking about that weird possessiveness flaring up again? Yeah, that’s not the only thing flaring up. *Hey, dick. It’s me, Kit. I know we usually get along, but right now, I need you to deflate faster than a Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade balloon. Don’t look at Faye’s breasts. Don’t look at Faye, period. Think about that time your grandmother fell down the stairs and died.*

I doubt my morbid thinking would’ve worked in the first place, but thankfully, I hear the plop of the ping-pong ball, and Faye lets her hands fall away.

“Then, the partner who was the wall will drink. The next player from the team has to set the cup face-down on the table to flip it back to standing. Once the cup is right side up, the last player will try to bounce the ping-pong ball into it, and y’all will just rotate until every drink is empty,” Gage finishes, a dimple pocking the corner of his mouth.

Faye places her hands on her hips. “What are the teams?”

Gage’s eyes zip around the group, and I just know he’s plotting something in that messed-up head of his.

Do I want to be on Faye's team? Yes? Do I want to be on the opposite team? I don't know? This whole game feels like a bad idea. Faye's pretty much going to distract me either way, so whoever does end up getting me on their team is gonna be carrying my dead weight.

"Me, Faye, Aeris, and Bristol will all be on a team, and Hayes, Kit, Fulton, and Casen will be on a team," Gage decides with a smirk that spells trouble.

Faye looks at me, and she doesn't just look at me, but she runs her tongue over her teeth. She's getting back at me—playing on the sexual tension still between us and snapping it against my wrist like a rubber band. I'm taking the L now.

"And what's the prize?" Faye questions.

Gage's chuckle makes my blood go cold. "The winning team doesn't get anything, but the losing team gets humiliated. If you lose, you have to pick someone from the winning team to mimic your favorite sex position with."

It's official: I hate Gage out of everyone on my hockey team. That pint-sized little shit makes me so unbelievably violent sometimes.

If Faye gets into a sex position with someone else—even if it is just a joke—I'm going to lose my shit. I need this opportunity to speak with her. I need to make things right. And there's no way in hell that I'd ever let someone else get that close to her body.

I don't care if the guys tease me for losing. Gage thinks this is humiliation, but this is liberation, baby. It's a rule of the game. Nobody's gonna think anything of it if I lose and just happen to pick Faye. Our secret is still safe.

Murmurs diffuse through the crowd, and I crack my neck as I pretend to put on a competitive face. I huddle with my team, having decided that Hayes and I will do Beer Pong, Fulton will do Flip Cup, and Casen will do Rage Cage.

And then, as everyone gets into position, with Aeris and Faye being the starting players on their team, the game commences.

I'm responsible for shooting the ping-pong ball into one of the cups, and I'm able to peek out of the corner of my eye to catch Faye pushing her goddamn tits up again, which makes me completely miss my throw. Hayes is screaming at me to get a grip while he's pushing his own pecs up, but I'm so far gone that I'm beginning to lose control over my arm. The ball goes flying in every conceivable direction, not even skirting off rims but evading them entirely. I'm trying here...sort of. The guys know I have much better aim than this.

Hayes digs the heel of his palm into his forehead. "Kit, come on!"

"Sorry. I'm, uh, off my game tonight," I lie.

Aeris misses a few times, scrambling around and panicking as her team cheers her on. My team, on the other hand, continues to creatively threaten me if I don't make it in within the next second.

Newsflash: I don't.

The plunk of the ping-pong ball sounds from the other side, and I silently pat myself on the back for absolutely failing my portion of the game. As soon as Faye starts to chug, I sink the ball in, and Hayes quickly scoops it out so he can drink. Hayes is probably the fastest chugger on our team, which means he can easily tie us in the race. Faye's half his size. She'll never finish before him.

Shit. I should've stalled more. Dillied my dally.

Voices shout and holler, indistinguishable from one another, a mass of loud, brusque pressure that has my heart racing in my chest and rapid-fire pleas launching off my tongue.

To my surprise, though, Faye chugs her drink like a fucking champ, her throat rolling with each swallow, and she places the cup face-down victoriously.

That's my girl.

Bristol quickly starts to attempt to flip it upright. I know our captain has some pretty good hand-eye coordination, so I doubt he'll exceed five tries. Fulton, on the other hand, folds

under pressure, so I wouldn't be surprised if we're set back a few cups compared to the other team.

As soon as Hayes finishes, Fulton is up to the stand, and we all gently encourage him to try his best. He's got a good wrist flick, but he's applying too much power to each flip, which makes the cup topple over. I'm not going to tell him that, though. I need us to lose.

I don't even realize Bristol is done with his section of the game before Gage is bouncing the ball against the table. Fulton is hysterically flipping the cup at this point as he shakes with anticipation, and Hayes' voice has risen in decibels now that he's yelling at him to hurry up.

"They're winning! Flip it, Fulton! So help me God, FLIP IT!"

"I'm trying! It's a lot harder than it looks, okay? You know I don't do well under pressure!"

My eyes aren't focused on my team—they're focused on Gage. Gage and his blessed drinking game experience. And just like that, the opposing team's first round ends, and they rotate to start on the second drink in their pyramid.

Needless to say, I make sure my team falls behind a reasonable distance, so the winner is practically chosen halfway through our set. After which we all kind of just stop trying and accept defeat. My Faye craving—which I had to suppress for the past twenty minutes—has sprung back up inside me, unslaked and somehow more vicious than it was before.

"Show us what you got, losers," Gage taunts.

In any other situation, I probably would've been butthurt about losing, but this isn't a normal situation. Aeris and Hayes team together, along with Casen and Bristol, and that just leaves me, Faye, Gage, and Fulton. It's no surprise that Gage and Fulton would choose each other—they're best friends, after all.

So I stupidly think I'm in the clear before Fulton nonchalantly walks right on over to Faye.

What the fuck?

I'm far enough away that I can't hear what they're saying, but I'm close enough that I can definitely distinguish the coy laughter dripping from Faye's soft, sugar-spun voice. She has her hand on his shoulder, a single, manicured finger circling the cap, and she's staring intently at him with fluttering lashes.

No. This isn't happening. Not in a trillion years. Not over my dead, cold, rotting body.

Abandoning any salvageable subtlety, I march over to them with jealousy knocking into my solar plexus, and my temper ascends to dangerous levels.

I huff an exaggerated burst of hot air out of my nostrils. "Ful, I need to talk to Faye."

"He doesn't," she immediately retorts, refusing to look at me.

"Yes, I do."

"No, he doesn't."

She's not even acknowledging me.

"Uh..." Fulton whips his head back and forth between the two of us, eyes doubling in size, fear eroding his pallid features.

Faye, probably coming to the conclusion that I won't give up, finally turns to face me, doing a sexy little shimmy to pull up her corset. The way her tits bulge over the neckline, a slip away from flashing me her nipples, makes my dick fatten in my pants, even if it is at the expense of my indignation.

"*Fulton* was just about to show me his favorite sex position," she announces.

My teeth tear apart the growl rising in my throat. "Like hell he was."

"You were, weren't you, Fulton?" The scratchiness in her voice, paired with the pout of her bottom lip, are two things in this world that man cannot resist. And with Faye being the

deliverer, she has the power to burn Fulton in an all-consuming fire and reduce him to flakes of ash. Which, hearing it in my head, sounds great.

“I was?” he squeaks.

“Yep.” Faye positions herself in front of Fulton, grabbing his hands and bringing them to the curves of her sides, then sliding them all the way down to rest just inches above her ass. “Doggy, right?”

I like to think of myself as a sensible person. Level-headed. Reasonable. But I’ve never, in my entire life, felt anger this intense. Not when I was punted three consecutive times into the plexiglass during a game. Not when I missed the winning shot. Not when I was cussed out on the ice. Not when my nose was broken during a subsequent fight.

“Faye...” I warn, those stupid, green-eyed monsters sending my stomach into a nauseous upset, every muscle in my body constricting with a barely checked rage. My hands—which I’m envisioning cutting off Fulton’s circulation—knot into fists.

Fulton freezes like one of those fainting goats. “I feel like I’m intruding on something,” he murmurs.

Faye and I speak at the same time.

“You’re not,” she says.

“Yes, you are,” I snarl loudly, stepping an inch closer, staring down at the panicked expression on his face from the five inches I hold over him. If Fulton doesn’t get his hands off Faye in the next three seconds, I’m going to break his wrists so badly that he’ll never be able to hold a hockey stick again.

“Yeah...I’m...just...” And then, at a speed I’ve never seen before, Fulton slips out of the tense circle, sprinting toward Gage to evade my reign of wrath.

First smart decision he’s made.

Smugly, I feel the agitated ripple in my belly smooth out, and once my thoughts disembark from the rotating carousel of violence and vengeance, I turn to Faye with a triumphant grin.

“I’m not doing this,” Faye snaps, planting her hands on her hips.

“You either talk to me, or you get on your hands and knees.”

I was going to ask her politely, but after that stunt she just pulled, now we both have a reason to be mad. All I’m asking is for her to hear me out. Why is she making this so hard? I made a mistake. People deserve second chances, don’t they?

“I have nothing to say to you.”

“Then I guess we’re doing this the hard way.”

Faye slinks closer to me, twirling the ends of the bow in her hair, giving me a heart-stopping dose of bedroom eyes. “*This* won’t be hard at all. Because I don’t feel anything for you anymore.”

Fuck. That hurt a lot more than I thought it would. And I deserve it after the way I treated her. The rest of the guys seem to be too engrossed in their own positions to notice the dispute taking place between us, and I doubt that Fulton will think anything of the war he almost got pulled into. It’s none of his business.

Faye does as I say, perking her ass up in the air as her breasts spill over her top, the arch of her spine plucking my resolve wire thin. Despite the conflicted emotions inside me, my erection is far from conflicted. It’s overtly obvious that I still feel *everything* for her.

And suddenly, pretending to take her from behind seems like a terrible idea. I need to chill the fuck out. I need to jump into a cold lake. I need to be tranquilized. I need to jump into a cold lake while I’m tranquilized, and then slowly drown because that’ll be less painful.

I situate myself behind her, trying to adjust my crotch so she can’t feel the prod of my not-so-limp dick against her thigh. Then I wrap my fist discreetly around her hair ribbon, tugging ever so slightly. “Five minutes, Faye. That’s all I’m asking for,” I whisper.

She turns her head back slightly, still at the mercy of my hand. “Sorry. I’ll be booked for the foreseeable future. I don’t have time to talk to people who *clearly* don’t care about me.”

My voice is rusty when it comes out. “I...”

A sudden onrush of hoots and hollers lightens the heaviness of our conversation, and I withdraw my hand from Faye’s hair upon the stares of my teammates—and her brother.

“Oh, and Kit,” she purrs under her breath, keeping her jaw angled toward me but her eyes lowered in disdain. “Your *keys* are poking me.”

**NEVER READ THE YELP
REVIEWS**

When Aeris and Lila asked me to accompany them on a girls' day out, it sounded like a great idea, especially since I've been imprisoned in a house full of hockey jocks and testosterone. But in hindsight, sitting in a poorly ventilated restaurant with sweat dripping down my back and Kit's nagging words ringing in my mind, maybe a homemade peanut butter and jelly sandwich would've sufficed. Don't get me wrong, I'm happy that I get to spend time with them. I just wish the circumstances were a bit better.

I know they heard about my slip-up at the party. Everyone and their mother have heard about it by now. And yes, Hayes stuck by his promise to keep me locked in my room for the time being—aside from Gage's *brilliant* drinking game. Luckily, Kit's rarely set foot in his room after that night. It's a good thing I didn't catch him, or I would've thrown a lamp at him.

I can't get over the things he said to me. He's just a person. He's just a guy who's not entirely hideous and who has a knack for putting pucks into nets. He's not special, so I don't know why I let him have so much power over me. I was incensed at first, and even more so when he tried to talk to me during the game, but now I'm just drained.

I've stopped feeling guilty, I've stopped pitying myself, I've stopped feeling angry. I don't have the energy to let him take over my life. And all of these secrets. Ugh, these fucking secrets! I don't want them anymore. I do—

“Faye?”

I blink as the view of our waiter crispens, and everyone around the table stares at me, the young, probably fresh-out-of-high-school server waiting impatiently for me to order.

My gaze immediately locates the pasta subsection of the menu, because if I’m going to get through this lunch without biting someone’s head off, I’m going to need sweet, sweet carbs. “Sorry, I’ll have the tortellini,” I say, folding my menu and placing it in his outstretched hand.

He takes it from me with a blank expression. Then, like a light has been switched on, he plasters on the fakest smile I’ve ever seen. “We’re so pasta-tively thrilled that you chose to dine with us this afternoon!” he exclaims cheerfully, then scurries off to the kitchen window.

“That was...weird,” Lila comments, taking a sip from her water glass.

Aeris glances around the hole-in-the-wall restaurant, everywhere from the enlarged cartoon penne in a bikini to the random framed facts about pasta dating back to the thirteenth century. “Yeah, the website made it look a lot more normal online.”

The restaurant has started to fill up—a surprise there—and judging by the volume of people filtering in, our meals will likely be cold by the time they make it to our table. I hadn’t realized how hungry I’d actually gotten in the thirty minutes we’ve been here.

Aeris folds and refolds her cloth napkin. Lila purses her lips as she takes in the outfits of the customers around us.

I sigh. “Don’t you two want to ask me what you’ve been dying to ask me since we sat down?”

“What? No, of course not. We-we have no idea what you’re talking about,” Aeris insists, nodding to Lila, who nods back just as vigorously.

I know when Aeris is lying. Everyone does. She’s a terrible liar.

Lila slips her manicured fingers between the gaps in her plaited braid, puffing up each individual section. “Yeah, we’re just glad you didn’t do cocaine. That’s the real hard shit.”

Aeris nudges her friend’s arm. “Lila!”

“What? I’m just being honest. And warning her. I did cocaine one time at a sorority exchange and was convinced I was going to die. I couldn’t tell the head sister either because I would’ve been dropped, so I locked myself in the bathroom for the rest of the night.”

I shift the weight on my hip bones, trying to ignore the shallow pool of sweat my back’s gathered on the hardwood seat. “See! Molly isn’t that bad. I don’t get why everyone’s treating me like a kid.”

“They’re just worried about you,” Aeris coos, her lips cracking into a sympathetic grimace.

She means well. The whole house does. But...I have a right to feel indignant, don’t I? I’m twenty-two. I don’t need to be looked after all the time. And I know it’s immature to blame my own actions on someone else, but none of this would’ve happened if it wasn’t for Kit.

I run my nail through the condensation on my glass, eyes glued to the ring of water soaking into the varnished table. “Can we just talk about something else please?”

Lila catches on immediately, throwing herself into the ring with a wicked little grin. “I’m officially done with boys,” she announces.

Mid-drink, Aeris chokes on her water. “You’re turning lesbian?”

“No, but maybe down the road. I meant I’m done with *Bristol*, specifically.”

My eyebrows lift with curiosity. “Hold on. You and Bristol?”

She rolls her mascara-primed eyes, twirling her straw around. “Yeah, ever since Hayes’ birthday party, but that clearly hasn’t gone anywhere. He’s so unsure of what he

wants, but he's sure enough that he doesn't want me," she mutters, her tone shrouded in annoyance. "He needs to make up his mind. I'm not going to let him drag me along, you know? If he doesn't want the real thing—and that *includes* labels—then I'm not going to give him the time."

"Men suck," I agree.

"I'll drink to that." Lila throws her water back and finishes it in a few gulps like it's a shot of tequila.

We both turn to Aeris, who's upgraded from folding her napkin to styling it into an unidentifiable animal shape.

"Oh, yeah. Men suck balls. Death to the patriarchy!" she yells a little too loudly, attracting a side-eye from a granny a few tables away from us.

And the resentment that had momentarily left me is back, engulfing my heart in tendrils, a bunch of black conduits for the hateful poison seething in my bloodstream. Fuck Kit Langley. My life was better when he wasn't in it. And if I see his dumb face, I'm going to punch him. In fact, maybe I'll book a flight back to Pennsylvania to really show him.

Great. Now aside from being hot and hungry, I'm pissed. Just when I said I wasn't going to give him any more power, here I am, handing it over to him. My temples throb, and dizziness wallops my nutrient-deprived brain. I somehow also feel dry and wet at the same time. The bare parts of my body are all crackly, but the clothed parts of my body are damper than they should be.

A waiter maneuvers through the three o'clock rush of incoming customers, carrying a tray of sliced fresh bread. Steam swirls like a thin brume from the doughy insides. The outside is crisped to perfection with flour sprinkled over top, and dried rosemary has been baked into the pristine, white craters, bringing an equally tempting scent to my nostrils.

My stomach rumbles angrily, and I press my hand to it, hoping that if I suck on an ice cube long enough, it'll just shut up.

There's an elongated pause, then Aeris clears her throat. "So, how's school going?"

I stuff an ice cube into one side of my cheek. "It's, uh, it's fine. Finished finals with straight As, though my stats class was hell to get through. It was my first A-, and the teacher was terrible. Never explained anything, never provided study guides, included information on the midterms that we never learned."

"A-? That's impressive, Faye. I got a D in my Food Culture class. And half our grade was based on attendance," Lila says, flashing a flirtatious smile at the waiter filling up her glass.

"Do you know what you want to do after graduation?" Aeris asks.

I'm going into my junior year in the fall, so the post-graduation questions aren't new to me. But I hate thinking about them. Adulthood has more rigid schedules, but you have less control over everything. I'm not ready for all of that. The only thing I know for certain is that I'll work on my teaching credentials after college.

I swallow my melted ice. "Kinda just going with the flow. You know, it's impossible for kids right out of college to get jobs." Deflect, Faye. I'd rather not be reminded of the life I have waiting for me back in Pennsylvania.

"You don't have to know," Lila chimes in. "Your journey is your journey. No point in rushing through it if you're headed to the same place in the end."

Aeris nods. "I didn't get a job until months later. I actually remember going to all the stores downtown and—"

There's a scream. A high-pitched, bone-chilling scream. And it's coming from the blond across from me. I don't know how I didn't clock it as soon as it happened, but a passing server must've tripped by our table, because the plate he was carrying—which must've been Spaghetti Bolognese—is splashed all over Lila's designer shirt.

I freeze. The whole restaurant freezes. The waiter might've shit his pants, who knows.

Lila's in hysterics as Aeris slowly scoots out of her seat and escorts her to the bathroom. Now, instead of my friends sitting across from me, there's a mess of tomato sauce and chunky meatballs dripping off the table. Noodles the consistency of puke are sprawled in a brown mush on the floor. Lovely.

Honestly, if nobody was watching the disaster that just took place, I might've licked the table clean. I've gone from hungry to ravenous in minutes. With a sigh, I dig around in my purse for some sustenance, but then I remember I took my emergency Junior Mints out when I had a late-night cry session the other day. Thanks to Kit. All thanks to Kit.

A few waiters have been deployed to remedy the pasta explosion at the table, and they all scrub furiously like they'll lose their jobs on the spot if they don't have the wood looking clean enough to eat off. And once their crew disperses with some mumbled apologies here and there, none other than Kit motherfucking Langley sits down in Aeris' abandoned seat.

"What are you doing here?" I growl, my headache growing tenfold.

"I needed to talk to you." He's dressed in a tank top, delicious tattoos on display, big lips in a slight pout, and just the right amount of perspiration condensing on his hairline.

Hold up. Did he follow me here? Did he place an AirTag on the bottom of my shoe or something? How did he know where I was?

"What, Kit? About what? There's nothing to talk about."

I have no idea when the girls are going to get back, but they can't see me and Kit talking. And Aeris seems like the kind of person who has those Tide to Go sticks on her at all times.

"We have everything to talk about, Faye. I haven't been able to stop thinking about what I said to you at the party. I was out of line. I wasn't thinking about how my words would

affect you. I started spewing anything I could think of to push you away. And none of it was true. *None* of it.”

My teeth nick the skin on my lower lip, and I taste copper. I lean back in my chair with my arms crossed over my chest. “Guilt’s a bitch, isn’t it?”

Kit’s face twists in pain, his jaw clenched, the muscles in his arm wrung impossibly tight. “I know you’re mad,” he mumbles softly, using that same voice someone uses when they’re approaching a cornered dog.

“Mad? I’m crushed. You broke my heart and my trust. You let me open up to you when you were planning on dumping me like one of your conquests.”

“Faye, please. I’m trying here.”

“So I should give you an award because you *tried* to apologize to me?”

I don’t know if my heart will ever recover. Sure, it still beats how it was intended, and yes, I can still love with it, but the fissure inside of it will never fully close—will never fully heal.

I’m sorry. I never meant to lead you on, Faye.

This was never going to work.

You were just so blinded by something you could never have.

On repeat. Every minute of every day since he said them.

“I fucked up. I know I did. I shouldn’t have been so harsh. You didn’t deserve any of it, and if I’d found out someone else had ever treated you the way I did, I would’ve killed them. I was trying to make things easier for me, but it only made things harder for you in the process. I *made* that choice. I was the selfish asshole who ruined the only good thing I had in my life.”

As much as I hate looking at him, I can see the regret in the strained lines of his face, in the blue-black smudges under his eyes.

Tears prick the backs of my eyes. My rage has liquified into sadness, and I can feel my body melting alongside it. “What am I supposed to say, Kit? I can’t do this back and forth with you.”

“I don’t expect you to forgive me, okay? I just needed you to know the truth. I needed you to know how I felt.” His stare never wavers, the gentle tone of his voice like susurrations through a grove of trees. I feel it brush my skin, and my body betrays me by wanting to go to him, to burrow into those strong arms of his.

“If you give me the time, I’ll prove to you how much you mean to me. I promise. No more back and forth. The real thing.”

“The real thing?” I squeak out, my elbow knocking into my silverware by accident as I layer my hands on the table. They’re inches away from Kit’s. I’ve waited four years for the real thing with him.

“Whatever you want. Coffee dates or hand-holding in the dark. Goodnight kisses or walks in the park. Me trying to impress you with my shitty cooking, us watching movies in bed together. I’m willing to give you whatever you want, Faye, because...”

“Because?”

I’m mad at him. I’m mad at him. I’m...tired of being mad at him. A second chance. That’s all he’s asking for. And I know Kit’s a good person. What if I was the one asking for a second chance? I’d want him to consider, right? Everyone makes mistakes. I would know; I’ve made plenty.

He brushes a wayward tear off my face, his touch fracturing my thoughts. No matter what narrative I give him—if he’s the hero or the villain of my story—his touch will *always* light up my heart. Rays of sun that shine from the inside out, through the barrier of my skin, into the world as a blinding display of color.

He inhales shakily, unsure if he should continue with his train of thought. The anticipation is making me sick. I can’t

read the emotion welling in his eyes.

Before I'm given the chance to say anything, seven words stop my heart. Seven words that now take priority over the mindless excuses he gave me at the party. Seven words that drop all the way to my soul, scaring the darkness away, casting a soft afterglow in every corner of my body.

"Because you mean the world to me."

I don't know what to say.

His hand covers my own, a nonverbal message that tells me he means it with every fiber of his being.

I thought I knew what he was going to say. I thought it might've been an L-word gesture, but it wasn't. I mean, I guess I'm not that surprised. Love is complicated. Love requires trust and the ability to be vulnerable. I've been vulnerable before, and it left scars soul deep.

If I give him a second chance, this is a no U-turn kind of street. Once I career down this road, I can't go back. I'll hit a dead end. Am I willing to risk it all for Kit? Risk my heart again?

"I miss you. So much." Authenticity hangs off every word. It's there in the deep brown of his eyes, a window to a mind I've wanted to live inside for years.

"I miss you too," I whisper, my eyes refilling with tears, my chest aching from the sobs trying to escape.

Kit's thumb brushes my knuckles. "If you let me, I want to earn your trust back."

"I don't know."

"Please, Princess. Please let me make things right. I can't stand what I've done to you. Fuck, I deserve to wallow in my own self-hatred, but you shouldn't have to question how much you mean to me. You want me to chew through my goddamn leash to get to you? I will. You want me to get on my knees and beg? I will. You want me to come clean to Hayes and take the blame for all of this? I will."

I stare at a fleck of spaghetti sauce that the cleaning team missed in their tornado of towels and wipes, closemouthed.

“I don’t care how long it takes. Make me work for it. I played hockey for eleven years before making it to the NHL. I’m willing to wait even longer for you, because you’re a far better prize than going pro. You can hate me all you want, but what I won’t have is you questioning how amazing you are just because I fucked up.”

“I—”

Our original waiter has somehow materialized right next to me, unfazed by the fact that the two girls at the table have been replaced with a giant man in a skimpy tank top. “We’re so sorry. Your dishes should be out within twenty minutes. There was a hiccup with our presiding chef.”

“Is everything okay?” I ask, exchanging a worried glance with Kit.

“Yes. He’s quite alright. His finger has been successfully located, and he’s on his way to the hospital as we speak,” the spindly teenager says, smiling at me like he didn’t just use the word “finger” in a sentence regarding food. He shuffles off before I can shake him down for more answers.

Kit and I speak at the same time.

“Did he just say ‘finger’?”

“You haven’t eaten yet?”

“It’s fine,” I say dismissively, just as my stomach expels a growl loud enough to be heard over the chatter of the restaurant.

He gives me one of his judgy little looks. “Sure it is. And I didn’t just have a one-sided conversation with your stomach.”

Embarrassment rushes to my cheeks.

Kit reaches into the pocket of his shorts, pulls out a miniature box of Junior Mints, and slides them over to me.

It takes everything in my power not to snatch them up like some greedy bridge troll. “You were carrying a box of Junior

Mints with you?”

“I thought I should start to since we were hanging out so often,” he explains, watching as I—gracefully—pop the lid open and pour a handful of those delicious chocolate melts into my palm. I toss them into my mouth—a little less gracefully—and muffle a moan when the sweetness hits my tongue.

“Plus, you get really stabby when you’re hangry.”

I flick a piece of candy at him, but it bounces off him like a tiny pebble. “I don’t get *hangry*.”

He picks up the mint, tosses it into the air, and catches it in his mouth. “Uh-huh. Then what do you call that time we were momentarily trapped in Ikea and you threatened to disembowel me with a blender blade if you didn’t get a plate of meatballs?”

“That wasn’t my proudest moment,” I admit with a wry grin.

Kit leans back against the seat, chuckling under his breath, a perfect picture of the male specimen. The surly, famous NHL defenseman who’s willing to do everything to win me back...is all *mine*.

“But...thank you. Nobody’s ever done anything like that for me before.”

“I’d do anything for you, Princess.”

Princess. I’ve missed hearing that name, and it’s never sounded better.

Kit’s eyes duck to my lips, lingering, one bad decision away from pressing his mouth to mine. The crippling need to kiss him pulses in my lower abdomen, journeying all the way to my cunt, where desire throbs even harder and faster behind my cotton-clothed center. My hunger for food is long forgotten. All I can focus on is him. The way he’s looking at me right now, leaning in like he’s about to—

And then I hear feminine laughter from around the corner, growing in volume along with the click-clack of heels.

“They’re coming! Hide!” I hiss, making a shooing motion with my arm.

Kit glances around the space frantically. “Hide?”

“Or leave! I don’t know! If they see you, they’ll know something is up.”

“So, you still want to keep us a secret?”

“For now, yes. Hayes is already livid over the party. I don’t think now is the time for him to indirectly find out about us. Now go!”

Kit wastes no time making a beeline for the exit, his freakish hockey speed allowing him to slip undetected out of the door before Aeris and Lila can possibly catch sight of his retreating figure.

The two reclaim their seats, looking a lot calmer than they were before. The burgundy stain on Lila’s blouse has faded to a light pink, only noticeable if one was a witness to the spaghetti catastrophe.

“You guys got it out,” I observe, suddenly very aware of the fact that Kit and I almost got caught. That was way too close for comfort. And yeah, I could’ve lied and said that he was just dropping by to say hi, but that wouldn’t have explained why no other member of the team was with him. Hayes for sure would’ve stopped by to see Aeris.

Aeris pockets her stain stick. “Oh, yeah. That was a tough-ass stain. But her shirt looks brand-new, right? Well, not *brand*-new. Just don’t look at it too closely. Or smell it.”

Lila squints her evergreen eyes, curiosity scoring the lines of her face. “Where’d you get that box of Junior Mints?”

Oh, crap. I totally forgot to hide those. I flatten down the lid tabs and stuff the box in my purse, my heart throbbing in my chest and affection accelerating through my veins. Kit was hanging onto them...for me. Even though he said things that weren’t true, his feelings for me never changed.

“I guess I had them with me all along,” I say, curbing a smile, mentally counting down the minutes until I get to see

him again.

MY BED, MY RULES

Dinner was excruciating, and not because Fulton's story of how he found out peanuts grew in the ground was twenty minutes too long. More due to the fact that I was fighting a boner the entire time Faye was eye-fucking me from across the table. Okay, maybe not *eye-fucking* me. Maybe just looking at me, but that's plenty enough to get me hard.

Things are finally good between us. Better than good. They're amazing, and I think I always knew that I was never going to be able to stay away from her. I've even noticed that she's retired her amethyst necklace.

I wish I'd had more time to talk to her at lunch today. I still feel so shitty for what I did to her.

So, instead of working through my feelings like a sane person, I went on a thirty-minute run at night, in the dark, with nothing but my depression playlist on full blast in my ears. Like I told Faye, I'm going to work to earn back her trust. I'll do whatever I have to. And if I've learned anything from romantic comedies, I have to really show her I'm putting in the effort.

Maybe a hot air balloon ride? Or a discreet picnic in the park? I'd fill her—my—room up with roses, but that would definitely be a stupid move if one of the guys were to walk in. I don't want to hide this. I don't want to hide *her*. I want the whole world to know she's mine. Hiding Faye Hollings is like trying to black out the sun. She's this burning ball of

brightness that lights up every single room she walks into. To hide her away would be a disservice.

But I'm going to have to suck it up because she's right. The alternative is destroying the friendship Hayes and I have. And I'm not ready to lose either of them.

The guys are usually in their rooms by eleven, and I know for a fact that Hayes is spending the night at Aeris', so if I'm sneaky enough, I'll just dip in to see Faye for a bit. Nothing suspicious going on there, right? I mean, she is staying in *my* room. And I'll need to grab a fresh pair of clothes because, despite it being night, it's still seventy degrees outside.

As I trudge up the stairs, I can hear Gage and Fulton cackling about something from down the hall, but aside from that, the house is eerily quiet. Bristol must've called it a night, and Casen's probably doing a deep-clean of his bedroom, or he and Josie are fucking. Just, like, silently.

Shit. Now I'm thinking about sex. Granted, it is a thing I think about a lot, but I wouldn't mind thinking about something like politics.

I pause in front of my door, fist raised to knock, and that's when I hear a buzzing noise from behind the partition. It sounds like an electric razor. Is Faye shaving her legs right now?

I knock once. Nothing. I knock again. Still nothing, but that hum is persistent as it leaks through the flimsy wood separating us. If she is shaving, she's probably doing it in the bathroom. I'll just wait for her to finish up.

Look, I've seen a lot of things in my life. As a hockey player, I've seen everything—bottom teeth going all the way through someone's lower lip, a locker room full of flaccid penises, a couple practically fucking in the front row at one of our games. But I never, *ever* expected to see what greets me behind the door.

There, on my bed, is Faye in one of her tiny nightshirts, pleasuring herself with a goddamn vibrator. Her feet are

planted on the bed, her knees bent, giving me a direct view of the small bullet lodged in her glistening cunt.

I...I think I just went brain dead.

Her head is thrown back against the pillow, the line of her throat shiny with sweat, her pert nipples poking through the front of her shirt. The sweetest moan flows out of those carnation-pink lips, ones that I wish were wrapped around the base of my erection.

I know I should say something. I know I should look away. But I can't do either of those things. I'm so incredibly turned on right now that I can't generate any thoughts. My dick hardens further behind my running shorts, jutting out in front of me, and I feel warmth spool low in my stomach. My mouth puckers from sudden dryness, so much so that when I go to speak, the words grate against my esophagus.

“What the fuck are you doing?” I exclaim a lot less calmly than I imagined doing so in my head.

Faye's eyes snap open, and the moment she realizes she's been caught, she screams and flings her vibrator to the ground. Her legs slam shut fast. I usually have the opposite effect on women.

“What the fuck are *you* doing?” she shoots back, scrambling to hide her legs underneath the comforter.

I was watching you. Obviously.

Reining in my overeager tongue, I try to ignore the fact that Faye's bare pussy is currently touching my sheets. I know it's been a week since we had sex, but every day has been complete torture. I haven't been able to stop thinking about the way I stuffed her full of my fingers and cock, the punishing grip her cunt had on me when she came, the way I painted her face in cum—the fucking fact that she *wanted* me to.

“I was coming to get a change of clothes.” I gesture to the gross ring of sweat around my neckline.

She smacks her lips together, pulling the covers up to her chin, like I haven't already seen everything before. “Okay, yeah. That makes sense.”

Her vibrator is still buzzing against the carpet, so I reach down to turn it off, biting back a groan of wanton desire when my fingers make contact with the sheen of natural lubricant coating the bullet. And it takes my whole willpower not to smell my fingers.

Her stare never leaves me, never softens, narrowed in perusal and framed by long lashes that flare at the ends. There's an intensity in her eyes that tantalizes me—lighter fluid to the match that I've unwisely lit myself—and I can't tell if it's an aftereffect of her sex high or if it's because of me.

“Now you get to answer my question.” To distract myself, I divest myself of my shirt, forcing my feet over to the dresser. Now that I'm no longer facing her, relief sprouts in my chest, but it's not enough to stave the shiver running down my spine.

“I was just...relieving some tension,” she breathes.

My fingers seek a newly washed shirt, but I don't pull it out of the drawer. “And?”

“And?”

I feel my Adam's apple roll down my firm jugular, a low growl emitting from my lips. “Did it work?”

Screw the shirt. I push the drawer closed and turn toward her, keeping my back flush against the cold surface of the dresser, hoping that it'll be enough to ground me. The closeness, her cum on my fingers, the little noises she made—it's all a double whammy to my senses, threatening to buckle my knees.

She blushes and rolls her lips inward. “No.”

“Good. Maybe that'll teach you not to fuck with things that aren't yours,” I snap, my tone rife with acrid bitterness.

“Excuse me?”

The muscles in my back knit, aggravating the fiery stretch in my chest. “Did I stutter?”

Faye scoots herself all the way to the edge of the bed, looking like she's about to pitch forward, but I step into her space with two strides, forcing her butt back down on the

mattress. There's a defiant glitter in her eyes, her mouth drawn into a little pout, her perky breasts puffed out in a mirage of confidence. I cage her chin with my fingers, encouraging her to look up at me.

"I own your pussy, Faye. I'm the only one that gets to make you come. No incompetent vibrator, not your fingers, nothing. Do you understand?"

Instead of the unbending compliance I was expecting, her stare perforates me, challenges me, practically makes me fall to my knees. "Oh, Kit. If you're jealous, just say so," she drawls, and then she skirts her tongue along her lower lip, inches from my hands.

My self-control is as thin as a thread, and Faye just keeps tugging. "Jealous of three inches? Princess, you know I have *a lot* more than that."

"Could've fooled me."

That's it. If she's not going to shut her smart mouth, I'll shut it for her.

My hand moves from her chin to the hair spilling down her shoulder, and I wrap it around my fist, pulling harshly until she bares the length of her throat to me. "You're a fucking brat," I snarl, bringing her close enough that she can feel my breath on her face, so close I could easily spit into her mouth and make her swallow.

Her jaw twitches, but her gaze never yields. "What are you going to do, Kit? Are you going to spank me?" There's a taunting lilt to her voice, like she doesn't think I will, or she's using some kind of reverse psychology on me because that's *exactly* what she wants. And even though I'd love nothing more than to tease her and make her beg for it, I can't wait that long. I need to be inside her—fingers, tongue, cock, it doesn't matter.

I let her hair go as her head rears back from the force, and wordlessly, I go over to lock the door, allowing myself a modicum of relief that nobody will be able to walk in on what's about to transpire. My enlarged cock is close to

combusting, so painfully erect that my balls ache. I can feel the slick pre-cum on the inside of my shorts, and even though the fabric is breathable, it's somehow suffocating at the same time.

“Spread your legs,” I demand, drooling at the neat triangle of hair above her wet vagina.

I know she wants to resist me—I can see it on her face. But just like me, Faye is only human, and she's never going to give up a chance to be pleased.

She does as I say—albeit tentatively—and the calluses on my palms scratch the smooth flesh of her thighs, tiny ministrations that already have her squirming for more. Without wasting any more time, I latch my lips to hers, and there's no preamble before my tongue explores the inside of her mouth, tasting the mint from her toothpaste. And then when I grow tired of the gentle teases and strokes, my tongue devours hers, our spit conjoining together.

When I pull away, I push both her knees to one side, moving my hands from her legs to the curve of her ass, squeezing her bare cheeks.

She groans, and I cover her mouth with one of my hands.

“If we're going to do this, you have to keep that pretty mouth shut,” I whisper. “Even though I love those little noises you make.”

She involuntarily makes some kind of whiny noise that's a cross between a moan and a mewl.

“Fuck, just like that.” I send a titillating slap to her ass, feeling the skin recoil under my fingers, and she rattles off a bunch of breaths that never fully form words. I can't see her backside, but I know I spanked her hard enough to leave her red and sore.

I whip my attention back to the intoxicating nectar between her legs, and a shot of ice-cold need jets through me. Painstakingly, I spread her thighs apart, breaking my own rule as a throaty rumble sounds deep in my chest.

“Look at you, Princess. Dripping wet for me, and I haven’t even fucked you with my tongue yet,” I say, languishing kisses all over the inside of her legs, clamping my fingernails into her skin to hold her in place. Faye’s back arches when my teeth lock around a sensitive spot, sucking, bruising, driving her closer to the edge.

“Kit...”

“What do you want to come on? My fingers or my tongue? You have to show me what a good girl you are if you want my cock.” Just thinking of giving her my cock has my lower stomach cramping, fiery emblems of heat consuming me from head to toe.

“Tongue. I need your tongue. *Now*,” she orders, thighs quivering, hands clawing helplessly at my shoulders.

“There she is. There’s my greedy girl.” I kneel down at the height of her pussy, inhaling her scent, ogling the glorious sight of her cunt, already imagining how sweet she’s going to taste—like honey dripping directly from the comb. “You want my tongue? You’re gonna fucking get it. And I’m going to eat you out until you squirt all over my face, got it?”

She nods, wrapping her legs around my shoulders and thrusting her vagina into my face. My tongue instantly delves into her heat, slipping past her slick folds, slurping up the first dregs of her arousal like I haven’t had a decent drink in months. I employ a swirling motion, dragging and flicking it over her swollen nub, and her hips buck up from the bed as she swallows a moan. Obscene noises fill the empty space between us, saliva and liquid desire merging in sticky smacks that echo off the walls.

I pull back partially, laving at her puffy lips with brief laps, attending to the overworked bundle of nerves. Endorphins fire inside me, my dick jerking behind my shorts in time to the noises stuck in her throat—noises I so desperately wish I could hear. She slithers her hand through my hair and pulls roughly, squirming for me to spear back inside her and satiate the throb I’ve created.

I nip at the hood of her clit, testing her patience, seeing how long she'll survive until she's begging me to venture my tongue deeper, to reach every crevice, to make her come so hard that all she sees are stars.

"If you're going to eat me out, at least do it right," she hisses, dragging her nails against my scalp.

I immediately draw back, raise my head, and glare at her with hungry, slitted eyes, licking *her* cum off my lips. "I *know* you didn't just say that to me when my mouth was on your cunt."

She contemplates, and even though she has plenty of time to rethink her next words, she decides to wage a war anyways. "At this rate, I'll come faster with the goddamn vibrator."

"You really want to have a go at that?" I growl, my frustration—and arousal—rising to unprecedented levels, so overbearing that I'm seconds away from flipping her onto her back and teasing her hole. I want her thrashing beneath me, muffling her screams into my shoulder, her eyes watering from pure pleasure. I don't condone ever making a girl cry. Unless she's crying while you give her the best orgasm of her life.

"You're a slut for my tongue. Look at you, making a mess all over my face. You seriously think you could get off better with a fucking vibrator? I've felt the way you've milked my cock, Princess, and I know for a fact that you'll be calling for me the second you're 'satisfied.'"

Before she can say anything, I mold my mouth back to her cunt, sweeping my tongue against her fluttering walls, carefully circling her G-spot but not touching it entirely. A moan I'm assuming she tried to silence rends the air, and my eyes shoot up to notice the sweat waterfalling down her forehead, the strain of her tits as she heaves through breaths. She looks like a goddess right now—the stunning flush of her skin, the way the soft swell of her belly retracts, her face screwed up in permanent rapture.

"I'm—oh, God. Kit..."

"You don't get to come. Not until I say you do."

My jaw's starting to ache, but I'm going to give Faye Hollings an orgasm so incredible she'll never want to use a vibrator ever again. She's got my neck in some kind of leglock, and her whole body is starting to shake, those tears that I've been waiting for springing to her eyes. I'm about to come myself just from watching her get there.

She whimpers—fucking *whimpers*—and I feel her clit start to squeeze my tongue.

“Faye,” I reprimand against her cunt, but instead of the apology I was expecting, there's a knock on the door.

I freeze. She freezes. We both freeze—in a compromising position, nonetheless. The goose bumps on my flesh remind me how very naked we both are.

The voice of the mystery intruder cleaves through our dome of privacy. “Faye? It's Hayes.”

A RECIPE FOR DISASTER

Hayes. As in, my brother. As in, right outside the door. Why is he here right now? I thought he was supposed to be at Aeris’.

I expect Kit to hide in the closet or fling himself out my window, but he doesn’t do either of those things. In fact, he doesn’t even come up for air.

My heart’s beating so hard that I’m afraid it’ll bruise my ribs. From where I’m sitting, I can see that the door’s locked, but somehow, that tiny piece of metal doesn’t feel like adequate protection.

Am I supposed to respond? What do I say? Do I keep the door locked? Won’t he get suspicious? Oh, God. This is the worst possible thing that could happen to us. I knew sneaking around would be hard, but I didn’t know it would be downright dangerous.

My mouth opens an inch, but Kit’s Goliath hand slaps over it. He’s still buried in my pussy, and all I can see are his jet-black eyes throwing daggers at me.

“Look, I get you don’t want to talk. I know you’re still mad. I didn’t really...apologize for how I acted. But you understand, right?” Hayes says from the other side of the door, his words only slightly muffled.

Could he have any *worse* timing?

If I try to say anything, the sound won’t get past Kit’s hand. At least we could share in the mortification, right? A

funny story to be looked back upon when we're gray and old and passing time in the senior retirement home.

But no, because Kit isn't nearly as fazed as I am. In fact, he's so unfazed that his tongue pushes further past my ring of muscle, licking every inch of me that he can reach.

Oh, God. I'm so close. I'm going to come. Fifteen feet away from my brother.

The pressure in my abdomen grows, a testament to Kit's sheer stubbornness and merciless pursuit for revenge. My whole body trembles from the pleasure. My head empties of all thoughts upon the flat of his tongue and the purse of his lips as he sucks. My legs kick at the swelter of sheets, and Kit's other hand anchors my flailing extremities, rendering me powerless to his onslaught.

"I was so worried about you. I'd never seen you act out like that. And I know I shouldn't have been that harsh on you. I'm sorry."

Hayes, stop talking! You're ruining this for me.

I blurrily make out the ripple of sinew covering Kit's back, how the swell of his biceps hardens as he eats me out, and the sloppy slurping sounds are almost so loud that I'm afraid Hayes can hear. There's a blip in Kit's pace, one that briefly allows me a moment of reprieve, and then I'm pulled back to the brink again, facing a twenty-foot tumble into a dark, starry abyss.

A moan lurches up my throat, and this time, I don't hold it back. I let it fly at full volume, knowing that Kit's palm will cloak it.

"I'm not saying you *can't* do drugs. You can if you want, but the safe ones, okay?"

I can't take this anymore. This is torture. I grind my crotch into Kit's face, beseeching him to let me come, my arousal oozing out of me faster and harder than I thought was possible. The buildup is becoming marginally painful. My gut twists with exhilaration, pins and needles zinging down my back, leaving me in complete disarray.

“And it has to be around me or the guys. No one else. Definitely not at a party.”

And then, as I scream into Kit’s hand—biting him a little in the process—I climax, warmth flowing out of me in squirts of cum that Kit eagerly guzzles. I come until every drop’s been drained from me, and my muscles turn to jelly, my lungs working to make up for lost breath.

“You’re probably asleep, aren’t you? So I’ve just been talking to this door...the entire time. Great. Okay. I’ll come back tomorrow. Please, please be awake in the morning. Don’t make me look like a bigger idiot than I already am.”

Then the wondrous noise of Hayes’ footsteps fades down the hallway.

That was the best orgasm I ever had—well, besides the first one Kit gave me. But no way in hell am I letting him bask in the glory.

Kit slowly removes his hand from my mouth and stands up, my pearlescent arousal glimmering on the lower half of his face. My eyes absentmindedly drop downwards until I reach the soiled front of his running shorts. A dark stain covers his softening dick, and streams of cum trickle down the inside of his thigh, sticking to the forest of soft hairs on his leg.

My eyes widen. “Did you...?”

Kit doesn’t even look down. “Of course I did. Have you seen yourself, Faye? I can get off just by looking at you, by hearing your voice. I don’t need to fuck you to come.”

He leans in to kiss me, but he stops right in front of my lips, his breath wafting over me. “But it’s more fun if I do.”

A FOOL'S GUIDE TO LOVE

June 28th, Friday, 11:33 a.m.

KIT: What the hell does 'pulsating sword of steel' mean?

FAYE: Are you...reading one of my books right now?

KIT: It was on the bathroom counter.

FAYE: That's private property.

KIT: Your name isn't on it.

FAYE: That's just common decency, ass.

KIT: You didn't answer my question.

FAYE: I'm not going to tell you.

KIT: Oh, wait. Question answered. *smirking emoji*

FAYE: Kit...

KIT: The little tabs you put in here are really helpful.

FAYE: I think I just died from embarrassment. You killed me. Does that sit well on your conscience? Do you like having my blood on your hands?

KIT: I'd prefer a different bodily fluid, but...

FAYE: PUT THE BOOK DOWN. NOW.

KIT: Relax, Princess. I'm just doing research.

FAYE: Research? What are you talking about?

KIT: I'm going to finish reading this dirty little book of yours, and then I'm going to have you show me exactly how you want me to touch you.

FAYE: Fuck me.

KIT: That's Plan A.

FAYE: I mean...fuck you!

KIT: There's twenty-five more letters in the alphabet I can use. We can do this whichever way you want.

JULY 3RD, Wednesday, 8:45 p.m.

FAYE: DICK!

KIT: You're gonna have to be more specific.

FAYE: You ate the last ice cream sandwich.

KIT: Hey! Why do you automatically assume it was me?

FAYE: Oh, I don't know. Maybe because I found the wrapper in *your* trash can?

KIT: This feels like a trap.

FAYE: That was the one thing I was looking forward to today. ONE.

KIT: I'll drive down to the store to get you another box right now.

FAYE: Too late. I already hate you.

KIT: Yeah, but you know that turns me on.

FAYE: Don't you ever think with anything besides your dick?

KIT: What can I say? He has a big head.

FAYE: ...

KIT: Get it? Big head?

FAYE: ...

KIT: Fuck you. That was funny.

FAYE: I'm not dignifying that with a laugh.

KIT: How about an ice cream sandwich?

FAYE: ...

KIT: Two ice cream sandwiches?

JULY 8TH, Monday, 8:21 a.m.

KIT: I miss you.

FAYE: I'm lying right next to you?

KIT: You're too far away.

FAYE: We're in the same bed.

KIT: Jesus Christ. Just come over here, woman.

FAYE: You know, I think I'll stay on my side. It's cool and smells good over here.

KIT: Are you implying that my side smells?

FAYE: Well, you are in it, so...

KIT: That's low, Faye. That's really low.

FAYE: And you hog all the covers.

KIT: You don't need covers. I'll warm you up with my body.

FAYE: I think I'll stick to the covers, thanks.

KIT: *middle finger emoji*

FAYE: *kissy face emoji*

KIT: You're lucky you're cute.

FAYE: I'm a lot more than cute.

KIT: Bratty, stubborn, a pain in my ass? Check, check, and check.

FAYE: Sexy, intelligent, wise beyond her years.

KIT: Conceited.

FAYE: I know that's supposed to be an insult, but I also happen to be laid-back. Criticism doesn't faze me.

KIT: Please. The only laying back you do is when I have you pinned to the bed.

FAYE: And yet you beg for it every time.

JULY 13TH, Saturday, 3:56 p.m.

FAYE: Remind me never to wear these pants again.

KIT: Are you kidding me? Your ass looks fantastic today. It looks fantastic every day.

FAYE: Yeah, the guy at the grocery store thought so too.

KIT: ...

FAYE: Hello?

KIT: Is he still there?

FAYE: What? I don't know. I was just checking out.

KIT: ...

FAYE: Kit, why do I hear the car running?

FAYE: Oh my God. DO NOT go down there.

KIT: I just wanna talk.

FAYE: No, no you do not.

KIT: People talk with their hands all the time, Faye. It's called ASL.

FAYE: So if I look at the local news later, I won't find a picture of that man with a face full of bruises?

KIT: Who knows what he gets up to in his free time.

FAYE: I think you need to calm down.

KIT: I'm going to pretend like you didn't just say that to me.

FAYE: You can't just go...gallivanting around every time a guy makes a gross comment about me!

KIT: Oh, oh. I most certainly can, and I will. In fact, I was meaning to get some boxing sessions in today.

FAYE: I didn't even tell you what he looked like.

KIT: You really think I won't be able to find him?

FAYE: Ugh, no.

KIT: Face it, Princess. Even though you don't need me, I'll always be your knight in shining armor.

FAYE: Is that why you call me that? Because you think I'm a princess?

KIT: Wasn't it obvious?

FAYE: I thought it was more along the lines of 'She's a damsel and in distress. Help her before she burns the city down.'

KIT: God, no. Never. I call you that because you deserve to be treated like one.

FAYE: I didn't realize you could be so sweet.

KIT: Don't get used to it.

FAYE: C'mon. You're a big softie. Admit it.

KIT: Fine. Only for you.

**THE KEY TO MY BROKEN
HEART**

I t's not every morning that you have a dream where you're the hostage of a morally gray pirate and he abandons his life of crime to travel the world with you on his ship. And it's a great dream, a great dream that just so happens to be interrupted by a sulfurous smell that's either the product of burnt food or an electrical fire. So when I'm forcefully pulled from my dreamscape, I wake up in a pool of sweat and gasp for air like people do in movies after they've had a terrible nightmare.

There's a scream—not high-pitched enough to be feminine but shrill enough to be classified as a scream. My eyes immediately skip to Kit's figure standing by the doorway, and I'm hit with that burning odor again, strong enough to probably sear some of my nose hairs.

“What are you doing?” I screech, using the back of my hand to mop up some of the sweat on my forehead.

“Why did you wake up like you were having a demon exorcised out of your body?”

I glower. “Did you not smell whatever's burning?”

Kit's cheeks turn pink, offsetting the sable color of his hair, which is somehow perfectly unkempt without looking uncombed.

Then I notice the tray that's at the edge of the bed, complete with two dishes full of eggs, fruit, hash browns, a pile of blackened discs, a glass of pulpy orange juice, and a single flower vase. My heart and pulse chug in time with one

another, and I find myself sinking in abounding adoration for the man in front of me.

“You cooked this for me?” I ask incredulously, moving my back higher up against the headboard.

“I tried,” he chuckles, placing the overflowing tray in my lap. “The black things are supposed to be pancakes.”

My eyes wilt, and there’re probably some tears in there somewhere. “Kit, you didn’t have to do this.”

“I wanted to. I’m just sorry that the pancakes are as hard as pucks.”

“Nobody’s ever done something this nice for me.”

Kit’s expression pains for a moment, like he’s fully taking in the gravity of my admission, but it vanishes as quickly as it came, giving leeway to a puckish smile. “Get used to it. We have a full day ahead of us.”

I start to nibble on some of the cubes of cantaloupe. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m taking you on a date,” he says, grabbing one of the strawberries and popping it into his mouth.

“I thought you had practice today.”

“Woke up early and went down to the rink by myself. I’m dedicating the rest of the day to you, Princess. No phones, no distractions, no responsibilities.”

I swallow, and that damn piece of fruit sticks in my throat on the way down. “What if someone sees us? What if—”

Kit immediately grabs my hand, and he wreathes his fingers around mine, squeezing slightly. “I don’t care, okay? Nobody’s going to see us. I mean, they will, but they’re going to mind their own business. Speculation isn’t worth anything these days. The guys know that. Your brother knows that.”

I exhale abrasively. “I just...I don’t want to cause any trouble.”

“Hey,” Kit murmurs, using his other hand to caress the side of my face. “You know I’d take a lifetime of trouble in

return for a day with you, right?”

“I know.” I do. I guess I’m still coming to terms with everything that’s happened these past few days.

It’s unreal being with someone like Kit—someone I’ve had a crush on for so long and believed that it was unrequited. And we’re not even...*together* together. Not to mention that even though we’re only halfway through July, school starts at the end of August, which means I’ll be on the other side of the country by then. This is everything I’ve ever wanted, and yet, I don’t really have it. It feels like I’m living a lie. A heavily layered lie.

“I don’t want you worrying about anything today, okay? We can do whatever you want. And if the paps happen to be a pain in the ass, I’ll kindly tell them to fuck off.”

“Whatever I want?” I ask, playfully batting my eyelashes.

He stares at my lips unabashedly, those dark, depthless eyes of his scouring me like I’m his prey. “Possibly.”

I stab a chunk of cheesy eggs with my fork, shoving it to the side of my cheek as I chew. “So no naked skydiving?”

Kit lets out a low whistle as he pretends to contemplate me. “Hey, hey. Let’s not be rash now.”

I move the tray off my legs. “You’d seriously go skydiving?”

“If we were naked and stuck together? Obviously.”

“So what I’m hearing is that you’ll do anything if it involves getting naked?”

“No, Faye. I’d do anything you’d ask me to. Getting naked is just a bonus.”

Dear God. The proximity, the body language, the sweetness sliding off his expert tongue like silk. I’m overheating under the covers.

I reach for the glass of orange juice to quell the sudden dryness in my mouth—all while under Kit’s watchful stare, mind you—and I accidentally overpour past the seam of my

lips. Liquid drips down my chin and collects at the neckline of my white sleep shirt, doing an excellent job of turning the fabric translucent.

Stupid nerves. Stupid Kit and his clever innuendos.

My hand flounders around for the nearest napkin, but I don't even make contact before Kit's mouth is on my neck, licking a clean stripe through the sticky liquid. One corded arm is braced against the wall, right next to my head, and the other is working the strap of my top down my shoulder.

"Oh, God," I groan, feeling him lave attentively at my skin. I rake my fingernails down his back and use him as a handhold, marinating in the morning smell of him—his natural scent before he covers himself in cologne.

His lips move down my throat to the shelf of my collarbone. I'm pretty sure there's barely any juice there.

My lower half squirms, pressure and warmth building at the juncture of my thighs. "Kit..."

"Stop talking." He sucks on my collarbone, flicking his tongue over the taut flesh, and my back arches off the headboard, inadvertently giving him a face full of my now-bare chest.

A string of moans leaves me, but I'm too aroused to try and quiet them. Kit purrs like a motorboat as he traces the bridge of his nose down the curve of my tit, and he stops at my nipple, giving it a quick lap before closing his mouth around it.

Fuck. He's treating my body like an altar, and I'm about to come before I've even finished breakfast.

My breath puffs out, and there's a rise of panic in my voice. "Won't we miss...whatever it is...we have to do...?"

Kit's teeth pull gently on my nipple as a high tide of lust washes over me—one that makes my toes curl and wipes my mind clean. I dig my fingers deeper into his back, hating the fabric that's currently preventing me from gaining any traction.

“We have all the time in the world,” he mumbles against my skin, subsequently pressing a kiss to the tender flesh of my breast.

A girl could get used to this...at least for the summer.



FOR THE PAST TEN MINUTES, Kit's kept me blindfolded, and not in the way I like. He has a surprise for me, which generates all sorts of anxiety. Kit's an all-or-nothing kind of person. He never does anything half-assed. So either he's treating me to a romantic lunch or he's constructed some kind of flash mob to happen downtown.

When the car comes to a stop and the engine dies down, I blindly fumble for the door handle, allowing Kit enough time to run over to my side to open it for me. He helps me find my footing, leading me to God knows where—and probably erecting some weird stares from the people around us.

“Are we almost there?” I ask, only slightly freaking out at my lack of control over the situation.

His rich chuckle allays some of my panic.

“We're here.”

The cloth covering my eyes falls away, and once my vision adjusts to the change in lighting, I'm welcomed by the sight of a Barnes & Noble, outlined in a golden aureole, luster glinting off the dark green awning. It's humongous, with wide-paneled windows and two grandiose entrances at the front, garnished with brick supports that stretch all the way to the sky.

“Oh my God,” I breathe, shock and giddiness duking it out in the curve of my ribs, right where my heart is struggling to pump.

“I'm going to buy you whatever you want,” he tells me, a body-melting grin skidding across his lips.

I squeal and drag Kit toward the building. This officially takes the cake for the best day of my life. Maybe even above

when I got accepted to UPenn. I've never struggled financially compared to my peers, but I definitely don't have enough extra money to spend on stacks of paperback books.

The minute I step into heaven, I follow the smell of new books like a cartoon character follows the aroma of a freshly baked pie. And just as I thought, the inside is just as stunning as the outside. Mile-high bookshelves swerve to form labyrinths of untold stories, pages that have yet to yellow from age or become distressed from use.

Kit's eyes practically bulge out of his head as he realizes what he just agreed to, and I make a beeline for the romance section, entirely ready to spend the rest of the day hoarding as many books as possible.

I titter. "Regret it?"

He snorts. "Please. How many books could you need?"

"That sounds like a challenge," I muse, arching my brow, a sinister gleam in my eyes.

I walk down the aisle with Kit trailing behind me like a lost puppy, and I drag my finger along the mismatched spines.

"You do realize you're saying that to the person who'd buy you a house, right?"

And Kit's dotting act saps me of my smart mouth, warming every inch of my body in a bonfire-turned-wildfire. I'm convinced he's dead set on making me blush every time I'm around him.

It feels like asphalt clots my throat. "You wouldn't do that."

He steps into me with his intimidating body, making my back go flat against one of the shelves, so close to me that I can see the nuanced truth in his eyes. "You're right, I wouldn't do that," he whispers. "I'd only do it if you agreed to live with me."

My thoughts go astray, and it feels like all the air's been plucked from my lungs. He didn't...he couldn't possibly mean

that. We're not even dating. No matter if he meant it or not, though, I'm still at a loss for words.

"You..."

"I mean it, Faye."

God, I want to kiss him so badly right now. I want to cling to him and never let go. And I lean in just an inch, to where our lips would touch if I pushed forward anymore, but the silhouette of a person on the fringe of my peripheral reminds me that I can't go there. All of these empty promises—they'll remain empty.

I quickly pull away from him and reroute my gaze, feigning interest in a hardback cover that's embellished with different illustrations of wildflowers. I want to tell him he can't say stuff like that, but I'm not sure if it's because of some self-preservation instinct taking over or not. I need to remind myself that I'll face inevitable heartbreak at the end of the summer.

We don't say anything to each other for a good five minutes, with me either pulling books out and placing them in Kit's outstretched arms, or me pushing them back in and moving on to the next shelf. I can feel his eyes on me the entire time—which is part of the reason I try to keep my body turned away from him.

I've already amassed an impressive pile of books, and I hear one being flipped open as I continue to browse.

"A werewolf and an orc romance story? Really?"

I turn to find Kit waving a book with an inappropriate cover around, and even though I'm used to consuming smutty romances in public, I prefer a less conspicuous cover. The naked—by werewolf standards—protagonist is lovingly embracing his equally naked orc mate, with one loincloth somehow covering both of their private parts.

"I was under the impression that this trip would be free of judgment," I mutter, crossing my arms over my chest.

He readjusts his grip on my stack of books. "I just didn't think you'd be into..."

“Smutty monster romances?”

“Like...do they have the same anatomy as humans?” he asks louder than the conversation warrants.

“I’m not discussing this in the middle of Barnes & Noble with you.” I inch further down the aisle to a less populated part of the bookstore, all while Kit lags behind me and continues with his endless arsenal of questions.

“Does it take place in the real world? Do people know about their existence? Or is it more of a fantasy world where humans don’t exist? What’s the main conflict in the story? Does it revolve around their relationship, or are there some weird monster laws in place that forbid the coupling of interspecies relationships?”

As annoying as Kit usually tends to be, I have to admit that I’m amused by how interested he seems.

“It depends. They can take place in the real world or in a fantasy world, sometimes even on home planets. And the conflict varies depending on the author. Some authors write books that don’t have conflicts—it’s just a hundred pages of marathon sex. Other authors go really in-depth about there being some kind of competition among mates or some kind of love-hate angle that has the protagonists in a push-pull situation.”

I expect him to snap back with a witty remark, but he doesn’t. In fact, his face becomes crestfallen, and his voice thins.

“Like us.”

My wandering hand—hovering over a Regency romance—freezes. My stomach froths with regret, and a sick taste cakes the back of my mouth. *A push-pull situation.* Kit’s all the way in, he’s made that clear from the beginning. I’ve been the one on the fence about everything. I’ve been so caught up with how this unpreventable separation might affect me that I haven’t even thought about how Kit would feel. I keep finding more reasons to not be with him, because setting myself up for

disappointment is better than having it blindside me out of nowhere.

He's working so hard to make this work, and I'm...doing nothing. I'm letting what could possibly be the best relationship just fall through my fingers. Instead of enjoying each other's company for the past month, we've been stuck in this revolving door of will-they-won't-they. I have a little over a month left with him. I'm done feeling guilty every time we kiss. I'm done *making* myself feel sad over what I'm going to lose instead of happy over what I have.

"Not like us," I say, shaking my head. "I'm sorry that I acted like you—*this*—was expendable to me. It's not. You're not. I'm all in, Kit. Whatever happens, I'm not going anywhere."

Goddammit. I want to kiss him right now. I want to show him how much he means to me. Because I am all in. Kit Langley's the only man in the world who holds the key to my heart, and if I'm not careful, I'm going to be telling him I love him before the summer is over. And telling someone I love them romantically was never on this year's bingo card.

Love rallies inside me. "And I forgive you for the party."

"You do?"

"I do. But I don't expect the princess treatment to stop any time soon."

"Never," he promises.

BOOK HAULS AND BLUE BALLS

She's all in. I'd pump my fist in the air if I had a hand to do it with. One small step for man, one giant leap for Kit-kind.

I watch and admire the way Faye lights up with excitement when she finds a book that piques her interest. She keeps handing them to me, and yeah, there might be a slight ache in my arms, but I'd carry enough books to fill up a library for her. When she finally decides that thirty-some-odd books are enough, I pay at the checkout, hefting each bag up my arm.

It's past three by now, and we still haven't eaten lunch yet. We make the short trek to the car, and Faye pops open the trunk for me.

"You hungry?" I ask, hauling the bags inside, thinking back to when I had all her luggage back here. The beginning of everything.

Faye sighs wistfully. "Food sounds great right now."

I hip-bump the trunk closed and lean against it. "What do you feel like?"

"Oh, uh..." Her face scrunches up adorably, and I want so badly to take it in my hands and kiss her a hundred times over. Kiss her so many times that she's swollen mouthed and panting for her next breath of air, until her pupils are dilated and that gorgeous blush of hers is a patchwork of pink all over her cheeks.

"You pick."

“Princess, I’ve been down this road. I know how it goes. I’ll throw something out there, you veto it, I offer something else, you also veto it. And we go back and forth until you eventually just tell me what you feel like.”

“I’m not *that* picky,” she bickers.

I clasp my hands together and point them at her. “Pizza.”

“Isn’t it a little hot for pizza?”

“Chinese food.”

“I love it, but it is super greasy.”

“Sandwiches.”

“The bread is always so...dry.”

I scrub a hand down my tired face, chuckling at how well I know her. Even though she drives me up the wall sometimes, my heart only beats for her. Hell, it would still beat for her if she yanked it out of my body, stomped on it, and threw it out the window to be flattened by a four-wheeler. Not that she would ever do that.

I stare at her in silence.

“Okay, fine. I see your point,” she mumbles in defeat, scouting for the nearest restaurant. Even as the sun hangs lower in the sky, it still swathes her in a canary halo, one that lightens her eyes and brings out their underlying gold tones.

“What about burgers?”

Despite the fact that I’d eat anything put in front of me right now, hunger isn’t what pushes me toward the idea. It’s the dick-wetting sight of watching Faye bite into a burger twice the size of her head, all while grease drips down her chin as she makes those little orgasmic noises.

Fingers snap in front of my face. “Hello?”

“Yeah, I said that sounds good.”

“You didn’t say anything.”

“I did in my head.”

“Uh-huh,” she says, eyeing me before turning around and tromping toward the burger joint—Been There, Bun That—across the street. She’s halfway across the parking lot by the time I come up behind her and pinch her ass—which is covered by one of the prettiest sundresses I’ve ever seen. Pale blue, decorated in a floral print, with a ruffled hem that ends around mid-thigh and a sweetheart neckline that leaves little to the imagination.

She squeaks, swatting blindly at the air behind her. “What was that for?”

“You put a masterpiece in front of me and expect me not to touch it?”

She scowls at me, but I don’t miss the hint of color suffusing into her cheeks. “You’re an idiot.”

“But I’m *your* idiot,” I clarify.

As I hold the door open for her, she just laughs. She pretty much laughs all the way to our table that’s situated in the far corner of the restaurant. And it’s that genuine, airy kind of laughter that I love hearing—the kind of laugh I could record and play on repeat and never get tired of listening to.

Our waiter gets us started with some drinks and menus, and the whole time, I’m still wondering how I got so lucky to be seated across from the most beautiful woman in the world. She has her face tucked behind her menu, and her hair’s been thrown up into some messy updo because of the heat.

“What looks good to you?” she asks.

I’m not looking at the menu. I’m not looking at anything aside from her. I’ve noticed that the more time she spends in the sun, the darker her freckles become. I’ve noticed a lot about her that hadn’t been on my radar before, like the little nose crinkle she does when she’s thinking, or how she always slightly pouts when she’s frustrated.

When I don’t say anything—because I’m too dumbfounded—she looks up at me. “Aren’t you hungry?”

Lust teases its way up my spine. “Not for food.”

Faye's menu clunks onto the table, and her eyes enlarge.

"Shit. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that," I admit, my gaze drifting downward, regret locking around my throat like a serpent.

"No, don't be." Her response is hasty, surprising me so much that I look up from the table to meet her eyes—eyes laden with a seductive darkness.

Trouble, spelled out in all capital letters. Trouble, offering me the chance to turn back from the metaphorical chain-linked fence with the KEEP OUT sign splayed on it.

Faye leans in, lowering her voice. "Tell me what you would do to me if we weren't in public."

I'd freak out if we weren't seated at a pretty secluded table. And luckily for us, the lunch rush must've wiped out a lot of customers, because there're only a few stragglers left.

She's as sexy as sin right now in that form-fitting sundress, with her perky breasts pushed up between her arms, taunting me. Not to mention that I can faintly make out the outline of her pebbled nipples against the thin fabric, and my hardening dick stirs behind the grain of my pants. She's gonna kill me, and I'm fully going to let her.

Internally shoving down the moan rising inside me, I lean forward, matching her intensity. I'm so horny that I can barely think straight.

"We don't have to be in private," I whisper, reaching my hand under the table, brushing against the caps of her knees.

The table is small, which means we're close enough for our legs to touch if we maneuver just a bit. I also take up a lot of legroom. But the good thing about being in a cramped space is that I don't have to lean forward very much to touch her—to run the pads of my fingers along her buttercream skin.

Her breath hiccups, her eyes falling shut in pleasure, and if it wasn't for the broken buzz of the fan above us, I'm sure I would've heard a little noise slip out of her. My hand lingers at the crease where her closed knees meet, wondering if she'll

allow me entry. And like the good girl I know she is, she parts her fucking legs for me.

My eyes are trained on her the entire time as I slowly drag my fingers up the plushness of her thigh, nearing closer to that heavenly apex that I've spent hours buried inside. I can practically taste her sweet juices on my gluttonous tongue.

“If we weren't in public, I'd start by begging you to let me taste you again. Beg you to douse me in your scent until I can't fully wash your smell away. Beg you to feed me every last drop of your cum until I'm drunk on the flavor of you.”

Faye wedges her lower lip between her teeth, and I get the first tremor from her as my hand inches even closer to my desired target.

“And when you let me—not *if*, but *when*—I'd start to kiss a path up your thighs. Maybe even bite if you deserve it. Leave my mark on you so you remember every second my mouth worshipped your body.”

My fingers are more than ready to graze the lace of her panties, to wet my pads with the cum soaking through the front, but the apparent lack of barrier thwarts my next move. Because Faye Hollings isn't wearing any underwear.

“Oh, fuck,” I breathe out, and I know she can feel my touch falter. I almost blew my load right then and there. She's been walking around...with no panties on...this entire time. My cock's already leaking pre-cum, so unfathomably hard that it's borderline painful, and my balls draw up tight, aching for release. All which makes the room in my pants nonexistent.

“Faye,” I growl, forcing her to open her eyes and look at me.

The minute I see those bright brown beauties, I'm a goner. My fingers haven't even been inside her, and I can already feel them slick with her arousal.

“Commando? Seriously?”

She licks her lips like a vixen savoring her last meal. There's no sign of the sweet, innocent Faye I'm used to. The sweet, innocent Faye who blushes every time I say something

vaguely dirty or touch her in just the right place. No, I'm staring down a fucking temptress.

"Oops" is all she says.

Oops.

Desire slices through me like an unforgiving scythe, ripping me open and airing out all my bleeding parts. This girl is torture. Has been since the moment I met her. And right now, she's going to be my undoing.

There's a glacial iciness to my tone. "You're lucky I'm not going to finger you right here, right under this goddamn table. Make you walk out of this restaurant with your legs covered in your own cum like the slut you are."

I have no control anymore. None. And there's no way I'm getting through lunch with a boner, so I do the most reasonable thing I can think of: I stand up and excuse myself to the restroom.

If we were at home right now, I'd bend her over my knee and spank her. Spank her until her ass is red and there's an imprint of my hand tattooed on her cheek. But I can't do that in public because that's "breaking the law."

It's painful just making it to the bathroom. My bulge is so prominent that it's laughable, and my legs are as stiff as hell for fear that more unnecessary movement will exacerbate the pain.

I finally get there though, by some miracle, and as soon as I see the safe haven of those tiled walls, I release the breath trapped in my chest. I do a quick perimeter check to make sure no dicks are swinging around, and then I readjust the major hindrance in my pants.

Am I proud about what I'm going to do next? No. Is it necessary? Absolutely. Jesus Christ, this has to be one of my lowest points. You know when you've hit rock bottom, and people say there's nowhere to go except up? They're wrong. You can most definitely keep going down, probably all the way to the earth's core if you don't burn alive from embarrassment beforehand.

I start to tweak the button on my jeans when I hear the door swing open, and my entire body clams up. Shit. I didn't block the door. Oh my God. How could I have been so stupid? Now I'm just standing in the middle of the bathroom like a total weirdo with my fly all the way down.

Don't turn around. Just act natural. Or do turn around... and hope whoever just walked in doesn't see your massive hard-on.

I'm prepared for the humiliation. I'm prepared for the weird look. What I'm not prepared for is the feminine voice that sounds from behind me.

"I'm not done with you yet."

I whip around fast enough to crick my neck, and I stare down at the menacing, five-foot-five package of power and beauty all rolled up into one. Faye moves the stainless-steel trash can in front of the door, corralling both of us in and hopefully acting as a sufficient blockade for anyone outside.

My brows cross. "What are you doing in here?" I ask, and I must be more nervous than I thought because my voice cracks.

Faye's hooded eyes prowl over me, and slowly, her cheeks twitch with a sultry grin. Even her posture is different—she's assertive, dominant. A furor of enthusiasm unleashes inside of me like the ground-shaking boom of a transformer blowing.

My dick responds instantly to her, staining the front of my pants with pre-cum, and I groan when she steps closer to me, trailing her fingernail up the length of my arm. My skin breaks out in goose bumps as my cock cries to be freed from its denim prison.

She makes a low noise of disapproval, looking down at the pathetic state of my crotch. "That seems pretty bad."

"It's...fine," I huff out, feeling the pressure in my lower stomach begin to mount.

Faye edges closer to the point where her tits are flush against my chest, and if she wanted to, she could reach down

and see what she does to me—could fondle the evidence of my desire for her.

“I could help you, you know,” she croons, her fingers descending even further until they rest over my sensitive bulge.

Even through the fabric, her touch seeps into my hot skin, and my hips shamefully buck into her palm. As much as I’d love nothing more than for Faye to help me, I’m not going to ask her unless she’s sure she wants to do it. A little blue balls never hurt anyone...right?

“Faye, you don’t—”

She cuts me off by pushing me up against one of the walls, and I’m so shocked by her strength that I don’t pay much attention to the tingling in my spine from the collision.

She then lowers to her knees, and they squeak against the tiles since her dress doesn’t offer enough length to cover them. “You told me that you would’ve had me walking out of here with *my* cum all over me,” she starts, popping the button on my offending pants and zipping them down. “But you’re wrong. I’m going to be walking out of here with *your* cum all over me.”

“Oh, fuck,” I ground out, trying to keep a level head, feeling a thousand times better now that my jeans are pooled around my ankles and not suffocating my balls. My angry, red-hued dick springs out, whacking my stomach. It’s riddled with rivers of veins that are self-destruction pressure points, and there’s a pearl of pre-cum at the tip, already trickling down my twitching shaft.

“Wow, I’ve never looked this thing in the eye before,” Faye says humorously, using the soft pad of her finger to follow its slight curve, all the way to the bulbous head that’s slicked with lubrication.

Her touch is featherlight, but my God, I’m not going to last three minutes.

She raptly sets her sight on the dark trail of hair leading down from my navel to the trimmed thatch of my pubes. And

then her eyes bug out at my two hanging balls. “This is impressive, Kit. Huge. Heavy. You could really do some dama—”

“Faye,” I snap, my patience fading.

She giggles because she knows how torturous this is for me. I’m about to just start some stimulation with a couple of pumps, but Faye doesn’t let my hand get anywhere near my cock.

And the first stroke of that precise tongue...that first stroke has me ascending to heaven. She keeps one hand at the base while her tongue does the rest of the work, licking my veins in earnest, gliding all the way to the blushed tip where she sucks up some of my seed. Her hand is soft as it rubs up and down, halfheartedly squeezing with each upstroke. I feel my knees begin to shake and my head become woozy, and I have to remind myself that there’s a wall holding me up.

With spit-slick lips, Faye laps at the underside of my length, stamping delicate kisses to the taut skin. A moan punches out of me, and I lean my head back against the wall, all while tugging on her hair. I twist those wavy strands around my fingers for stability, nearly passing out when the heat of Faye’s mouth swallows down a good portion of my dick.

“There’s my good girl. Look at you, so eager for my cock. You want me to fuck your mouth so hard that your jaw locks?”

Faye doesn’t pop off to answer. Instead, she mewls around my girth, giving the slightest of nods as she takes me even deeper. Her cheeks puff out, and spit begins to drizzle from her mouth, congealing into long strings. A lot of women usually can’t take all of me—even those with no gag reflexes. It doesn’t bother me. I get off whether they pump or suck.

“Princess, I don’t want—”

She gives me a full-on death glare through her lashes. And to spite me, her mouth envelops more of my dick, to the point where I feel myself jammed against the back of her throat. I don’t know how well she can breathe, but her nose is fully

nestled in my pubes, and my balls tap her chin as she starts to hollow her cheeks and suck.

“Fuck, Faye. Your mouth is incredible. You’re choking on my dick. I’m not going to last long if you keep doing that,” I groan, my jaw wound so tight that I’m surprised I haven’t cracked enamel yet. It’s criminal the way her tongue swirls and flicks, hurling miniature aftershocks through my entire body.

I thrust forward slightly into her bulging mouth, and she gags a little, a cocktail of my arousal and her spit leaking down her chin. I’m immediately worried that it’s too much, but Faye only needs a moment of composure before she’s slurping up my penis with sloppy, vulgar noises. She isn’t worried about what *she* looks like—she’s only focused on bringing me to the precipice.

While she’s locked around me, her tongue rolls over the sensitive skin on my penis, ironing out the creases there, and my lower body convulses, thrusting into her already-full mouth. There’s a flare burning up in my thighs, making it hard for me to control any of my muscles, and a veil of water manifests in my eyes from the overwhelming sensation.

“You want me to paint your tonsils with my cum?”

Faye unlocks her lips from around my cock, nods obediently, and tongues the ridge of my dick until she reaches my neglected ball sack. She begins to massage my balls in her small hands, kneading the thin flesh there, saliva and pre-cum helping with the friction. Vertigo warps my vision, and the contraction of my abs and the palpitating of my shaft tells me I’m close. But Faye doesn’t stop there. She sucks one of my balls into her mouth, laving the darkened skin and weighing it on her tongue, and that’s when I know I’m done for.

I can’t help the floodgates opening inside of me. With the combination of her sucking my balls and her hand jerking me off, there’s nothing in this world that could stop me from coming all over the bathroom floor.

“Princess, I’m gonna c—”

Still on her knees, she rests the tip of my bursting dick in her mouth, waiting for me to come all down her throat. And that image alone—with her bedroom eyes and pouty lips—has my orgasm hailing through me at immeasurable speeds. My core collapses as illustrious flashes of energy coruscate through me, and then every inch of my body begins to ignite, resulting in a supernova of euphoria strong enough to wipe out my thoughts, my breath, and the very legs I'm standing on.

Ribbons of cum shoot out of me and into Faye's mouth, splattering a bit on her chin. She swallows down as much as she can, careful not to miss any rogue drops, and once the stream fizzles out, I take a moment to recollect myself.

Faye licks off the mess of milky-white spend all over her lower face, and when she rises to a stance, I wipe off the excess that she forgot.

“You know you didn't have to do any of that, right?” I say, holding her cheeks in my hands, not caring about the stickiness of her skin or the smell of cum on her breath. To be honest, there's something sexy about smelling myself all over her.

Her glossy lips ripen into a soft smile. “I know. I wanted to.”

DEATH BY DROWNING

I don't trust the ocean. Only five percent of it has been explored, and the sea floor is crawling with freaky, bioluminescent creatures that look like they're straight out of a sci-fi movie. But I'd traverse the ocean for Kit. I'd even go as far as dangling my feet in the blacked-out depths for him.

Date after date, sex marathon after sex marathon, we've spent a whole week attached to each other's sides. It started with our book date and our...um...*time* in the Been There, Bun That bathroom, then he set up a blanket fort and projector in the backyard for a scary movie marathon (which the guys thankfully didn't find suspicious). And the next day, after treating me to multiple orgasms in the shower, we went on a day trip to San Diego.

I know we can't really put a label on our relationship, but this is *definitely* veering into boyfriend-girlfriend territory.

Today marks our fourth consecutive date, and I would've been happy just watching some trashy reality television in the living room, but Kit had to pull out all the stops as usual. So he proposed a boat date. A boat that I had no idea was registered in his family's name and had been gathering dust in the garage this whole time. We eventually got the boat towed to Kit's Jeep, and we headed westward to Lake Elsinore.

Boats are...romantic, I think? I never really saw them that way, but there is something appealing about being out on the water, miles away from people, and having Kit all to myself.

The end of my sarong billows in the salt-crusted air, the metal from the railing finally beginning to warm underneath my palms. The sun seems to sizzle in the clear blue of the sky, dripping slowly down the bare length of my spine and reflecting in fragmented diamonds off the purling water below. There's a handful of boats out right now, but I doubt anyone will pay much attention to us.

Deflecting the sunrays, I snag a quick peek at Kit, who's currently manning the steering wheel. The propeller cuts through the brackish water with splashes and gurgles, leaving behind a trail of pressurized bubbles.

I empty out a sigh. I'm happier than I've been in a long time. Hayes seems to have backed off for the time being, I have Kit's full attention and commitment, and I have no other responsibilities to worry about right now. Hell, sometimes I even forget what brought me to California for the summer in the first place. I don't think I've cried in...a week? Which, I know, seems like nothing, but when you were crying nightly like I was, that's a big improvement. And since I'm in such a good headspace, I think I'm finally ready to tell Kit I love him. What better place to say the big L-word than on a boat? Preferably at sunset, surrounded by rose petals and a bottle of champagne.

I don't mean to toot my own horn, but that's prime romanticism right there. I'm going to outdo the doer. I want *him* to feel special for once. Kit deserves it. With everything he's done for me, including jeopardizing his relationship with my brother, he deserves it.

Our cruiser glugs along before finding an unoccupied inlet, and I hear the buzz of the propeller shut off before I feel two strong arms wrap around my midsection. Kit's body is hot from soaking up all the sun, and I nuzzle my head into his hard chest, the fragrance of his cologne and lightly scented sunscreen perfuming through my nostrils.

"I've"—he nips at my earlobe—"missed"—he lavishes my neck with a kiss—"you"—then drags his pillowy lips to the curve of my shoulder and bites playfully. I close my eyes and

gouge my fingers through his wind-ruffled hair, lust summoning a breathy exhale from my agape mouth.

Kit licks my skin, the pleased rumble in his throat juddering through me.

“It’s been fifteen minutes,” I laugh, turning around once he lifts his mouth off me, the delicious afterburn making lust eddy in the pit of my belly.

He grins. “What can I say? I have separation anxiety.”

I gently trace my fingertips over the grooves of his stomach and up to his firm pecs, where he captures my hand in his larger one. I look up at him through my lashes, chewing on my lower lip, and he stares into my eyes with a reverence I’ve never known before. It’s scary and startling and so overpowering that I lose grip on all my words.

My heart twists. “I—”

“God, you’re beautiful,” he says, the peak of his knuckles ghosting over my cheekbone. “Sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt you. I just...I could spend forever staring at you, and it wouldn’t be long enough.”

I blink, and when I blink, tears threaten to overflow. Good tears. Happy tears. I don’t remember a time when I felt this loved before. Given my track record with men, it wasn’t something that I really believed would happen for me. At least, not for a long time.

“Your eyes outshine every star in the galaxy, Faye. And your laugh is my favorite sound in the entire world. I hear a lot of stuff on the ice—buzzers, whistles, angry and sob-filled screams, the hiss of skates on ice, the scuttle of the puck against my stick, shouts from my teammates. But none of it, *none of it*, compares to your laugh.”

Has your heart ever felt light and heavy...at the same time? I don’t know how to explain it. It’s a weird feeling, and it’s foreign, but whenever I’m with Kit, my heart goes through a million stages at once. Lightness from his outpouring affection, heaviness from the sincerity of his words.

“I’ve spent countless hours mapping your body, finding the places where it melds to mine, and I’ve spent even more trying to figure out how I got so lucky to feel you in my arms. I want that for the rest of my life. I want *you* for the rest of my life.”

I start to sputter like a fish out of water. “What does—what do you—”

“Don’t freak out, but what if...hypothetically...” He trails off, waiting for me to read his mind.

What if...what?

Panic has me caught in its undertow. “Kit, if you don’t get to the point—”

“What if I got your eyes tattooed on my arm? Like, over the tiger eyes.” All of his words are mushed together when they come out, a cannon fire of unintelligible strings, and the apples of his cheeks rosy with blush.

“What?” I echo dumbly, brows knitted.

He holds his right forearm up, where the tattoo mirrors his own eyes. “Your eyes, Faye.”

I don’t know what to say. He has to be the biggest idiot in the world, right? Shock and dubiety fleet through me, tying my tongue and failing to silence the warning sirens going off in my head.

“That’s permanent,” I blurt out, nowhere near ready to harbor the responsibility of tainting Kit’s flawless, golden skin.

He nods. “You’re permanent.”

“I...”

“If you feel uncomfortable with me doing it, I won’t. But I want to. I really want to.”

My nerves compress into an unswallowable lump in my throat. “I don’t want you to regret it,” I murmur.

“Hey.” He cradles the side of my face with his hand, the weight of his stare melting over me. “I could never regret anything when it comes to you. Ever.”

I'm frozen, and not just because Kit's touch usually does that to me. I'm so overcome with affection that I can't function properly. A part of me with Kit...always. No matter the distance that separates us. That means a lot considering summer is coming to a close, and I'm not sure where long distance will lead us.

"I don't want to be known as the 'Big Cat' anymore. I want to be known as yours."

Mine.

I never knew Kit felt that way. Violent bursts of love roar up in my gut, and I can feel the waterworks starting up again, though I'm not sure if I'll be able to stop them this time.

Relieving me of the pressure to respond, Kit's palm falls away from my cheek as he walks over to the hardtop. He rustles around in the bag he brought with him, pulling something out before heading back to me.

I'm not sure what I expected him to grab—maybe more sunscreen for my sunburnt skin—but a book is clutched in his hands, tiny, colorful tabs sticking out of the pages.

"Kit, what is that?" I ask.

The corners of his lips tick up into a proud grin. "After you schooled me on romance books, I did some digging myself. And I, um, I annotated this for you. I don't really know what I was doing, but I wanted to try. I wanted to do something for you besides the usual bouquet of flowers."

When he hands me the book, the first thing I notice are the giant hockey sticks on the front cover, backdropped by a cracked, white-blue ice design.

"A hockey romance?" I will my heart to stop flapping.

He scratches the back of his neck. "I know it's not your monster romance, but I thought you might like it. Life imitates art and all that."

He annotated a book for me. Kit Langley annotated a book for me. Kit Langley—the man who's never been with the same

woman twice—carved time out of his day to read a book and tab it. This has to be some kind of fever dream.

I slowly open the book to a random page and am greeted by a medley of pastel-colored, miniature sticky notes scattered through various paragraphs. And not only that, but there are passages underlined with little notes scribbled in the margins.

“Oh my God,” I breathe, emotion steamrolling over me.

“I underlined things that reminded me of you.”

He even doodled small hearts. *Hearts*. Like a teenage boy who has a school-grade crush on a girl.

My eyes rake over the first paragraph that catches my attention.

I'll always crawl back to her. I'll crawl to her on my knees across the broken shards of my heart. I'll crawl to her when she's thousands of miles away from me. I'll crawl to her even if she never wants to see me again, because that's the power she has over me. That's the kind of love that possesses me. Unconditional, undying, unequivocal. I'm forever hers.

I don't have time to formulate a coherent sentence...which is probably for the best, because I'd be blithering like a lovesick fool.

“I don't want this to be a summer fling,” Kit says, recapturing my focus. “I know you have school. I know you're going to be in Pennsylvania. But I want to be with you, Faye. I don't care about the distance or your brother.”

This is everything I've ever wanted. And it's all right in front of me, ready for me to take. The veracity of his confession floors any thoughts pinballing around in my brain. His vulnerability is like a naked flame in a perpetual bout of ruthless wind, always facing the possibility of being stamped out but refusing to seek shelter or be extinguished.

I drop the book to the deck of the boat. My body moves of its own accord, and my mouth slants over Kit's, enveloping him in a time-stopping kiss of tongues and unfettered passion. And if I didn't know any better, a healthy helping of *love*.

He falters at the beginning, a bit shocked by the intensity, but he returns the pressure on my lips, his hands clutching the naked flesh of my back. His nails dig into me, his kiss consuming me whole, the frantic, harsh nature of his touch at odds with the soft lull of his tongue. The charged air around us seems to crackle, my skin humming with pleasure.

“Okay,” I whisper into his mouth.

“Okay?”

I pull away from him, tipping my forehead up to his lowered one. “What about long distance?”

“We’ll make it work. I’ll find weekends where I’m free to come to you, and I’ll make sure to carve time out of my day so we can call or FaceTime,” he answers.

“But you need to focus on hockey. You’ll be so busy, and you’ll have games all the time.”

“I will be busy, and I will have eighty-two games to play. But I don’t care. I don’t care how exhausted I am. I will *always* make time for you.”

Speaking of permanent, the L-word is *reaaally* close to coming out. And I think I’m done trying to find the right moment to say it.

But before I can, Kit picks me up in his arms and swings me around effortlessly. My legs lift off the ground as I braid my arms around his neck to keep from flying away. My face is snuggled into his neck, and the richness of his laughter rumbles through me.

“Kit!” I half-shriek.

After a final spin, he gently sets me back down, smiling apologetically. “Sorry. I’ve been wanting to do that since I saw you.”

He tucks a flyaway strand of hair behind my ear, our bodies close enough that we could survive off each other’s heat if we were stranded in the arctic, and his eyes look drowsy with lust.

He's leaning in. He's going to kiss me again. And I have a feeling we aren't going to stop until both of our swimsuits are on the ground. I need to tell him that I love him now, before he goes any longer without knowing.

No preparation. No grand gesture. I'm just going to say it.

With a fevered breath, I stop holding back. I stop overthinking. "Kit, I l—"

But of course, because the world is conspiring against me, the loud whir of a boat propeller escalates in the distance. Both of our heads snap toward the sound, and the sight of a cruiser headed our way has sweat breaking out over every inch of me. It's not until it's a few feet away that Kit's eyes grow twice their size.

"It's Gage and Fulton."

"What?"

He drags me to the edge of the boat. "If they find out we're out here by ourselves, they're going to start asking questions."

I'm cemented in place by fear, like a bug stuck in thick amber. I know that if we keep seeing each other, Hayes is eventually going to find out. But I wasn't prepared for today to be that day.

"What do we do?" I'm freaking out, waiting for my untimely demise. My heart and pulse are competing to see who's the fastest, and my stomach bubbles with nausea.

Now, there are a lot of choices Kit could've made in this situation. He could've had me hunker down in the cockpit. He could've started the boat up and driven away. He could've lied to them about us being alone, saying that some other people were coming to join us. But he doesn't do any of those.

He glances down momentarily at the water, but not quick enough for me not to notice it.

"Kit..." I warn.

Their boat is getting closer. If they haven't spotted my silhouette already, they will within a few seconds.

He wouldn't.

“I’m so sorry” is all he says before he shoves me off the boat and into the freezing cold lake below.

**WATER UNDER THE BRIDGE
(BOAT)**

I really hope Faye can swim.

Nerves shackle me as Gage and Fulton pull up in their cruiser, the two of them the embodiment of tranquility.

Fulton has an obnoxiously loud Hawaiian shirt hanging off him—with matching shorts that make me shudder—and a dab of sunscreen smeared across his nose.

Gage slides his sunglasses up, resting them in his messy crop of hair. “Well, well, well. If it isn’t the Big Cat himself.”

I’m trying to lean on something in that cool guy pose, but there’s nothing in the nearby vicinity that could support me. “Sup, guys. Nice weather we’re having, eh?”

Oh, God. I’ve never turned Canadian when trying to make small talk before. They’re going to know something is up. Or Gage will. Fulton’s kind of...empty up there.

Fulton stretches. “Oh, yeah. It’s really nice out. Not too hot, not too cold.”

Gage eyes me suspiciously, his gaze jumping from the cheek-biting smile on my face to the seemingly empty deck behind me.

“Whatcha doin’ out here all by yourself?” he asks.

My head whips around like I hadn’t realized I was alone. “Huh? Oh, uh...”

Think, Kit! Get him off your back. You’re not doing anything illegal. You’re fine. Just say you wanted some time to

yourself or something. Keep it simple. Don't elaborate.

I've never been such a mess before. Then again, I've also never been fostering the biggest secret in the entire world. Now my emotions are trampling me in a rockslide.

"I'm going fishing," I lie, hoping that my consternation doesn't translate through my voice.

Gage's tongue pokes the inside of his cheek. "I never knew you liked to fish."

"Oh, yeah. Fishing is great. I love...sitting and waiting for them to bite. Really riveting. And then when you catch them, it's...super dope."

Dope? Dope?!

"Where's your fishing gear?"

Fishing gear. He means a rod and shit. Did I seriously not realize I'd need fishing gear for this lie to work? I'm cold and clammy. I feel like a paralyzing agent's just been injected into my bloodstream.

"I'm fishing the old-fashioned way," I say with as much confidence as I can muster.

Gage laughs in an I-don't-believe-you kind of way, and even though he hasn't necessarily called me out on my bullshit, the condescension in his tone is loud and clear.

"And what does that mean exactly?" he probes.

"Fishing with my hands," I grunt, waving my hands around for good measure. I could totally fish with my hands. I'm a hockey player. Dexterity and precision are all in the game.

Fulton's jaw practically drops to the ground. "You fish... with your hands?"

Gage, unfortunately, is not nearly impressed. "Bullshit. There's no way you can catch a fish with those giant mitts," he scoffs.

Offended, I get the sudden urge to swim around until I catch a slimy bastard just to prove it to him. "You're just

jealous because you're not as skilled as I am."

"Oh, sure. That's it. Where're the fish you've 'caught' today then?"

"It's been a slow day."

"What kind of fish live in this lake, Kit?"

"The gold kind," I answer.

Fulton's mouth hangs open for the second time, accompanied by childlike wonder in his disc-wide eyes. "I thought goldfish were only in pet stores," he gasps.

Gage doesn't rush to correct me, so maybe I did something right for once. I'd let out a sigh of relief if it wasn't so obvious.

I shake my head. "Sweet, sweet Fulton."

Goldfish were the only fish I could think of, and if I took any longer, Gage would know I was lying. I honestly had no idea they lived in the wild. That was a lucky guess. Do goldfish live in lakes? Is that a thing?

I grin in triumph, crossing my arms over my chest. "Are we done with the interrogation? I have to get back to fishing."

Gage's features are as hard as slate, his squinty little eyes scrutinizing me, waiting to find that crack in my guard so he can jam his fingers in there and rip me open. Very *I Know What You Did Last Summer* of him.

"She another puck bunny?"

"What? No," I hiss. I wish I had hidden my reaction better, but comparing Faye to a puck bunny nearly made me grab Gage by his collar and dangle him over the side of the boat.

"A pop icon?"

"No."

"What are you hiding, Kit?" Gage grills.

The blood vessels in my forehead are gonna burst. "I'm not hiding anything!"

Fulton, witnessing the tension underlying this whole interaction, decides to step in not a moment too late. “C’mon, Gage. We’re gonna be late to the kickback.”

“Right,” Gage replies, starting up the boat propeller, all while his unnerving stare never leaves my face.

I swallow. There’s sweat dripping into my trunks from the heat and the bitter taste of lies. And I have no idea how Faye’s faring down there. She’s going to be so pissed at me if we make it out of this alive.

“Have fun catching your *goldfish*, Kit.”

And just like that, I watch as their boat speeds off into the distance with a hydrodynamic drag, sending a ripple through the eerily calm lake. Jesus Christ. That was worse than a police interrogation. Not that I’ve ever experienced one. I’m just guessing.

I tentatively peer over the side of the boat to where I last saw Faye, and lo and behold, she’s bobbing in the water, giving me a Medusa glare.

“I hate you,” she growls, though half of her words are drowned out by the water sloshing into her mouth.

This is going to be a long boat ride back.

THE GHOST OF TRAUMA'S PAST

As messed up as it is, I forgave Kit about an hour after the boat incident. But he's been making it up to me ever since, and I haven't had the heart to turn him down. Let him think twice about throwing me off steep ledges in the future. Plus, what sane girl wouldn't want flowers, a foot massage, a few orgasms, and chocolate-covered popcorn?

My brother's pretty much been occupied with Aeris, which is good news for us because slipping out of the house is a lot easier when you don't have to find death-defying ways to do it. Casen and Josie have been living their happy life, Bristol's been training down at the rink to gear up for the upcoming season, and Gage and Fulton have probably been getting into trouble with whatever shenanigans they're usually up to.

"Where are you taking me now?" I ask Kit, struggling to keep up with his long-ass strides. If we could just, I don't know, *hold hands*, it would force him to slow down a bit. But we still can't take that risk in public.

"It's a surprise," he says, winking at me.

I'm grateful that I didn't opt for heels today because my feet would've been blistered by now. It's around midday, with an orange bloomage feathering over the sky, the heat bearable enough to cap my usual amount of sweat excretion. We pass by a few quaint shops—ranging from flower stores to book emporiums to antique menageries—and the space is bustling with a few more bodies than usual. I can smell the wafting aroma of freshly baked pastries from around the corner, and I

feel the whoosh of air-conditioning whenever I pass by open doors. Bushels of lilac asters line the sidewalk, scattered arbitrarily among green, overgrown foliage.

Kit slows once he realizes we have two very *different* staminas, and he walks shoulder to shoulder with me—or more realistically, shoulder to head.

“You’ll like it, I promise.”

“You don’t have to keep doing things for me, you know,” I tell him, wishing I could reach out and waffle our fingers together.

I want to treat him to something for once, spoil him, show him how grateful I am to have him in my life. I tell him all the time, but it’s different when someone’s actually *doing* something to express their feelings. And it doesn’t help that my L-word plans got totally ruined when Gage and Fulton showed up. I need something bigger than a boat at sunset. Though I am on a college student’s budget, so that might be kind of hard.

His eyes click down to me, the brown of his irises brightened by the sunlight overhead. “What if I want to keep doing things for you?”

A laugh bounces out of me. “Then I’d say that I—”

But as easily as that laugh came, it’s gone within the same second, like an apparition skating between realms. I don’t know what compelled me to look ahead—maybe just natural instinct—but a few feet away from me in the teeming crowd is an all-too-familiar silhouette. A silhouette that I wouldn’t be able to miss anywhere, no matter what hemisphere of the earth I was in. A silhouette that strikes a chord of fear in me, stronger than the fear I feel whenever my brother gets too close to the truth. That kind of fear is amateurish in comparison. Maybe fear is too soft of a word.

This...person...begets a howling pain within me, one that’s been long dormant since I made my great escape to California. It’s been buried deep within me, stirring and stretching like some kind of creature exiled to the very depths

of my belly. And now it's awake. It's awake, and the pain rears up. It's as if my body's experiencing rigor mortis. My breath slows to the point where I'm not even sure my heart is still beating. The edges of my vision fuzz into an ebony haze.

I don't know if Kit's still talking to me. I can't really see him in my peripheral. All I can see is that man's face, staring straight into me, the exact same predatory eyes that once violated my body all those years ago. Behind his well-liked façade lives my everlasting sentence to hell.

People never know what the devil looks like. They have preconceptions, sure, but they're wrong. The devil can be your next-door neighbor, your partner, your mother, your ex-friend, *you*. The devil can be someone you barely know, or someone who's infiltrated every aspect of your life to bring you the most unimaginable types of torture. My devil is Saxon Thompson—the man who raped me.

There's no possible way he can be in California. It can't be him...can it? I'm seeing things. It's only someone that looks like him. He can't hurt me anymore. He can't hurt me anymore. He can't hurt me anym—

“Faye!” Kit's voice is like a life preserver, reaching out to me in the dark chasm of my mind, offering security, safety. All I have to do is swim toward it.

I feel his hands shake me, hear his pitch rise with concern, all while blurry bodies continue gliding past me. Everyone's faceless except for *him*. And as he stares at me, unmoving, a crooked smile stretches his mouth inhumanly wide, those sharp fangs of his waiting for me to get close enough—waiting for the opportune moment to sink into the flesh of my jugular.

I can't hear anything over the blood galloping in my ears, over the roaring pain that my body's been clinging to this entire time. That night comes back in flashes, first starting with my intoxication, then with his hand on my thigh, then with the sickening noise of his skin against mine, and lastly with the ache between my legs like a string of barbed wire shredding my inner walls.

“Faye, what's going on?”

Kit's words sound like a foreign language.

I can't...I can't be here. I can't do this again. I thought it was over. I thought I was free. I thought I was *better*.

But I wasn't really better, was I? I was running. Eventually my past was going to catch up to me.

I wish I could say that Kit's voice was what brought me back to the land of the living. But it wasn't. It was...*his*.

"Faye Hollings?"

My eyes strain to stay on him, to not water at the reminder of that night. Sweat besmirches every inch of my exposed skin as bile rises in my throat. I couldn't say something if I tried. If I open my mouth, I'll throw up.

That charming smile—the one that made him universally loved by everyone in our grade—is saccharine, the kind that leaves a bad taste in my mouth.

"Saxon Thompson. From high school. Oh my God, it's been like...what? At least a few years since we've seen each other," he says with a radiant expression, looking exactly the same as I remember him. Conventionally attractive, well-dressed, with coiffed, brown hair and ice-blue eyes that *freeze* me.

Kit's been clocking this entire interaction with tense shoulders, an untrusting glare, and a grizzly growl rumbling in his chest. But Saxon is as oblivious as he was in high school, only seeing what *he* wants to see, what will benefit *him*. Everything else simply doesn't exist.

Saxon's gaze has attached onto me like some kind of parasite, burrowing in even the tiniest of crevices. All he needs is a drop of my blood and that moldering rot can begin to spread through blackened tissue. Infection, illness, then death.

"How have you been? You look amazing."

How can he say that? How can he act like he doesn't remember? Unless he doesn't. Unless that night was so inconsequential to him that he *forgot* he sexually assaulted someone he considered his best friend.

Kit steps the slightest bit in front of me, shielding me with his gargantuan body and sticking his hand out. “Kit Langley,” he greets, receiving a rather enthusiastic shake from Saxon.

Saxon’s smug little face lights up, yet it doesn’t make him look appealing like happiness does on other people. All those controlled wrinkles—manufactured to look genuine—make him look like the lowest life form there is. *Repulsive.*

“Oh, I know who you are. Big fan of the Reapers. Me and my boys are season ticket holders.”

Kit’s grin is as wide and false as Saxon’s. But unlike Saxon, Kit’s fist curls and uncurls, the surface of his knuckles stark white, stressing the delta of protruding veins on his hand.

My pleading eyes momentarily find his, and when he looks at me, the intensity in those whiskey-dark pools softens to the subtlest of glows. Even the tension pinched in his jaw falls away. He takes a fortifying breath.

“That’s nice, *Paxton*. So you live in Riverside then?”

Information. Information is good.

“It’s, uh, *Saxon*. And just visiting a friend, actually. I live up in Wyoming.”

Wyoming. That’s far enough away that I could never see him again—if I’m lucky. At least he’s just passing through. *You’re okay, Faye. You’re safe.*

“Well, you’ve wasted enough of Faye’s time, don’t you think? We should get going,” Kit hisses from behind a row of perfect teeth, camouflaging the snarl he probably wants to give Saxon instead.

Saxon’s about to say something, but Kit shoulders into him, whisking me away as quickly as possible. Once we get some good distance between us and him, the crowd swallows Saxon’s figure whole, not even leaving the tiniest remnant of him left that could confirm he was ever here in the first place. Kit picks me up in his arms bridal-style, and I interlace my arms around his neck, hiding my face in the cotton of his shirt.

As soon as we round another corner, we arrive at the narrow entrance of an abandoned alleyway, one shadowed by neighboring shop overhangs. He gently sets me down.

“Breathe, Princess. You’re okay. You’re safe,” Kit whispers, his voice a million shades softer than it was only moments ago.

I wasn’t sure if I’d be able to talk again. I know, that sounds a little dramatic. But I’ve never experienced something so scary in my life—not counting that night. I felt like I had to flee to protect myself, that he would hurt me in broad daylight. I don’t mean hurt like punch or kick me. I mean hurt like... *touch*...me. Even a platonic touch, like a hug or a handshake. Nonconsensual.

Kit’s eyes are attentive and responsive, his stare an impasse that I’m not quite sure how to navigate. His irises are the color of crushed, brown coneflowers, turning a hint darker with volcanic anger. “Who was that man?”

I don’t say anything.

His large, rough hand palms my shoulder, a silent attempt to siphon the worry out of my quaking body and into his robust one. I wish I was one of those girls who stayed strong in times of chaos, who stood her ground and spoke up when she felt threatened. I wish I had spit in Saxon’s face. I wish I had slapped him. I wish I had communicated to him just how *deep* my rage goes. And now, I’ll never see him again, and I’ll never be able to confront him about that night.

I speak for the first time, gargling around the shards of glass in my esophagus. “He was...”

Kit connects the dots faster than I can, which I’m thankful for. I don’t think I could bring myself to *say* the word. Words hold a lot of meaning, weight. They stick with you. They represent different things. And some words are more dangerous than others. Some words serve as a constant reminder of the victim you are. No matter what the context is, or who says them, some words follow you like a tenebrous shadow. Always there. Until they merge and become one with you, with your name, with your achievements.

Kit's lips knot, then tighten into a straight line. "Was that the man who...raped...you?"

It feels like there's a giant ravine separating me and Kit. A ravine that holds all the trauma from that night—that's preventing me from going to him and living out the rest of my life safe in his arms.

I nod, feeling my tear ducts begin to sting, unable to stem the emotions bleeding out of me. My nose is stuffy, my mouth begins to salivate, and my stomach roils with queasiness.

I'll never be able to move on if I don't work through this trauma. I'll never truly be happy with Kit if I don't let him in. I have to be the one to jump the gorge. My little ledge of safety is slowly crumbling, torpedoing to that lightless bottom. I have to take a leap of faith. I don't want to end up trapped in a deep, dark cave.

"Senior year. Prom night. He—I—everything's so blurry. We were drinking. A lot. We were having a good time. I was never interested in him romantically. We just went together as friends." The words rush out, the percussion of my breaths matching the plink of dirty rainwater on the corroded fire escape beside us. "We stayed at a hotel for the night since our prom was a city away from our hometown. I was tired. I was drunk. But Saxon was wide awake. B-before we agreed to go together, he always made jokes about wanting to have sex on prom night. The girl he was seeing at the time, she was asked out by another guy. I was...the backup."

The more I talk about it, the worse the pain gets. Like someone taking a scalpel and slicing me from navel to throat. Gloved hands ripping my skin back, baring my bloody ribs to recycled air, then those same hands plunging into the fleshy matter of my internal organs. While all I can do is watch.

The angles of Kit's face are blade-sharp, the muscles in his upper body coiled in on themselves like a cobra waiting to strike. His hands are still bleached white from excessive tension, and there's something alarming about his stare—the ferocity behind it strong enough to weaken knees and topple empires.

Tears, snot, and saliva slick my face in a disgusting resin, and the heat in my body is catapulting to new temperatures. My hands continue to shake, clawing rapaciously for something to stabilize myself. “I was barely conscious. He started touching me, soft at first, but the more I tried to move, the rougher he became. I wasn’t aware enough to fight back even if I wanted to. Then he stripped me of my clothes, whispered terrible things in my ears, penetrated me without any precautions to dull the pain. I remember trying to scream, but I don’t think anyone could hear me.”

“Oh, Faye.”

I look up at Kit through fogged eyes, my breath gossamer-thin, my heart skittish, somehow trying to hide itself from him, even though it’s stored safely in the chamber of my chest.

More salty rivulets cascade down my undoubtedly blotchy face, pebbling at the red seal of my waterline. “I was terrified.”

Kit holds the side of my cheek with his hand, his touch velveteen despite the callouses weathering his palm. I reunite with his touch, feel my heart peek out just the slightest at the familiarity, feel the tears dwindle to a slow-moving pace.

“I’m sorry, Faye. I’m so sorry that happened to you. I wish I had known you back then. I wish I could’ve protected you.”

“I wish so too.”

“I can’t believe I just let that fucker walk away unscathed,” he chews through his teeth. His voice has just the right amount of venom to kill a grown man—or Saxon.

A frown snakes onto my chapped lips. “Kit, I don’t want you to do anything. It’s...all in the past now. I don’t have any evidence he even assaulted me. I couldn’t take him to court. I don’t think I would even want to.”

“You deserve *justice*,” he growls.

“A lot of victims don’t get the justice they deserve.” I swallow down some of the remaining terror in my body.

“Please, Kit. I just need you to be here with me,” I beg, and almost instantly, the fury notched into his incensed features disappear. He’s been freed of the wrath-like creature operating his movements. No curled lip, no trembling fist; even the twin, black holes of his eyes are starting to lighten.

He embraces me in a hug that almost knocks the wind out of me, his arms squeezing so tight that I’m not sure if he plans on letting go. “Thank you for telling me, Faye. I need you to know that as long as I’m in your life, I’m going to do everything in my power to protect you, okay? I never want you to feel that kind of pain ever again.”

I’m on my tiptoes as I bury my face in the crook of his neck, clinging to his shirt like he’s my salvation, breathing his strength into me so that one day I can protect myself.

“Thank you, Kit.” My heart’s pushing against the prison bars of my ribs, trying to slither its way through the gaps, trying to get to *him*. My blood pumps for him, my lungs breathe for him. Kit’s the reason I’m alive right now. If he hadn’t picked me up that night at the gas station, I don’t know where I’d be.

KNOCK, KNOCK

Finding someone who doesn't want to be found is easier than you might think. Especially if you have a hell of a motive. I know what Faye said. And if it were under any other circumstances, I would've respected her wishes. But I can't. Not when she's had her whole life ruined by a pathetic, mousy-looking rich boy.

The endless sobs she cried into my chest as I held her, the burst capillaries in her red eyes, the shaking of her pale limbs. The only time I'd ever seen her so broken was the night she called me. The common denominator of this entire thing stems from *him*. A weed invading Faye's lonesome little dandelion, starving her of peace and happiness, growing between her cracks with an irremovable grasp on her.

And how do you kill a weed?

You pull it.

When I arrive on the doorstep of the house he's staying in, I notice the singular car parked in the driveway. It's one of those classic, American dream houses, hugged by a white picket fence and bordered by hedges that don't have a single leaf out of place. Two stories with a wraparound porch, a pathway made of cobblestone, and too many double-paned windows for any one person to need. The sky is bruised with a plum gloam, tiny clusters of stars twinkling through an overhanging nebulous. The breeze pestering my arms forewarns a cold night, but I welcome the shock to my system,

letting it fuel my ratcheting anger as I rap on the door with my fist.

I can hear the faint rumblings of a game on television, followed by heavy footsteps trudging my way. The door swings open to reveal the douche canoe himself—Saxon—standing all dumbfounded with the stupidest expression on his face.

His mouth hangs open. “Kit Langley?”

“Hi,” I say, leaning my shoulder against the doorframe, realizing now how much I tower over him, how quick of a visit this will be.

I crack my knuckles one finger at a time, gridlocking my eyes with his, rage wading through my bloodstream in boiling-hot pulses.

Saxon adheres a sickening smile to his face, one that brings out the skew of his front teeth and the wrinkles in his too-big forehead. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Oh, trust me. It won’t be a pleasure for much longer.”



WHEN I GET HOME, my hand is oozing blood. I tried to staunch the flow with a pair of spare shorts I found in the back seat, but all it’s done is change the color of the shorts from light gray to a deep maroon. I admit that in the moment, I didn’t really think about how I’d sneak back into the house, and my patience is so fucking thin that there’s no way in hell I’m going to make an effort. I walk through the door, trailing droplets of carnage behind me, ignoring the wide-eyed stares from my teammates currently huddled in the front room.

“Whoa, dude. What the fuck happened to you?” Casen asks.

Whatever leftover fury I had is still storming inside of me, and my lips pull back from my teeth in a growl. “None of your business.”

Gage sits up from his slouching, knocking a bag of tortilla chips off his lap. “Um, it most certainly is when you’re leaking at least half a pint of blood out of your hand.”

I’m a sick fuck for wanting to smile. “It’s not mine.”

“Not yours?” Bristol chimes in, very clearly biting back whatever unnecessary comment he was going to throw at me.

I try not to let their disappointment cloud me and wring out the adrenaline rush I got from beating Faye’s rapist with nothing but my fist. How fear crystallized in his eyes when I backed him into a corner, how easily his skin split underneath my knuckles, the volume of his screams and the sticky tears that tracked down his lacerated face. Even though his blood was warm and the smell turned my stomach, I needed to see more of it. I needed to see copious amounts of it spurt from his broken nose and cracked lip, needed to subject him to as much pain as possible.

I imagined how Faye must’ve felt that night—how scared she was, how much pain she endured. And that imagery fed every one of my throws, each becoming harder and quicker than the last, so much so that when my own knuckles began to bleed, I didn’t care. My hand is so sore I can barely move it. I might need stitches.

But none of that matters.

“Helped someone who was bleeding,” I gruff out, adding pressure to my throbbing hand. All I want to do is see Faye. Make sure she’s okay after today. I don’t need a surprise intervention from my teammates. Nothing they could say would make me regret what I did.

Hayes’ eyebrows furrow. “Did you take them to the hospital?”

“Yep.”

“What happened to them?”

“Didn’t ask.”

“You’re sure you’re not hurt?”

“M sure.”

Fulton, for once, is speechless. Nobody knows what to say, or what to do, apparently, because I'm still soaking through my makeshift bandage.

"Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm gonna go wrap this in my bathroom," I grumble, sauntering impassively past a myriad of confused and disbelieving looks. Nobody dares to follow me.

I'm not that much of a hothead on the ice, but I am a defenseman. I take hits all the time, deck them out myself. Being beat up is something I'm used to, and the guys usually don't question it. I also prefer to keep certain aspects of my life private from them, and they know not to overstep their boundaries. Yeah, they'll probably continue interrogating me in the morning, but if they were to get all up in my face right now, I'd blow a gasket.

I quietly enter my bedroom in case Faye is sleeping, and I shut the door and lock it.

I hear her voice before my head turns toward her.

"Hey, you're—oh my God."

Before I even have a chance to look at her, she's up and out of the bed, sprinting over to me with fear imbuing her doll-like features.

"Kit, what happened?" Her touch is soft despite the urgency in her movements, big eyes blinking back at me, searching for an answer she isn't going to like. She looks so small and fragile right now. I know she isn't. Hell, she's stronger than I could ever be. And yet, here I am, still feeling the instinctual need to protect her.

I lighten my tone with her—like I always do. "It's nothing."

"It's not nothing!" she shrieks, half-walking, half-stomping over to the adjoining bathroom, rummaging around in the cabinets with the occasional curse here and there.

"Faye, I'm fine. It's just a little bleeding," I reassure her, sitting down on the edge of the bed, keeping my hand elevated and away from the sheets. I thought this part would feel better.

But the worry I caused her...it strings me up like putrid meat on a butcher's hook.

Her barely clothed hips sway in my peripheral as she comes over to me with an armful of gauze and antiseptic, kneeling down and splaying the first aid out on the floor. The corners of her lips are jacked down in a frown, and she refuses to meet my eyes.

"Give me your hand," she orders, her voice halfway to a full-blown growl.

I carefully unwrap my carmine-stained hand, and a few indigo blooms have swelled up under the skin, coloring the surface of my knuckles a mosaic of gruesome hues. At least the bleeding looks less stark now.

She tucks her lower lip between her teeth, chewing on that one spot in the middle that always feels a little more tender when we kiss. "Jesus, Kit."

"It doesn't hurt." I don't mention my high pain tolerance or the fact that my adrenaline's definitely been swaddling my pain receptors.

Faye uncaps the antiseptic and pours some onto a cotton swab, drenching it before dabbing at the splits ribbing my knuckles.

"Fuck," I hiss, my arm tensing involuntarily.

She continues to clean the area. "Get used to it."

She's pissed. Wait until she hears about what actually happened.

The truth wrestles its way out of my throat before I can stop it, and the admittance of it has my face turning as red as the fluid seeping out of me. "It's Saxon's." I don't know why I suddenly feel like I'm in trouble. I didn't do anything wrong. Frankly, that asshole is lucky to still have two working legs.

Her hand stills, betrayal shimmering in her eyes. "*What?*"

My mouth's watery, and that apparently "nonexistent" guilt is rising faster than the goddamn sea level. "Faye..."

She fastens her gaze on the roll of bandages beside me, unraveling it without saying a word, only showing me her glossed eyes when she moves to wrap my knuckles. Unshed tears ream her lower lids, and her chin wobbles the slightest as her fingers begin to shake in the ribbon of cotton. She makes four circles around the gore-soaked gashes before gingerly tearing the end of the roll off, securing it to the underside of my palm.

As she stands up, so do I.

“Princess, please look at me.” My broken plea seems to get caught between my teeth, bereft of the prior complacency that I was willing to flaunt for anyone who’d look at me. I don’t feel bad for what I did, but I feel bad for making Faye so upset. I thought this is what she wanted. I thought she would be happy.

When she tips her head up, I’m expecting to see a river of tears muddying her perfect complexion, but all that exists is a fervid flicker in her eye, hot enough to melt skin off bone and char her resentment into the very planes of my soul.

“I asked you not to do anything. But you never listen to me.”

How can she be angrier at me than she is at him?

A low-grade headache bludgeons my skull, adding to the slow-rolling anger slinging up each vertebra of my spine. “You weren’t going to do anything about it, Faye! Someone had to give that prick the beating he had coming!”

I’m sure the guys in the living room can hear murmurs of our conversation, but whatever decency or civility I had circles down the drain.

“You always think you’re playing the hero, Kit. You still look at me like I *need* to be saved. I was perfectly fine with moving on, letting my trauma exist in the past, but instead of supporting me through my decision, you went and brought it into the present!” she yells, nostrils flared and jaw pulsing, brutalizing me with each stab of her words.

My own rage disgorges like water from a hot spring, and I dig my fingernails into the freshly applied bandage, my fingers still aching from the altercation. “You would’ve rather me let him walk away? Let him walk away after what he *did* to you? So he can go do it to someone else?”

“No. You’re not villainizing me,” she snarls, pointing her finger at me. “You had no right to assume how I felt. You had no right to do that without telling me.”

I find myself pushing my chest into the tip of her fingernail, glaring down at her from above, a growl starting deep in my belly and racing up the channel of my throat. “I didn’t realize I needed your *permission* to beat up the man who raped you.”

“Oh my God. There you go! Making me seem like *I’m* the irrational one for not wanting you to beat someone up.”

“I just don’t understand why you’re so mad at me!” I shout, refusing to back down even as her finger presses into my pectorals, even as I witness the most heartbreaking expression on her face. My heart feels like it’s being macerated by a mortar and pestle. That trust we’ve built, nursed—all gone within one stupid, impulsive decision.

“I’m mad at you because you did it for you, not for me! If it was for me, you would’ve respected my wishes!” She sweeps her finger into the ball of her fist, pounding it against my sternum.

Hit.

“How am I supposed to trust you? I was reluctant to tell you in the first place because I didn’t know what you’d do.”

Wince.

“You say you care about me, but then you go behind my back. You say you want to be with me, but you’ve made me cry more than anyone else has!”

Hit.

Wince.

A rhythm that doesn't cease, that rumbles under my feet and splits into a fault line, threatens to swallow me underground. Though as much as her punches sting, they're nowhere near as painful as her words.

My uninjured hand reflexively shoots out to grab her arm, but I keep my grip soft around her wrist. She reels backward—not enough to extricate herself—and she stares into my eyes from beneath those damp lashes, her chest rising and falling in frame-shaking breaths.

My knees are barely holding me up at this point. “You think I like making you cry, Faye? It's the worst feeling in the world. That fight we had at the party was one of the worst days of my life.”

I don't like revisiting that day. And now here we are, weeks later, and I'm breaking her heart all over again when I promised I wouldn't.

“Then why do you keep doing it?” she spits, ripping her arm from my fingers. “You say I matter to you, you say...”

I don't hear the rest of her sentence. I don't hear anything over the bashing of my heart and the internal voices laughing at me from the dark corners of my mind.

She keeps saying that I don't care about her. She keeps saying things that aren't true. Why does she keep saying that?

There are cinder weights tied to my feet, pulling me deeper into the ocean, down far enough that I can no longer see the cerulean patch of sky above me. All that exists is the darkness closing around me like giant tentacles.

“Stop!” I don't register how loud my voice is, how it reverberates off the walls. All I register is the agony bisecting the two halves of my barely beating heart, leaving behind a hole that only Faye can occupy.

And she *flinches*. She fucking flinches.

I can hear the guys' voices loudening down the hallway, overlapping with one another in worried hushes, and right as Haye forces the door open, Faye charges for the exit. The group parts down the middle to make way for her bolting

body, and I pray that my strides are long enough to catch her, but the goddamn roadblock in the doorway slows me down. Everyone's asking me questions I don't have time to answer.

I reach the living room—with the rest of the team on my heels—right as I see her snatch something from the entryway table, and then she disappears into the dark of night.

HOW TO LOSE A GIRL IN ONE NIGHT

“**S**tart talking. Now,” Hayes orders, embers of anger reflected in the aquamarine pits of his eyes.

If my heart wasn't seconds away from bursting out of my chest, the shame would've jumpstarted it. “We got into a fight,” I say curtly, and no matter how furious I may be at the situation, the only person to blame right now is me.

Fulton peeks his head out of the door. “I don't see her,” he relays.

Fuck! She could be anywhere right now. It's midnight, it's dark, and Riverside isn't safe enough for her to be walking around alone at night. I don't even know if she took her phone, shoes, a jacket, anything.

The roughness of Hayes' growl chafes my ears, and he digs his phone out of his pocket, the screen illuminating his face. I've never seen him so distressed before. Not before a game, not before a big conference, *never*.

“Her phone's still here,” he chokes out, and something changes in his irises. That initial outrage, the shock, the confusion—they've all amalgamated and shapeshifted into pure fear.

He doesn't look at any of us but instead stares at the opaque darkness rolling over our doorstep like a foreboding omen. “We need to find her.”

Guilt spumes inside me, threatens to revolt from my stomach. “It's my fault.”

“I don’t care whose fucking fault it is. We need to find her,” he repeats, his face strained with bulging veins, spit flying from his lower lip.

Gage grabs his keys from off the coffee table. “Should we call the police?”

“You can call them once you’re in your car.” Hayes tosses the rest of the guys their keys, and a scurry of sneaker soles, jacket zippers, and jangling bits of metal follows his instruction. The worst kinds of thoughts pistol through my brain—her encountering a horde of bad people without me there to protect her, her running miles away and never being found again. Maybe she darts into the street and an oncoming car doesn’t see her.

I shouldn’t have raised my voice. I shouldn’t have fought with her. I shouldn’t have gone to visit Saxon.

For as loud and urgent as Hayes’ voice is, the tremor doesn’t go unnoticed. “Everyone split up. We don’t rest until she comes home, got it? We call each other if we hear or see anything.”

“I didn’t hear a car engine,” I pipe up, the tacky saliva in my mouth seeming to proliferate.

Bristol’s eyebrows stitch together. “What?”

“She didn’t get in a car. Wherever she is, she’s on foot.”

Hayes begins to usher everyone out of the house, leaving me and him the last of the group to exit. And it’s then, in this moment, that I realize we’re both panicking over the loss of the most important person in our life.

“Then she’ll be easier to find,” Hayes concludes.



I DON’T KNOW how long I’m driving around for. Maybe an hour and a half. It’s silent in the Jeep, void of Faye’s teasing quips—void of her effervescent personality. There’s nothing but unending darkness in front of me, around me, behind me.

Even the stars have long fallen from the sky, blanketing our town in funeral-like desolation.

I've circled the perimeter of town twice, even followed the less-traveled routes hidden by far-reaching willows, and there's been no sign of her. I checked the parking lots thoroughly, traversed over rocky, uneven terrain with only my phone flashlight to guide me, spent an hour wanting to tear my hair out and cry and run into my mother's arms like a little boy. I need to find her. I *will* find her. Not finding her isn't an option.

I can't imagine what will happen if we don't find her.

I don't want to. I don't. I don't. I don't.

I'm right back at the intersection before the turn into our ice rink. No other car is on my strip of road. The red glow of the stoplight spills over the front of my vehicle, lighting my interior through the reflective surface of the windshield, and the only noise to bring me any sort of comfort is the steady purr of my engine. My fingers wrap tightly around the steering wheel, compounding the pain under my bandaged knuckles. The bleeding must have stopped, but it's stained a good portion of the gauze.

I need to change it soon if I want to prevent infection. I need to eat. I need to sleep. But I know I won't be able to do any of that until Faye is safely back in my arms.

If she's on foot, there's only so much distance she could've traveled. And she doesn't know Riverside. No shops are open. The only place she knows is...

My bloodshot eyes behold the behemoth arena sitting right beside me, and even though the light is still red, I immediately turn from the middle lane into the parking lot.

I'm not the fastest guy on the team. A lot of my padding slows me down. But I don't even feel the burn in my thighs or the air rushing out of my lungs when I sprint toward the building.

Please be here. *Please.*

I jostle the handles on one side of the entrance. Nothing. The small morsel of hope I've clung to like my life's depended on it is slowly slipping through my fingers, kinetic sand that can never hold its shape.

No, no, no. This is my only lead. If she's not here, I have nothing.

My hand skims the handle on the opposite side, and without even putting any pressure on it, the door creaks open. A sliver. No projection of inside light. But a sliver. And that's all I need.

Muscle memory carries me through the building that I've grown to know as a second home, desperation and fear peddling my legs, the chill from the rink sinking into my skin. I can see my breath swirl out in front of me, and I'm not wearing enough clothes to combat against the perpetually low temperature, but none of that matters.

Because right as I see that tempered glass, my eyes hook onto the small figure sitting on the curb of one of the side openings. I've never felt my heart burst with such relief before—it's almost too much for me to handle. But looking at Faye, unharmed and in one piece, blasts me with a warmth like a varicolored sunrise in the dead of winter, persimmon and purple shades bleeding into one another around an epicenter of gilded sun.

"Faye!" I scream, rushing over to her, ignoring the collision of my hip into the front row of seats.

Her head perks up as she rises to her feet, and my arms immediately bar her in an embrace. I don't know why I thought she would smell or look different, but she smells and looks like *my* Faye. She's shivering in her tiny pajama set, burying herself into the heat of my body, and now I wish I'd brought a jacket with me. I don't pull away. I'm not ready yet.

"Are you hurt?" I whisper against the crown of her head, inhaling her peach scent—how it still lingers even after a grueling day. The smell of her, the feel of her, just looking at her is like a muscle relaxant. My own slice of heaven that I

don't deserve. The one place I'll always come back to no matter how far away I am or how much time passes.

"I'm okay," she says quietly, cheek pressed against my chest.

I can't tell you how many times we've been in this position before. I don't want to repeat it, no matter how familiar it may be. There shouldn't *have* to be a reunion with us. We shouldn't have to be separated in the first place. And I know each of these instances have happened because of something idiotic I said.

I pull away from her—even though my body protests—and I drink in those perfect features of hers, catalogue the smile adorning her heart-shaped lips, the brown of her eyes that remind me of autumn, the freckles that dot her alabaster skin in vast constellations.

"You scared the shit out of me, Faye," I tell her, running my hands over the gooseflesh on her arms.

She doesn't seem to respond to my touch like she usually does, and her lifelessness nudges my anxiety into action.

"I'm sorry," she says. "I shouldn't have said those things to you. I shouldn't have run. I just felt so cornered, and I didn't know what to do."

"No. You don't need to apologize. *I'm* sorry. I shouldn't have raised my voice at you, and I shouldn't have tried to villainize you when everything was my fault. I was ashamed and angry and didn't want to hear the truth. I thought I knew what was best for you, but I was wrong."

I'm never going to go behind Faye's back again. Because nothing in this world—and I mean *nothing*—is worth losing her. I've never been so wrecked in my life. I was fully ready to accept that she was gone. Not, like, *dead* gone. But just gone. Somewhere better, without me. And if she was, I wouldn't have held it against her. I'll always put her happiness first, even if that means sacrificing my own happiness.

My life doesn't fucking exist if Faye's not in it. Whenever she decides to leave this planet, I'm going to follow her,

because there's no way in hell I'm going to survive if I never see her face again, never hear her voice, never hold her.

There are inky streaks of mascara on her cheeks from crying, and the sight sits on my chest like an imposing anvil, too heavy to move. She's been sitting in this empty rink for an hour, all by herself, in nothing but a tank top and shorts. I know her thoughts can be a dark limbo, a cesspool of negativity and self-deprecation, and I let her run out of the house after saddling her with too much emotion for one person to handle.

She shrugs. "It's okay—"

"It's not okay," I assert, trying to soldier through the thick layer of bile in my mouth that has yet to recede. "None of this is okay. How Saxon treated you, how I treated you. I was supposed to protect you, and all I did was let you down."

There's not a lot of space on the ground for both of us, but I lower anyways, folding my legs in uncomfortably so Faye has enough room. She follows suit and sits down next to me, all of her limbs fitting proportionately between the front row of seats and the partition of plexiglass.

I don't have a speech prepared, but I am ready to grovel—which, knowing me, is kind of guaranteed at this point.

I've never liked talking about my past. It doesn't matter who it's with. And no, I didn't have the most gut-wrenching and heartbreaking childhood. I didn't witness a major death in the family. I didn't suffer from abuse. I wasn't forced to take care of myself from a young age. I always had a roof over my head and food on the table. My childhood was...fine. It was just lacking.

I hazard a glance at her, feel the backs of my eyes itch with tears. "I never had a good model of what a healthy relationship is supposed to look like. My parents fought a lot when I was younger. I thought it was something that every married couple went through, until they eventually grew further apart. I don't really believe they were *ever* in love. They were cruel to each other, blaming the other when they had the chance, lying and manipulating when things didn't go the way they wanted.

They created this toxic environment that, as a child, I was completely oblivious to. I'd fall asleep to the sounds of them yelling, the crash of dishes or furniture or whatever was throwable in the space they were in. If a day passed where they weren't screaming their lungs out at one another, I thought something was wrong.

"After they split, home life got a lot easier for me. But my relationships with other people...suffered. I was terrible to my girlfriends—unempathetic, uncaring. I didn't know how to show compassion or how to think about anyone besides myself. I mean, you said yourself that I'm not necessarily the nicest person."

"I didn't say *that* exactly."

I laugh for the first time in days—something I definitely didn't think I'd be doing for a while. "It's true. I don't make an effort to understand people. I don't care about anything unless it affects me. It's what I grew up with, what I thought was the norm. I'd been content living a loveless life because I never really knew what love was. It wasn't until you that I realized I'd been doing everything wrong."

"I love you, Faye," I profess, robbing the breath from her lungs.

Should I have said it sooner? Maybe. Do I wish I had done some big reveal, like flying her out to Ireland on a private jet to show her the flower field I bought that spells out her name? Yes. But all that matters is she knows it now.

Faye stares at me, eyes wide, mouth agape. I don't want to put pressure on her to say it back, so I continue.

"When you told me not to reach out to Saxon, I didn't listen to you. I was convinced that I was in the right, and I wasn't willing to change my mind to understand where you were coming from. But in doing so, I fucked up what we had. I broke your trust...again. I believed that love was all about sacrifices instead of compromises."

She pushes out a quiet breath, but it's the only noise to be heard in the whole arena. A heavy exhale echoing off a surface

of ice and skyscraping walls. I can see the gears turning in her head as she contemplates what she's going to say.

"Yeah, you've been kind of a dick lately," she mutters.

The corners of my lips buoy into a smile. There's my Faye. Tells it like it is. Always holding me accountable. Never sugarcoating anything. "I have. I'm sorry. You're the last person who deserves it."

"I'm tired of being mad, Kit. I'm just tired of it all."

"I know, Princess."

She turns to fully face me, and I lift my thumb to brush the teary gunk out of the corner of her eye, the softness of her lashes kissing my skin. "How do I know you won't hurt me again?"

Because I won't let it happen. I'll flip this entire world on its axis and condemn myself to an eternal life of hell if I ever hurt her again.

"I think hurt is a part of life," I say, the arrhythmic warble of my heart now the loudest sound in the rink. "But I'll never do anything to hurt you again. Not as long as I live, because I know that if I'm hurting, you're hurting a thousand times worse than me."

I start to withdraw my hand from the arc of her cheekbone, but she grabs it before I can get very far. Her touch lances heat through my body, searing enough to burn off my fingerprints and cauterize the open wounds left in the devastation of our fight. "What if I don't forgive you?" she asks.

"I don't expect you to. But I'll work until I earn it, just like I said I would at the restaurant. Maybe it'll take days, weeks, months. A year. I'll work forever if that's what it takes."

"A year?"

"I have to start over, Faye. A clean slate. And I'm not afraid to."

Faye goes from holding my hand to wrapping her arms around my torso, nearly knocking me off balance with the force of her hug. I jolt back and drape one arm over the

expanse of her ribs, while my other arm keeps us both propped up.

“I love you,” she whispers into my neck.

She loves me. Not just with a “too,” either. Not just a response to my profession. A full statement. I love this girl so fucking much.

She’s warmed up a little from when I first found her, and her fragrant scent sparks every one of my synapses, whetting my appetite for her. I’m this close to using her goddamn shampoo myself just so I can have her smell on me at all times.

I want to kiss her. But maybe it’s too soon. I need to give her time.

My phone pings in my pocket, silencing my artillery fire of thoughts, and that’s when I realize I haven’t updated the group chat about Faye’s whereabouts. Fuck. Hayes is probably still losing his mind.

ME: Found her. She’s safe.

Faye leans over to peek at the screen just as a bunch of relieved texts start flooding in from the guys. My eyes aren’t fast enough to keep up with everything they’re saying.

As much as I want to keep her all to myself, I need to get her somewhere where the default temperature isn’t fifty degrees. “I should probably get you back to the house.”

She smashes her lips together in that demure way she does sometimes, and nothing could have prepared me for what comes out of her mouth next. “What if I don’t want to go back yet?”

THE SIN-BIN

“**W**hy wouldn't you want to go back?” I inquire, concern stewing deep in my twisted guts.

I'm starting to worry now, so I don't give her the chance to respond.

“If it's about your brother, he's not going to be mad at you. I'm sure he—”

Faye grabs my jaw, her fingers squeezing my cheeks and making my lips purse. “Because we're finally alone,” she says under her breath.

I stare at her.

She stares at me, except her eyelids are at half-mast.

I blink stupidly, mouth smushed. “I don't follow.”

Her manicured nails lightly indent my face, and she lets out an impatient growl as her fingers eventually fall away. “I've had a shit day, Kit. The worst twenty-four hours of my life. I'm tense, and I need you to fuck the stress out of me.”

Holy shit. Am I seriously that rusty that I didn't know what she was implying? I want to say I'm a gentleman and would never fuck her when she's coming off an emotional low, but I'm not a gentleman, and my self-control isn't *that* strong. Even surrounded by cold air, I can feel my dick lurch in my pants, and my raisin-sized balls are no longer raisin sized anymore.

I refuse to bite off the frisson in my voice. “Are you sure?”

Faye rolls her eyes at me, her throat vibrating with a rumble I've never heard before. "Kit."

Oh, fuck. My cock is growing so absurdly hard that my thoughts lag for a second. I can feel warmth in my boxers from where my crown's spit pre-cum, and I'm glad I'm wearing thickish pants, otherwise this would be way more embarrassing than it already is.

I adjust the turgid bulge in my sweats, and I'm so sensitive that my fingers *indirectly* on my erection feel like goddamn cheese graters. I remember how irresistible her pussy is, especially when it's sucking me in with needy pulses, weeping with an overflow of arousal that glues her thighs together. "Say my name again."

"*Kit.*"

"I don't have a condom," I blurt, suddenly wishing that our rink handed out contraceptives like Planned Parenthood. Maybe we should invest in one of those vending machines that dispense condoms free of charge.

"That's why Plan B's a thing," she drawls.

Being inside Faye is amazing as is, but being inside her raw? I have to be dreaming. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure."

I throw my head back, trying to concentrate on the ceiling rather than the ache in my twitching balls. "If we're fucking in the rink, Faye, we're not stopping. Not for a second. Not for a break. Not when you beg me to go gentler, not when there're tears streaming down your face. I'm gonna fuck you hard and rough with my fat cock. And once you've come multiple times for me, I'm going to abuse that greedy cunt of yours until I paint your walls with my cum."

I've done my best to avert my eyes from her pointy nipples, but the fabric of her top is about as thin as tissue paper, and now she's pushing her chest out to me, waiting for me to bite. Oh, I'll bite. Where I want. And as hard as I want.

"Then do it already," she challenges, her cleavage dipping down farther as she leans forward.

Our position right now isn't ideal, but I need to taste her lips, to feel the hot flesh of her tongue as it strokes mine, to run my fingernails along her scalp until I can grab fistfuls of her hair and *pull*. My hand weaves behind her neck, and I apply pressure to her nape, bringing her nose to nose with me. She's already panting, our mouths hovering inches from each other, breath steaming between us in the frozen atmosphere. And when I see her lower lip quiver and hear that heaven-sent mewl of hers, I press my mouth to hers in an undisciplined kiss.

A sleet of white flashes behind my eyelids like a stun grenade, and the pressure of our lips marrying one another has endorphins firing in my soupy brain. Fuck, it feels so good to kiss her. So *right*. With my hand still caressing the base of her neck, I move my thumb to ghost over her jugular notch, and I can feel the steady drum of life pulsing under the thin layer of skin. Her body is still, obedient, but her mouth tells a different story. Hungry, rabid, chasing a high only to savor it for as long as she can, then resume the hunt. A flurry of lips, mind-numbing pleasure, and unspoken promises.

When we pull away from each other, a string of spit bridges between us, glistening in a vortex of moonlight. My own saliva is smeared across her mouth—a result of sloppy impatience—and she's already beginning to glow with a whole-body flush, making my solid length strain in concentrated throbs.

“Fuck, Princess,” I moan, licking my Cupid's bow, as if I can feel the phantom residue on my own lips. “You look so good with my spit all over you, but you'd look even better with my cum.”

The filthiest noise barges out of her, too loud to be dampened by any amount of self-control.

“Need your giant cock right now, Kit,” she begs in a pained breath. “Need it stretching and filling me.”

I go to lean forward, but instead of focusing on her mouth, my focus detours to the hinge of her jaw. My tongue darts out to trace up to the lobe of her ear, where I nip at it before

sucking it between my teeth. “Only good girls get my cock. You need to say please.”

Her nails scratch down my back, fumbling for purchase, wetting the skin beneath. Desperation on any other girl is a turnoff for me, but from Faye, it’s like the best under-the-counter drug.

“*Please*, Kit. Please fuck me. Use me, degrade me, punish me. I want to be able to feel you for days after. I want to remember this night when I’m touching myself in my own bed, imagining your fingers are the ones in my cunt, bringing me to the edge.”

I growl into her throat, possessiveness transforming once docile desires into barbaric actions, and in this moment, I unlearn who I am. All that exists is the beast inside me who wants to mark her as my own, get off on her screams and the way she writhes beneath me. Like a bunny caught in the bloody jowls of an apex predator.

“Oh, I’ll make sure you remember me for a lot longer than a few days.”

Without warning, I scoop her up in my arms effortlessly, tightening my grip on the backs of her thighs, which are cold to the touch from the floor. The hem of her shorts slides up with each step I take, riding the split of her ass and taunting me with two jiggling cheeks. Her arms are slung around my neck in a holdfast, her mouth on mine with a starved urgency. I can barely see where I’m going, but I’m not about to rip myself away from her. She’s all mine, and I’m all hers, and I’m going to service every one of this woman’s needs.

We stumble our way over to the penalty box, and I make sure to shove the door open before her back has the chance to hit it. When I set her down on the bench, she unwraps her legs from me but keeps them spread, showing me a flash of hot-pink lace. Hot-pink lace that I’m going to fucking rip off to get to that gorgeous pussy.

I kneel down in front of her, clenching the outside of her leg while I press kisses to the supple bed of her thigh. And once I’ve colored the area in lavender rosettes, I drive my

teeth into the canvas of her flesh. Harder than a mere hickey. A bite.

A hiss leaks out of her open mouth like gas out of a ruptured pipeline, and she thrusts her clothed cunt into my face, the heels of her feet digging into the middle of my back. Her legs tremble, her breath shooting out of her in quick succession, spine arching to give me easy access to the perfect form of her slender body.

My finger traces a languid path to her panties, not quite close enough to provide her with any stimulation, but an inch from utter ruination if I so decided. “You soaking your panties like the desperate slut you are, Princess?”

Her throat clicks loudly with a swallow. “Yes, Kit.”

“You wanna show me? You wanna drench my fingers in your cum, then watch me feed them to you? So you can taste how fucking sweet you are?”

She doesn’t say anything except for a few incoherent moans, nodding her head eagerly. I can’t help but love how submissive she’s being, how she trusts me enough to take her in any position I want with no snappy comeback in sight.

I yank down her gray shorts more forcefully than I intended, revealing the high-cut thong barely covering her wet clit. She’s soaked through the material just like I expected, canting her hips into the air, galvanized to reach that unsurpassable summit of her climax.

My mouth begins to water. I can already *taste* her. “I love this sight of you sprawled out in front of me, showing me that pretty little cunt. You’re perfect, Faye. So perfect that it drives me up the damn walls,” I gasp.

Her eyes are pinched closed, breasts heaving. “Fingers. I want your fingers.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Within a second, her underwear is off, and my God...

Puffy, pink, neglected lips shimmer with viscous arousal. I’d fall to my knees if I weren’t already on them. My dick,

standing at attention, makes it painfully obvious just how turned on I am, and my lower stomach contracts with the growing need to come. I sheath the first joint of my finger inside her, and a blissed-out expression overtakes her wound up features.

“Oh, God. That feels so good,” she breathes, her walls already clenching around my digit.

I begin to move my finger deeper, and her entire body comes off the back wall, legs clamping tighter around the bulk of my torso. So tight that she nearly knocks the air out of my sore lungs.

“Look at me while I finger you, Faye.” I add a second finger, starting to steadily pump within her warm heat, the squelch of skin and muscle and moisture amplified within the confines of the box.

Her eyes rip open to watch me, and I make sure to slide my fingers out far enough for her to see, then I plunge them back inside, fluttering just outside of her G-spot. I’m drowning in her ambrosia from here, and it doesn’t help how crazy responsive she is—the briny sweat dripping down her temples, her bare belly tightening, her hair wildly strewn about and coming more undone.

“So wet for me. Keep squeezing, Princess. Ride my fingers. Don’t stop until you make a mess everywhere,” I order in a brassy bellow.

I circle inside of her with a fast-paced motion, getting rougher with each flick and scissor of my digits. She rides my hand down to my knuckles, gushing off-white juices. Our groans coalesce into one, hers overlaying mine in volume, booming around the stadium like an announcer’s voice. She’s so incredibly sexy like this, begging me to come, using my body as much as I’m using hers.

Still working my hand, I rear forward to drag my lips against her stomach, kitten-licking her belly button. I can tell she’s close by the way her eyes are rolling back and the vise around my fingers. And perfect timing, because my cock needs to be buried inside her. I need to feel her pulse around

my girth, need to look her in the eyes as I fuck her rough and slow.

“Kit,” she whines, biting down on her lower lip so hard that blood bubbles to the surface.

“I know, Princess. You’re doing so well,” I coax.

She fucks my fingers, her head tossed back against the wall, sweat running down her neck and disappearing below the collar of her shirt. And then she shatters before me, thighs suffocating my skull, hands pawing at the edge of the bench, a geyser of wetness erupting over my knuckles.

“Fuck,” I grunt, desperately needing to get my pants off before I lose my load. My dick hasn’t even been inside of her yet, and just watching her orgasm was enough to almost make me come.

Faye drops her legs back down in front of her, leveling her breathing as best as she can, her entire body now clad in perspiration.

I take my index finger and push it past the seal of her lips, smearing her own cum on her tongue.

“I told you,” I rasp, pride waxing inside me. “The sweetest thing I’ve ever tasted.”

She nods in agreement, watching as I slowly withdraw my digit, just grazing her scarlet-mottled bottom lip. Then her eyes coast over the embarrassingly noticeable situation in my pants, and her fully loaded stare makes my cock spasm.

“Take your pants off,” she commands tersely.

“Take your shirt off,” I volley.

With an annoyed noise, she pulls her tank top off in one smooth motion, letting it fall to some shadowed area of the penalty box. Her small, full breasts rest against her body, swaying slightly as she moves to readjust her position, and the sight of her hard nipples makes every nerve ending inside of me catch aflame.

“Pants.”

I slowly roll my pants down as overdue need kindles in my stomach, very aware of Faye's eyes watching my every movement. The minute my cock springs out, I feel a thousand times better. Sweatpants aren't supposed to be restrictive, but it's a whole different matter when you're hard.

The heft of my dick protrudes forward, the ruddy tip smeared in creamy pre-cum, and I add a hand to the root in some fruitless effort to stabilize it.

Faye leans forward, tracing her finger along the vein spanning the underside of my penis, and the softness of her touch swamps me with so much stimulation that I can't help the moan she extracts from me. Her digit ends its expedition at the mushroom head, and she swirls around my seed before sticking her finger in her mouth. She suckles loudly, only for her lips to pop off with an overexaggerated suction sound.

This fucking woman.

I stick my thigh between her legs and spread them, meeting zero resistance. "You ready to have my dick now, Princess?"

Faye nods. "Give it to me, Kit. Give me every inch of you. *Please.*"

I position my cock at her sopping entrance, gliding the head through her folds without applying pressure, and she trills in her throat as her body convulses with a shudder. "Gonna look so good full of my cock."

I piston my cock into her cunt, testing the give of her walls before sliding in even farther, all the way until the blunt pressure of my crown presses up against her cervix. Her pussy stretches around my girth, sucking me in deep, so deep that her warmth makes me never want to leave. She grabs my back for support as I begin to steadily thrust inside her, making her body rock as we move in a synchronized motion. Tits bouncing, ass clenched, mouth permanently agape to accommodate for a string of moans. My penis batters against her walls, slow and rough, all while the momentum has Faye's back slamming against the box.

I feel her palpitate around my length, milking me with her liquid desire, and it electrifies my veins with high voltage shockwaves—ones that make my brain go dark and my muscles slacken for a brief moment.

I'm rooted inside her to the hilt, my ball sack smacking against the edge of the bench. With my injured hand suspended above us, pressed to the glass for stabilization—and yes, it hurts like a bitch—I use my other to massage her tit. I can nearly cup her entire boob in my palm, and I torque her nipple, causing her to unwittingly let out a tone of pleased cries. I roll my hips, probing against Faye's G-spot, and her cunt throbs like a second heartbeat in response.

“So good, Kit. It feels so good,” she moans airily.

I slide partway out of her magnificent cunt, watching as my lubed-up cock sinks into her tight ring of muscle, squelching and slopping. And then I shunt the deepest I can, watching in the limited lighting the way Faye's flat stomach bulges with my dick. A slight groan—probably to defuse some of the initial pain—levitates out of her.

“Fuck...” I growl, placing my hand over her belly, feeling the outline of my cock through her skin, feeling where I am inside of her. “You have no idea how hot this is, Princess. Seeing you all full of me.”

I give my girl a barrage of slow strokes that have her spine lifting into an arch, her toes curling, and her nails digging so deeply into my back that I'm sure they've drawn blood by now. An incendiary ache blazes in my lower abdomen as my balls hang heavy, needing to spill my release. I'm close, and judging by the heaving of Faye's body, the pause in talking, and the way her cunt is strangling me, she is too.

She whimpers. “Kit, I'm going to—”

“Let go, Faye. I've got you. I've always got you.”

With one final plow, Faye explodes through her climax, and I'm right behind her. It's like a lit cigarette's been thrown onto a pool of flammable gasoline, sparking a fire so fatal that it could swallow an entire three-story apartment.

I jerk inside her, spurting stream after stream of cum, so much so that some of it leaks around the plug of my cock, trickling onto the bench. My body wants to collapse onto her, but I hold myself up, heart ticking like a metronome in my chest and legs screaming with a burn that's going to seep into tomorrow.

I study Faye's face long enough to see the sex haze clear from her eyes, her body spent and splayed beneath me, looking the rawest I've ever seen her. No facsimile of a smile, no hollow words for my easement, unburdened of the secrets she's been keeping. She's as organic as the stars in the sky, skin sparkling with opaline brilliance from sweat and particles of moonlight, and she's sacrificed a life of excellence to be slumming it down here with someone like me. My very own star. Forever the shining light leading me through the darkness, reminding me where home is.

As soon as my dick softens, I gingerly pull out of her, the combination of our arousals slathering my length. I have no idea how I'm gonna clean this up before practice tomorrow. Our breaths have fogged up the glass, the smell of sex lingering in the air, and now I realize that I'll never sit in this box without thinking about...well. Which could be a good or bad thing. Good for obvious reasons. Bad for concentration reasons.

"Are you okay?" I ask.

"Better," she says.

I lean down to kiss her—the calm after the storm—and she invites me in with no frantic tangle of tongues or rake of teeth, just simply letting me feel the bend of her mouth. The sweetness, the softness, the simplicity.

"Better is good," I whisper against her lips, feeling the first telltale signs of a smile.

SYNONYMOUSLY YOURS

Pressure. But not the kind that makes diamonds. The kind that crushes the strongest, most resilient objects—that reduces them to irreparable debris.

It's everywhere. I can feel it sitting on my chest like a gargoyle, crushing my diaphragm. I can feel it in between my legs, but it's less pressure and more a biting pain. It's too dark for me to see anything. It's too dark for me to identify the warmth pooling beneath me, whether it's blood or piss or something entirely different.

It hurts. It hurts so much. But I can't stop it, no matter how hard I try. I don't know why I can't stop it. I just...can't. All I can do is scream. The thing about screams, though, is that they're only heard when they want to be.

"Does that feel good?"

"This is what you want, remember? You've wanted this the whole time."

"Don't try to move. It'll only hurt worse. I don't want to hurt you, Faye."

A slew of tears dance down my face, cries and sobs mutilating my vocal cords. I try to speak, but nothing comes out. It's like the words are fully formed in my brain, but they glitch as they transfer to my tongue.

Something's holding my arms down. I'm completely helpless. Not just helpless but forced to *watch* what's being done to me.

A repeated invasion. A repeated memory. A repeated trauma trapped in my brain. A ghost that always lingers in the shadows, whether I'm asleep or awake, haunting me for the rest of my life. No matter how far I get away from it, it'll never be far enough. *He* will always find me.

I awake in a cold sweat, depleted of breath and panting for air, my soul feeling like it's been pulled from my physical body and forced to solidify in an incompatible world. My voice breaks on a cry, and my vision doesn't adjust quickly enough to unknot the panic gnarling inside me.

I immediately search for Kit's arms in the darkness, my hands patting the mattress distraughtly, but the lack of warmth beside me reminds me that he's not here—that I'm alone in the bed. My heart rages behind my ribs, and the moisture lacquered on my face must've followed me from my nightmare. Tears ambush my eyes as I pull my knees into my chest, condensing myself into a small ball, as if that'll protect me from my hyperactive mind. The words stay with me—braying, derisive, preying on the progress I've made, insistent on squashing my resilience like scraps of metal in a trash compactor.

With my head buried, I can't see who charges into the room, but I know the feeling of the arms that encircle me. I switch from folding in on myself to leaning on the one person who's been my rock this whole time, letting him take some of the pain like he promised.

"Shh, Faye. You're okay. You're safe," he whispers, his hand stroking the back of my head, and his scent surrounding me like a second skin.

I clutch at the cotton material of Kit's shirt, trying to remind myself that I'm in Kit's room, physically safe from Saxon, with no chance that he'll ever hurt me again. But it's hard for me to suppress the memory—because God knows I could never forget. I sob hysterically into his arms, not caring if the loudness of my cries notifies the rest of the guys in the house.

"Breathe, Faye. I'm right here."

Hiccups lay siege to my raw throat. “I can’t.”

Kit’s voice is a low rumble in his chest before it tickles my eardrums. “You can. In and out, Princess. Follow my breathing.”

I can feel his ribs expand against my legs with said breath, and thanks to being in the darkness for so long, my vision isn’t nearly as blurry as it was before. The image of Kit’s silhouette in front of me neutralizes my abject terror, slowing my pulse and arming me with enough composure to try and mirror his breathing.

In. Out. In. Out.

Fresh air reaches the farthest corners of my lungs, circulating through me on swift wings, and that paperweight on my sternum lifts slightly.

I know I probably should’ve said something along the lines of “Thank you,” but all that spews from the cusp of my lips is “You came.”

He brushes the back of his knuckles over my cheekbone. “I’ll always come when you call,” he says.

Comfort. Something I’ve never known much about. Not from my father, not from my exes, not from the man who raped me. I only found it in the shape of my brother, but even then, I had convinced myself that his comfort only existed out of obligation. Kit, though. Kit is a different story. He’s synonymous with comfort. A lighthouse guiding me to shore in the bowels of a violent storm.

“I’m sorry I woke you up,” I apologize, dabbing the tears from under my eyes, shame cartwheeling through my stomach.

I wish I could see his face, but all that my vision allows is the sight of his defined profile under a canopy of shadow—one that manipulates moonlight across the ceiling like a master puppeteering a marionette.

“Don’t be sorry. I couldn’t even sleep.”

“Because I took your bed,” I finish guiltily, mucus congesting my nasal cavities and trickling down the back of

my throat.

“Because I couldn’t stop thinking about you,” he corrects, moving his hand to thread his fingers through mine, giving me one of his consolatory squeezes.

Love acts as a soothing balm on my hacked heart, and slowly, the pain from my nightmare begins to deescalate. “Oh.”

His chuckle sounds sweeter than the early-morning trilling of mourning doves—a precursor to a new dawn. It reminds me that only hope is stronger than fear, that hope is the answer to surviving my trauma.

“Oh,” he mocks.

The mattress dips to accommodate Kit’s weight, and he sidles up beside me, his back flush against the headboard. “Come here,” he coaxes.

Even in the darkness, I’m able to find his body, find the space in his arms where I have always fit. I curl up against his chest, resting my ear over his heart, where I hear his lifeblood rushing through him. A strong plinth holding up my fragility.

He kisses the crown of my head as he forks his fingers through ratty tresses of my hair. “You wanna talk about it?”

I’m surprised that I don’t instantly shut him down. “It was about...Saxon.”

“I’m so sorry, Faye.” His tone, although croaky from exhaustion, is packed with empathy powerful enough to scare away the monsters skulking on the outskirts of my mind. “Is there anything I can do?”

Realistically, there’s nothing he can do. Or I guess he’s done everything he *can* do. When he mentioned to me that he may or may not have rearranged Saxon’s face, I was furious at him for going behind my back. But now, after I found out why he really did it, I’m not going to lie and say that a little part of me isn’t satisfied. Kit’s scary—I’ve seen the way he flattens players on the ice—and by the amount of blood he lost that night, I don’t doubt that Saxon looked *way* worse.

“That night you went to visit Saxon...weren’t you worried about word getting out? How it would affect your reputation?” I ask.

“Faye, the only thing I was thinking about that night was you. If you hadn’t noticed, you pretty much live rent-free in my mind.”

“You could lose your career, Kit. You could go to jail.” Fed up with the darkness, I turn on the lamp on the nightstand, watching as rays of light lengthen over his handsome features, sharpening the cut of his jaw and the angular slant of his cheekbones.

“I won’t.”

He sounds so confident. Kit was willing to sacrifice his career for *me*. Everything he’s worked so hard for could’ve disappeared within the service of a lawsuit. It doesn’t sound real.

When I settle back into his chest, I crane my head to look up at him. “I don’t understand.”

“After I finished ‘talking’ with him, I told him that if he told anyone what happened, I’d tell the whole world what he did. Of course, I’d only go through with it if I got your permission. So I was bluffing, but dude was scared shitless at that point,” he explains.

I frown. “Even if I wanted to take him to court, there’s no evidence.”

A half-cocked grin graces Kit’s lips. “You do know I’m rich enough to hire a private investigator, right?”

“You know I don’t watch *Law and Order*. I don’t know what any of that means.”

“Deleted texts, call records, and voice memos can be restored. It takes a while, and it’s fucking expensive, but it’s possible. So if we really needed evidence of what transpired that night, it’s retrievable.”

I never thought about anything like that. One, because I don’t have the money. Two, because I know jackshit about

laws. And three, because it's preposterous. That's the kind of shit billionaire Mafia heroes do in romance novels, not the teammate of your older brother.

After the assault occurred, I did reach out to Saxon. I tried to get a confession out of him. I was confused and hurt and didn't understand why he'd do something like that to me when we were supposed to be best friends. The worst part was that he didn't even deny anything. He told me it was consensual. He told me I asked for it. So there is evidence floating around somewhere in the catacombs of my phone.

I regret not screenshotting it at the time for evidence. I wanted it gone. I wanted the reminder to be gone. I couldn't stare at those pixelated words any longer. I wanted to try to move on and forget. Moving on doesn't work when you always have one foot planted in the past.

"And if I didn't want the world to know?" I whisper uncertainly.

He shrugs. "Then I would've been rocking a sick jumpsuit."

I gasp, punching him in the arm. "Kit, that's not funny!"

"I'm not joking. I look great in orange."

I want to laugh, and maybe I would if my emotions weren't off-kilter. But all I can think about is what would happen if I lost Kit. Not being able to feel his arms wrap around me. Not being able to talk to him whenever I want to. Adjusting to life back in Pennsylvania's gonna be a challenge as it is, but I can't imagine adjusting to life *without* him. Period.

I can feel the tears coming to a boiling point inside me, and the wet patches on Kit's shirt haven't even dried yet from when I used him as a tissue ten minutes ago. "I don't want to think about..."

He uses his forefinger and thumb to gently tip my chin up, our lips merely a breath apart. If I leaned forward a centimeter, I'd be kissing him.

“Princess, you’re gonna have to do a lot better than that to get rid of me.”

**THE GREAT PANTY
PREDICAMENT**

After Faye fell asleep, I took a container of Clorox wipes and snuck back down to the rink. Yes, it was around four in the morning. Yes, I probably shouldn't have been behind the wheel. Yes, I barely remember going down there at all. But no way in hell was I going to leave it to the janitors. What if they didn't clean all of it up? What if my teammates said there was a weird smell coming from the penalty box? I would've died from embarrassment on the spot.

I'm off my game this practice, and it's glaringly obvious. Bristol keeps shouting at me to pick up the pace; I can't save or sink a shot if my life depended on it. I've been a complete mess. Inside my glove, my hand's swollen to twice its size. Not just that, but I'm pretty sure I ran into the plexiglass a few times and apologized. The only thing keeping me somewhat alert is the cold-ass atmosphere.

I've been doing a passing drill for the past ten minutes with Fulton, but it's felt closer to an hour. The puck pings back and forth between us, the blades of our sticks scuffing against the surface of the ice, a *thwacking* sound echoing around the arena each time we land a hit. The next time the puck comes toward me, I accidentally overshoot, sending it flying over near the penalty box.

"I got it!" Fulton shouts, even though I'm only a few feet away from him.

I'm glad it's the off-season, otherwise this would be the saddest performance of my life. Faye's been a welcome

distraction, but a distraction, nonetheless. I haven't been practicing as much as everyone else. And the guys have been riding my ass about it.

I try to rub out the migraine bashing my cranium in like a mallet, but I forget that my helmet kind of prevents me from doing so. I blink a few times, shaking my head as if that'll somehow appease the pain.

And then a yell desecrates the peacefulness of our practice.

“Guys, come over here!”

It's Fulton, and he's waving the group over enthusiastically. Jesus, I can never catch a break with him. Only four years younger than me, and he's already sucking my life force out with a straw. I groggily tramp over to him as the rest of the guys form a half circle, expressions of boredom being passed around like a half-lit joint at a party.

He's hunched over so we can't see what he's looking at, but then he turns around with his stick brandished out in front of him, something colorful hanging off the blade. At first, I have no idea what it is. Maybe a jersey someone left behind. But then my focus sharpens, and the light bulb in my head turns on.

The access door to the penalty box is open.

That's not a regular piece of clothing hanging off his stick.

That's a pair of underwear.

And not just any pair of underwear, but Faye's hot-pink thong.

Oh. My. God. How could I have not noticed that? How could she have not remembered to put her panties back on? There are so many thoughts running laps through my head, but none of them make it off the tip of my tongue. Instead, all I do is start to choke on my own spit.

“What in the holy hell is that?” Casen exclaims, flinching away from it like it's some kind of radioactive material.

A shit-eating grin inches across Gage's face. “It's a thong.”

Casen rolls his eyes. “I know that, twat waffle. Why was it in the penalty box?”

“Someone put the *sin* in sin-bin,” Hayes snickers under his breath, leaning on his propped-up stick.

He *definitely* would not be saying that if he knew who they belonged to. *Chill out, Kit. You’re fine. They don’t know it’s Faye’s. They don’t know you were the one who ripped them off. They don’t know you were buried between her thighs less than twenty-four hours ago.* All I have to do is act normal.

Bristol cringes, his brow wrinkling. “Jesus. I hope they sanitized the box. That has to be some kind of health hazard.”

Fulton turns his stick, inspecting the underwear at a safe distance. “One of us has to be responsible for it, right?”

“I’m kinky, but not that kinky,” Gage replies. “Honestly, props to whoever had their balls out on the ice.”

Bristol sighs exasperatedly. “Please don’t ever say that again.”

Nerves wriggle inside me, taking me for a tailspin, and the wad of saliva in my mouth seems to be growing with each passing moment. My stomach flip-flops with a concoction of fear and nausea, the previous discomfort from my headache nothing but a near-unnoticeable hum now.

Fulton aims his stick at Hayes, swinging it around like he’s gonna shoot the panties as a projectile. Everyone ducks accordingly...except for me. My ramrod back won’t let me. Every muscle inside of me is tenser than the day after a full-body workout.

“You and Aeris spend *a lottt* of time together,” Fulton accuses.

Hayes moves the stick aside with his glove, deadpanning. “Aeris doesn’t own any pink underwear. And I would know, considering I’ve seen her entire collection. Plus, pretty sure my balls would shrivel up in this temperature.”

Fulton curses, choosing Bristol as his next target. I can practically see all the potential theories burning rubber in his

head. All he's missing is a magnifying glass, a pipe, and an oversized trench coat. "And what about you, Bristol?"

"Lila and I...aren't seeing each other anymore," he admits with a dismayed frown. "I just don't think I'm looking for a relationship right now."

"Yikes. Sorry about that, bud."

All the guys mumble out variations of "sorry" and dish out pats for their fallen comrade, the ambience of the rink becoming increasingly more awkward than it already was.

With a vexed—and slightly defeated—huff, Fulton sets his sights on Casen, underwear swaying in his direction. "C'mon, Case. You can't tell me that you and Josie don't get up to some freaky stuff in the bedroom."

Casen clucks his tongue. "We do, but a hockey rink is the least romantic place I can think of. She'd castrate me if I surprised her with a quickie in the goddamn penalty box."

"Arrgh!" With his free hand, Fulton jams the heel of his gloved palm into his eye socket. "It has to be yours, Kit. You have a roster of single ladies at your disposal. You called one of them up the other night, fucked like rabbits in the penalty box, and she left her underwear behind. I'm right, aren't I? Tell me I'm right."

Wrong. Wrong on so many levels.

But before I get the chance to plead my case, Gage doubles down on me. "You have been quiet this whole time."

Fuck! Say something, Kit. Anything.

Sweat beads down my forehead, dripping into the creases carved by my brows. A blustery panic lashes through me, inevitable, like an accompanying scintillation of lightning after a howl of thunder. "Nuh-uh," I hedge.

Nuh-uh. That's all I have to say? Seriously? What am I, twelve?

"You're hiding something," Gage argues.

"I'm not."

“You’ve been acting weird this whole summer.”

“I haven’t.”

“Then you’re responsible for the underwear.”

“Anyone on the team can be responsible. Ask the other guys.”

The rest of the group is quiet, eyes locked on us, watching us fight like children watching their divorced parents fight.

Gage crosses his arms over his chest. “So you’re saying that you haven’t been with anyone this entire summer?”

Shit. Is that what I’m saying? I hate lying to them. I hate lying about how important Faye’s been to me. They have me backed all the way into a corner, and I don’t know what to do. I should just come clean. Maybe it’s time.

I gulp so loudly that it sounds like a foghorn in my ears. “That is what I’m saying.”

No, dude! That was your chance!

Gage starts to say something—probably trying to see how long he can poke me before I snap—but Fulton cuts him off with a frustrated growl.

“Kit’s right. Anyone who has access to the rink could be responsible for the underwear. No use in arguing over it.”

When the guys egress from our huddle, I expect Gage to be glaring at me from behind his helmet’s cage, but it’s Hayes who’s giving me a strange look. Not a pitiful look or a suspicious look, just a confused one. Azure eyes bore into my soul, searching for the truth, searching for the friend he’s known for the past four years.

I’m not going to be able to keep Faye a secret for much longer.

ONCE A LIAR, ALWAYS A LIAR

He spanked me with his hockey stick, simultaneously thrusting his steel rod of pleasure into my hot, wet pocket.

“Hot, wet pocket?” I recite aloud, immediately cringing. “Aaand I need a break.”

I close the hockey book Kit gifted to me, setting it back on the nightstand to revisit it...at a later date.

If Kit ever spanked me with his hockey stick, he wouldn't *have* a hockey stick anymore. At least he didn't underline that part. He did, however, underline the part where the girl's riding the guy and wearing his hockey jersey. That was hot. And something I might have to try for scientific reasons.

I throw my legs off the bed, contemplating what I should make for lunch, when a stocky giant stampedes through the door, nearly making me jump out of my skin. The partition swings all the way back to the wall, hitting it with a wham noisy enough to alert the whole block.

“Jesus, Kit!” I screech, hand over my heart.

He grimaces. “Sorry, had a shitty practice.”

“Is that why you're home so early?” I ask, sympathy tugging at my heartstrings, nurturing that ever-present need I have to protect him.

He shuffles over to me at a snail's pace, hair wet with sweat and scattered in all kinds of directions, his shirt inside out and hanging off one broad shoulder in an unruly manner.

But even smelling like a ripe locker room, he still looks as gorgeous as the day I met him.

“I just needed to see you. And I know I smell like shit, and I haven’t showered yet, but I just wanted to—”

I rise from the bed and onto my tiptoes, tilting my face up to kiss him, our lips colliding with each other’s in a cosmos of passion and a light show of bold colors—hues of red that I didn’t even know existed; degrees of love that I could never receive from my friends or family members. He deepens the kiss, reacquainting our tongues in a sloppy caress before biting lightly on my bottom lip and pulling. His sinful mouth has a direct line all the way to my throbbing pussy, where arousal already begins to lubricate the gusset of my panties.

“You did a number on my back,” he rumbles against my lips, hands sliding down to the curve of my ass.

I laugh, and his grip tightens. “Want me to do it again?”

I thought I knew what it felt like to have my whole world fall apart. I’d convinced myself that after the assault, I’d never be whole again. And when it happened, even my strongest defenses came crashing down, not merely breaking but *shattering*. In such a state of disrepair that I couldn’t imagine spending a life building them all back up again. My self-love, my forgiveness, my compassion, my vulnerability—it was all stolen from me. Rubble dust that caked my palms like blood. I looked down at my hands and saw myself as my own destructor.

I blamed myself.

So when my world seemed bound to fall apart for a second time, I expected the same succession of events. The collapsing, the crumbling, the entire earth falling away from underneath me, immersing me in eternal oblivion. But it didn’t happen like that. There was no abrupt catastrophe; no moments leading up to natural disaster.

Instead, I find myself slowly sinking into quicksand, so I can *watch* as my world tears itself to pieces.

“What the fuck?”

I break away from Kit instantly, turning my head to see Hayes standing in the doorway, shock and hurt ripping across his face, twisting his lips and crumpling his brow. A storm clouds his blue eyes, leaving no trace of the brother I remember from my adolescence—the brother who ate ice cream with me every time I got broken up with, the brother who made me laugh whenever I was feeling down, the brother who took me under his care after our father abandoned us.

I may never know that version of my brother again.

I feel myself begin to shake, unspilt tears wallowing in my eyes. “Hayes, I can explain.”

A warning growl that infiltrates my skin and travels bone deep. “How long has this been going on.”

It’s not a question.

Kit steps between us, shielding me from my brother’s disappointment, redirecting the blame to himself. *Protecting me*. Like he always promised to do.

“It isn’t her fault,” Kit says, holding his arms out cautiously, as if that’ll act as any sort of security against Hayes’ wrath.

“You’re right. This is *your* fault,” Hayes snaps, stepping all the way into the room and coming chest to chest with Kit. He’s a few inches shorter, but Kit’s the one who looks small right now. Terrified, with fear or regret or both icing over in his eyes.

My skin is bedewed with tears now, whatever rehearsed bullshit I had prepared refusing to be vocalized. I knew this would happen eventually, and now that it has, I can’t act innocent. I knew the risk, and I took it anyways.

It’s like there’s a fishing line caught in my throat, and every time I try to say something, the hook digs deeper. “Please let me explain,” I plead, trying to get around Kit, trying to reach my brother.

He’s so disgusted that he can’t even *look* at me. “I don’t want to hear it, Faye. I can’t deal with you right now.”

The upper muscles in Kit's back undulate, tension budding in the hold of his shoulders, and his dominant arm twitches. There's a snarl forming on his lips as his eyes simmer with enough anger to match my brother's. "Don't talk to her like that. You have no idea what she's been going through."

"No idea? *No idea?* I'm her fucking *brother*, Kit. I know exactly what she's been through, and whatever shit she wants to blame it on doesn't exempt her from the fact that she's been hiding this from me the whole summer."

Hayes shoves Kit in the chest, causing him to stagger backwards. "*You've* been hiding this from me the whole summer!"

Even with flexed tendons and forked veins, Kit doesn't move. He doesn't fight back. He could. He could overpower Hayes if he wanted to, but he won't. And my heart feels like it's been torn from my chest by guilt's ironclad fist.

I don't know what to do. I'm powerless in this situation. The two people I care about most in the world are practically at each other's throats, and I can't do anything about it. They're going to rip each other apart.

I feel like I'm sitting on that gas station curb again, in the dead of night, waiting to be rescued. I'm *always* waiting to be rescued.

"There were so many times I wanted to tell you," Kit whispers, now an arm's length away from Hayes and choosing to remain there, his tone stained with profuse remorse.

The hurt in my brother's eyes augments the same hurt branching through every inch of me, shutting down my muscles, filling my head with dissonance. Flashes from the summer resurface despite me subconsciously trying to push them down. The hotel room. The bookstore. The boat. The rink. All memories that are a part of me now and betray my brother by simply existing.

"You didn't," he says.

Sobs and hiccups somersault out of me, and all I can manage is an incoherent line of driveling. Tears leave infernal

tracks on my torrid flesh as a smokescreen covers my vision, my body trembling with cries that pilfer the air from my lungs.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry. Hayes, I’m so sorry.”

My brother rarely cries. The only time I remember him crying was when he’d lock himself away in his room at night, weeping over the memory of our late mother. I’d hear him through the crack of his door when he thought I was asleep. He’d never cry in front of me. He’d never even tell me anything was wrong. He was good at compartmentalizing. He had to be, because looking after *me* was his priority.

But I can see the fresh tears now, spilling over his waterline. I can see the amount of control he’s enforcing over the quiver of his lower lip. I can see the broken boy—from my childhood—hidden underneath.

We never kept secrets from each other. My brother would never do anything to hurt me, to *betray* me. I did both. I did both willingly.

I want him to yell at me, to reprimand me, but he doesn’t. He doesn’t say anything. All he does is refocus his attention on Kit.

“I told you that you weren’t good enough for her. I confided in you.” Even with choked breath, the rage swimming in the undercurrent of his tone is evident. Veins jut from his reddened face, pulsing like a live wire beneath his skin. He looks nothing like the Hayes I know. He’s traded that comforting smile of his for bared teeth.

Not good enough. What is he talking about?

I insert myself in front of Kit, forcing my brother to face me. “I don’t understand,” I wail, reaching out to grab Hayes’ arm.

He wrenches his arm away, as if the mere thought of me *touching* him repulses him. “Why wouldn’t you tell me? Why would you keep this secret?”

“I didn’t know how to tell you!”

“So you were just going to keep lying to me? How long? How long would you lie to my face? Through Thanksgiving? Through New Year’s?”

Saliva and snot congregate on my face. “I didn’t...I d-didn’t want to h-hurt you.”

“Then what do you call this?” Hayes asks. “What was it, Faye? Was I never there for you? Is that why you decided to do this?”

Kit doesn’t move me aside. He doesn’t shadow me. He stays behind me, trying his best to deflect the shower of bullets spitting from my brother’s mouth. Trying to call a ceasefire.

“Hate me, Hayes. *I’m* the one who wanted to keep this from you. Not Faye. She wanted to end things. She wanted to tell you the truth.”

He’s lying for me. Oh, God. Their whole friendship...I’ve ruined their friendship. I can’t. I can’t...*do* this.

“You will *never* be good enough for her,” Hayes sneers, blinking away the moisture in his eyes.

Kit recoils. I expect him to retaliate, to stand up for us, *to fight for us*, but acceptance is the only expression he bears. No flared nostrils or clenched jaw. Just defeat. Defeat that drains the life and color out of him. I wait for his hockey-worn hands to reach out for me, but that comfort has been long extinguished.

War drums beat against my skull, turning my sorrow into potent fury—even if only for a split second. “Stop, Hayes. You don’t mean that.”

“Oh, I fucking do. You know how he’s treated women in the past. Are you really going to let yourself be one of them?”

I swallow back bile, acid hissing in my belly. “Did you ever wonder why I didn’t want to tell you? I knew you would react like this! *You* are the one to blame. Not me. Not Kit. *You.*”

“Excuse me?” he growls.

“If you wanted what was best for me, you’d accept whoever I fell in love with, no matter who they were. You think you know me. You say that you know me. But you don’t. You don’t know anything, and I’m tired of you acting like you know better.”

He doesn’t comment on the fact I used the L-word, even though I know he wants to. I can’t believe he calls himself Kit’s friend when he thinks such horrible things about him. Is that why Kit tried to pull away from me at the party? Has my brother been feeding him lines about staying away from me? I’m so fucking mad that I can’t think straight.

I step out of Kit’s protective circle, throwing my arms out in a fit of frustration. “You say Kit’s not good enough, but he’s the one who’s been here for me this entire summer.”

“Because you fucking pushed me away!”

“How else am I supposed to tell my brother that I was raped?!” I scream, silencing the entire room, shaking the walls with the weight of the truth as it curls past my chapped lips like a tendril of smoke.

Shock befalls my brother’s face, his pupils blown wide in disbelief—stagnant pools that reflect the deepest blue, the kind of blue that sadness is born from. “What?” he grates out.

I freeze, instant regret consuming every inch of me, and no further words leave my mouth. My throat constricts as if there’s the edge of a serrated switchblade pressed to my carotid, my sharp-toothed remarks lost adrift in a sea of newfound sensibility. I can’t believe I just said that. It wasn’t supposed to come out like that. That’s not how I wanted to tell him. I wasn’t thinking. It just...slipped out.

Hayes waits for an answer, an elaboration, *anything*, but I can’t bring myself to open my lips. I can’t bring myself to breathe. I don’t know if I can even look at him anymore. I feel so ashamed, and that’s a feeling I’d grown to ignore. I think maybe the reason I kept this from my brother for so long wasn’t out of fear of how he’d react, but of how he’d *see* me.

Hayes turns to Kit, but his head remains lowered, eyes downturned. “Did you know?”

Kit opens his mouth to answer him, but nothing comes out.

Everywhere I go, chaos follows. I brought this chaos into Kit’s life, and now my brother is caught in the maelstrom. I could’ve stayed away. I could’ve kept this from both of them, and they would’ve been better off. But I was selfish. I dumped all of this on their doorstep for them to deal with the ramifications instead of dealing with them myself. And despite me being freed from the pain I’ve been carrying for years now, my liberation comes at the price of my brother’s happiness. A price I wasn’t willing to pay.

My brother doesn’t say anything else. He doesn’t continue with his rampage. He doesn’t continue defaming Kit’s character. He’s speechless for the first time. I don’t know where to go from here. Nobody does.

Even though I doubt he’ll let me touch him, I extend my hand anyways. “Hayes, I...”

He’s gone before I get halfway through my sentence—not that there’s anything I could’ve said to get him to stay. The doorway is empty, as is the rest of the house, and I have no idea where he’s gone or how long he’ll be gone for. I’ve never felt the lack of someone’s presence so heavily before.

And I’m afraid that I’ll have to get used to that feeling.

THE PRINCESS'S DOWNFALL

Faye hasn't come out of the room in days. She hasn't talked to me. She's rotting in bed, and I don't know how to fix any of this. Hayes hasn't come home, either. Aeris texted me that he's staying with her while he works through whatever he's feeling. I want to yell at him to get his ass back here and apologize, to act like the fucking adult he is, but I don't know if I'd be doing more harm than good. Maybe space is what they both need right now.

The rest of the guys loosely know what's going on. Not about Faye's rape, but about me and Faye. The tension is palpably thick in the house. Nobody's choosing sides. I think they're all trying to be there for both me and Hayes in their own way. I appreciate them, I do. But their words don't make me feel better.

I feel like shit for what Faye's going through right now. For letting the argument get so out of hand. I didn't do anything. I was trying to take the blame. I would've happily taken the blame if it meant Faye was dealing with *half* the pain she is now. But everything escalated so quickly that I couldn't rein in the conversation.

I heard what Hayes said about me. And at the time, it hurt like a head bash to the ice. It wasn't even necessarily the way he said it. It was more so the fact that deep down, I knew he was right. None of this would've happened if I hadn't pursued Faye. Her life would've been a lot simpler if I'd stayed away from her.

Tray between my hands, I lightly nudge the door to my room open with my shoulder, already knowing what will greet me on the other side. Faye lies in a cramped ball with all the sheets pulled up to her face, looking impossibly small in my king-sized bed. At first glance, I can barely even see her. The only indication that there's any life underneath that stockpile of blankets is the strands of unwashed hair peeking out over the pillows.

I sit down on the edge of the mattress—doing my best not to rouse her—and I place the tray beside me. I made it my mission to get better at cooking for her, especially after she forced herself to eat my burnt pancakes. Today, I've made her a turkey and pesto sandwich since she needs the protein. She's lost weight. I've been bringing her food every few hours, and each time, she only eats a small portion of it.

I set a box of miniature Junior Mints—from my extensive collection—on the nightstand, hoping that maybe it'll tempt her to eat. Fuck. Seeing her like this destroys me. Not just breaks, not just crushes, but fully dismantles my entire world.

I rest my hand on her ankle. “Princess, you need to eat.”

She stirs to tell me she's awake, but she doesn't pull the covers down.

“Faye,” I try again, whittling my voice down to a soft whisper. “Please look at me.”

I don't know how to describe it, but my heart doesn't even feel like it's *mine*. Every emotion I feel comes directly through Faye. Sadness, predominantly. So much sadness that no single person could possibly endure on their own.

She barely inches her head out of her cave, peering at me from beyond her security blanket. Sob-impaired words tumble out of her mouth, like she didn't mean to say them in the first place. “I can't.”

I squeeze her ankle in silent reassurance. “You can. Just for a second. Please.”

A long-winded sigh comes from the girl next to me, and slowly, she rolls the sheets down enough for me to get a

glimpse of her beautiful face. Her skin has paled—a stark contrast from the tan she acquired over the summer—and her tangled hair falls into her red-rimmed eyes. Her cheeks look sunken in, the circles under her eyelids are purple, and dried blood crusts over her lower lip from where she’s been tearing the skin off. But in spite of everything, she’s still just as beautiful.

In that moment, love overhauls all the distress I’ve been feeling for the past few days. Much-needed love that has a smile emerging on my mouth and my heart pulsing with renewed energy. “My beautiful girl.”

“I don’t want you to see me like this,” she says quietly.

“I’m not leaving you, Faye. I’m not leaving you alone to deal with this.”

I lean forward to push a lock of hair behind her ear, but instead, I catch a tear rolling down the hill of her cheek. I brush it away with my thumb before it can cover any more distance.

God, I missed being able to touch her. Being able to *feel* her.

“He just needs some time,” I tell her, wishing we could both escape this mess, that I could ensconce her away from all of this heartache. I wind my fingers around a chestnut ringlet of her hair, rubbing the follicle between my coarse pads.

She doesn’t inch away from me, but she doesn’t lean into me, either.

“He’ll never forgive me,” she cries through choppy breaths, looking at me through water-encrusted lashes.

“He will, Faye. You didn’t do anything wrong.” It doesn’t matter what I say. I think it’s impossible for her to believe me, and not for my lack of trying. Faye’s always been hardest on herself. She’s the kind of person who’ll break her own bones to fit someone else’s mold of her—one they created from a single, surface-level interaction. The complete opposite of who I used to be. And it’s not just some random person she thinks she’s disappointing. It’s her brother.

She fully sits up, pressing her back to the headboard, the sheets trickling down to her waist. “He thinks I’m...I’m...”

She doesn’t want to say it. And she doesn’t need to. I know what word she’s going to use, because this whole summer, she’s brought it up multiple times to me. The worst part? She’s only ever associated it with a negative connotation. She uses it as a way to devalue herself.

I cut her off. “He doesn’t.”

She begins to bawl, her shoulders racking from the chest-deep emotion, and the helpless whine in her voice throws ice water down my back. It chills me to the core, slows the tempo of my heart, and usurps the confidence I had coming into this conversation.

“...broken!”

I can tell she’s close to pulling away, to hiding back underneath the covers, but I don’t let her.

“We’re all broken, Princess,” I confess, reaching out to grab her hand, silently rejoicing when she allows me to thread my fingers through hers. “And out of all of us, you’re the least broken one there is.”

Sadness splays across her features, puckering her forehead and widening those doe eyes of hers. “B-but you’re not broken,” she snuffles.

I chuff out a laugh. “I was—I still am—but you fixed that part of me. You showed me what it means to be loved. You patched those empty holes inside of me with your compassion, your selflessness, your generosity. You’ve given my heart a reason to beat. Nothing can compare to being loved by someone as incredible as you. People wait decades to find their other half, and some go their whole life without ever meeting them. But by some miracle, which I definitely never deserved, *you* found your way to *me*.”

Apparently, I’m worse at cheering her up than I thought, because Faye’s wails dial up in volume, bouncing off the walls like we’re in an echo chamber. I wouldn’t be surprised if the rest of the guys could hear what’s going on in here.

“Oh, God. Why would you say that?” Rivers of tears now decorate her pink cheeks, mangling the clarity of her words.

I—what?

“What? What did I say?”

She weakly thwaps me on the arm. “You’re being too... *nice*...to me!”

I wag my head, unable to help the chuckle rumbling in my chest. “Just for the record, I’m *always* nice to you.”

A small smile toys with the corner of her lips, and although she doesn’t give me a laugh, that’s a fucking win in my book. Her tears seem to be falling a little less frequently now, getting wiped away left and right by her forearm.

“What if he s-sees me differently?” she asks shakily.

“He will see you differently,” I say with candor, love corkscrewing into the very depths of my heart, implanting itself there for all eternity. “He’ll see how much *stronger* you’ve become.”

Faye catches me off guard—and a little off balance—when she wraps her arms around me, nestling her nose into my neck. Faye’s hugs are some of my favorite things in the universe, but this one feels different. Better than all the ones in the past, if that’s even possible.

If she wasn’t directly by my ear, I may not have heard her.

“Thank you for always being there, Kit.”

I squeeze her back in my arms, careful to mind the fragile state of her body. “Nothing in this world could keep me away from you, Princess.”

I’m in her embrace for so long that I’d know the feel of her arms out of hundreds of blind hugs, that I could successfully pick out that peach scent of hers in a large, faceless crowd. When we eventually disentangle ourselves, I push the tray toward her.

“Sit back. Let me feed you,” I coax.

She does as I say, just with an additional eyebrow raise. “It’s a sandwich.”

“Uh-huh. Very perceptive.”

“You can’t feed someone a sandwich.”

I do my best to tear the sandwich evenly down the middle, dollops of pesto oozing out from the sides and a slab of turkey skewing slightly beneath the top piece of sourdough bread.

“Jesus, woman. Just let me take care of you,” I grumble, realizing just how messy of a decision I made. But it’s too late to turn back, and I’m not giving her the satisfaction of being right.

I finally get the long-awaited laugh I was searching for, and it’s as delicate and sweet as spun sugar, serenading my ears.

It hasn’t completely dawned on me that this is how incredible the rest of my life is going to be. I’m going to marry this girl one day. I don’t know when, I don’t know where, but it’s going to happen. I want my forever promised, and I want it promised with her. If I have to fight tooth and nail to get it, I gladly will. I can’t imagine not waking up beside her in the morning, not kissing her as many times a day as possible, not seeing her rooting for me in the stands at my games, not ending the night with her in my arms as we fall asleep together. A future without her just doesn’t exist.

And the only thing that would make this future better is having Hayes in it too.

POT, MEET KETTLE

It's weird not having fifty pounds of hockey gear weighing me down this morning. I don't remember the last time I visited the rink outside of practice. I wish I was visiting it under better circumstances, but I'm on a mission to speak to Hayes today.

Faye's doing better, but if Hayes continues to ignore her, I'm afraid that she'll start to spiral again. It's time he pulls his head out of his ass and talks to her. I've given him space to cool down (enough, if I say so myself). This is about Faye, not about our relationship. I don't give a rat's ass if he forgives me or not. He just needs to make things right with her.

He's a lot more stubborn than I thought, which is a quality I never realized ran so deep within the Hollings' genes, but here we are. If I have to drag him all the way to the house by his ear, then that's exactly what I'm going to do.

When I step into the rink, the cold isn't the only thing creeping up my spine. There's a writhing mess of anxiety crowning inside me, weighing down my steps as I make my way over to the ice. I see Hayes' figure through the plexiglass, chucking pucks violently into the goal's net, billowing back the latticed nylon with vigor. Thankfully, we're the only two people in the rink.

He's red in the face, his anger tangible within the frosted atmosphere. There's a good handful of pucks studded across the rink from his previous failures, which means he must've been going at this for the past hour or so.

Hesitantly, and fearing for my face, I step onto the ice in my shoes, unsure if I should grab his attention or wait for him to notice me. I feel like I've just walked into the lion's den. A den that belongs to a starving, bloodthirsty lion that'll have no problem sucking the skin off my bone and leaving my carcass to rot.

I'm doing this for Faye. I need this to work. I need to make things right.

As I wait by the rink's entrance in silence, one of Hayes' stray pucks comes blasting toward me, narrowly missing my face and slamming against the plexiglass right beside my head. The transparent surface—now fashioned with a new grid of scratches—shakes from the collision, and my heart nearly falls out of my ass.

“You missed,” I say, hoping that my breathlessness isn't noticeable.

“I'm aware,” Hayes growls, his narrowed gaze scrolling over me, his bright blue eyes darkened to a dusk-like shade.

Cool, cool. It's going great so far.

I decide to keep my distance—in case he feels the need to shoot at me again, and because I don't want to piss him off more than he already is. With a heavy sigh, I try my best to ignore the spawn of guilty butterflies thrashing around in my gut.

“I know you're mad...”

“Mad is an understatement, Kit.”

It's like there are goddamn bear traps hidden beneath overgrown grass, and I can't see where I'm going. With each step forward, I risk getting my ankle gnawed off by metal teeth.

I grit my molars, and a muscle in my jaw jumps. “You have every right to be mad at me, Hayes. But you shouldn't be mad at Faye.”

His hand tenses around the shaft of his stick, as if that's the only thing keeping him from using his fists to talk to me

instead of his tongue. Alarmingly white and home to a topography of bluish veins, his knuckles have seen more action than anyone else's on our team, making him more than qualified to beat me to a bloody pulp. He's ditched his usual hockey gear for his regular clothes, and I can't tell if that makes him more or less intimidating.

The side of his lips quirk into a snarl. "Oh, so you're just going to walk in here and tell me I can't be mad at my sister? Who kept two *huge* secrets from me?"

"No—I—I'm just saying that maybe you should try and put yourself in her position," I reply (surprisingly) calmly, wishing he could see how terrible Faye's been doing—how much this fight has absolutely destroyed her.

"So you're trying to make me feel bad for her?"

Irritation knifes through me. "Fuck. I don't know, dude! I don't know how to fix any of this—how to fix *us*. Your sister is a fucking wreck right now. She's never going to forgive herself for what she did to you. She never wanted to hide this from you for this long. She was trying to protect you, and she went about it the wrong way, but you have no idea how much she's been torturing herself over this."

Hayes refuses to look at me, features pinched in painful contemplation, his own internal struggle coming to light in sporadic waves. I know Hayes said a lot of terrible shit that he can't take back, but I don't think he meant all of it. He has a big heart, just like his sister. This is tearing him up inside.

He doesn't have a snarky comeback or outburst of rage. He doesn't grip his stick tighter and resume his pitiful shooting. All he does is stare ahead into nothing, dissociating, maybe digesting my words to some degree.

It's almost worse to see him like this...drained of the anger that once fueled him, now neck-deep in the fallout of the fight, struggling to take in fresh air—struggling for the tiniest sliver of peace amongst a cyclone of chaos.

I don't know if it's a good idea or not, but I step just a foot closer to him. "I know you know what it feels like to keep

secrets to protect someone. Faye...she loves you so much. It was eating her alive not telling you the reason why she came for the summer.”

Another step.

“And this thing between us...it’s not ideal for everyone, no. But I’ve loved her for four years, Hayes. Four. And I’m going to love her forever, no matter what happens with our relationship. Faye means the world to me, just like I know she does to you. All I want for her is to be happy, but you know she puts your happiness before her own,” I mumble softly.

Hayes’ stick clatters to the ground, sounding like an exploding landmine in my ears, and when he finally turns to face me, there’s a deluge of tears in his eyes. I’ve never seen him cry. Ever. It’s fucking heartbreaking. I’m part of the reason he’s crying. I did all of this to him, to my own friend.

My own tears singe the backs of my eyes, and it feels like my lungs are shriveling up. “I’m so sorry, Hayes. I’m so sorry for not telling you.”

I could apologize to him a thousand times over, and it would never be enough. Hayes had every right to know about me and Faye. Keeping it from him was disrespectful, and to make matters worse, when the truth eventually surfaced, betrayal clobbered him not once, but twice. If we’d just told him in the beginning, maybe there was a chance he would’ve understood. But we didn’t even give him the benefit of the doubt.

A burr of despair lodges itself beneath my ribs, inches from sticking to my heart. The closer I get to him, the worse the dizziness in my head becomes. It inundates my mouth with a sour taste and stirs the uneasy twinge in my stomach.

Hayes sucks in a deep breath with thinned lips, and I can see his shoulders start to quake, the tears much more prominent now as they slather his face. Each sob is a purge of the fury that’s conquered him, the sheet of water on his skin evidence of a losing battle.

Sorrow muddles his strained features. “How could I not have known?” he hiccups, staring at me like I have all the answers to his questions, when in reality, I feel just as lost as he does.

My response breaks in my throat before even reaching the bed of my tongue. “I...I didn’t know, either.”

I don’t know what else to say. I reacted the same way when Faye told me. All I can do is encourage him not to blame himself.

“I failed her, Kit. I was supposed to *protect* her. I’m her big brother. I look out for her. She’s been...oh, God. She’s been dealing with this by herself for who knows how long. What did I do? Why couldn’t she tell me? I’m a fucking idiot. I’ve been so oblivious this entire time while she’s been crumbling to goddamn pieces.”

I embrace Hayes in a hug, trying to funnel his pain into my own veins, to offer him a reprieve from the wellspring of emotions inside him. He clings to me tightly—as if he’ll collapse if he doesn’t—and his chest heaves against mine, each haunting howl that crackles his voice making my heart splinter.

“You didn’t fail her, Hayes. There’s no way you could’ve known. She wanted to tell you, she did. I think she was worried about how you’d see her. She didn’t want to burden you,” I whisper.

Hayes pulls back, not caring to wick away the tears flecking his cheeks. “How I’d see her? I don’t...I don’t understand.”

I rub the base of my neck, attempting to assuage the sting there. “I think that’s something you need to talk to her about.”

Realization breaches his darkened eyes. “I can’t believe I yelled at her. I yelled at her for getting raped. I’m the worst brother of all time,” he murmurs, hiding his face in his hands. The tremors continue at a steady pace, like the consistent drip of cave water off pointed stalagmites.

I'm not gonna sugarcoat it. Hayes didn't respond in the most...*understanding*...way.

I loosen a jagged breath from my chest. "You could've handled it better, but you were dealing with a lot at the time. I don't think Faye's going to take it personally if you explain it to her. You just need to understand how your response hurt her, and you need to think about how you can show her that you're sorry."

I'm never one to give advice. It feels weird being on this side of the conversation. Usually, I'm the one fucking up.

"She's never going to talk to me. And I don't deserve her time. I don't deserve her forgiveness." His words are muffled, only barely brushing my ears.

"She's more ready than you think."

I think back to how I held Faye in my arms, how she's spent hours telling me how remorseful she feels, how she wishes she could've come to her brother the second she stepped foot in California. The countless tears I wiped from her eyes, the never-ending sobs of hers I swallowed with soft, grief-stricken kisses.

He lifts his head weakly, his heart emblazoned on his sleeve—showing me the true Hayes Hollings, the one freed from the stony façade he always wears. "I was wrong, Kit."

What is he talking about?

My brows weave together. "I don't follow..."

"I don't just owe Faye an apology. I owe you one too," he starts, lips reshaped into a frown, and I can feel the projection of his penitence vault over me.

"Hayes, you don't—"

He cuts me off. "I do. You were there for Faye when I couldn't be. You took care of her, even knowing that I'd lose my shit if I found out that you two were together."

I guess I never saw it that way. Taking care of Faye never felt like a job or a responsibility. It was just something inherent, a response that had been ingrained into my DNA and

was as natural to me as breathing. There's nothing I regret from our time together. The tears, the pain...it was all worth every second I got to love her.

I open my mouth to say something, but Hayes continues.

"I was wrong when I said you weren't good enough for her. I was wrong to assume things about you that aren't true anymore. I shouldn't have done that. I've always been protective of Faye, but in doing so, I guess I kept her from getting close to anyone."

Hayes had every right to think those things about me. I have a terrible history with women; not as bad as him, but nothing to be proud about. But ever since Faye, I barely even remember my love life before her. I can't believe I even wasted time pursuing girls who weren't her. It was always going to be Faye.

"You were just trying to look out for her," I point out.

I would've been offended if Hayes was making things up in order to villainize me, but everything he said was true at one point. I always felt a sneaking suspicion that I was never good enough for Faye. It's hard to be good enough for the person who's perfect in your eyes. The person's whose happiness could outshine the sun, whose laugh could put angels to sleep, whose beauty could rival Aphrodite's, whose touch could melt an ice cap.

"I went about it the wrong way," he argues with chagrin.

My heart stomps out a discordant beat, and I can feel the eye of the storm slowly begin to pass, taking with it the plague of unclearable darkness. "No one is innocent here. We all contributed to hurting one another in our own way. But I forgive you, Hayes. I just hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me one day."

"I don't know if I was ever really mad at you two being together," he admits, teasing his fingers through his mane of hair. "I think I was just hurt that you kept it from me for so long."

“If I’m being honest, I didn’t think it would last this long. I thought for sure your sister would’ve kicked me to the curb by now.”

Hayes laughs, and crinkles spring underneath his eyes, bearing an uncanny likeness to his sister. It feels so good to hear him laugh. We used to laugh about the most stupid shit, like speed running scary video games at one in the morning or pranking the rest of the guys by putting Saran wrap over the toilet seat. The house used to be a lot less heavy when there weren’t any secrets to come between us.

He shakes his head. “That never would’ve happened. When Faye loves someone, she’s with them until the very end.”

Through the whole mess of things, I hadn’t even realized that she’d told Hayes she loved me. But now it’s as clear as day, on repeat in my head.

If you wanted what was best for me, you’d accept whoever I fell in love with, no matter who they were.

The memory commands a shiver from my body, something warm uncoiling in my belly. I miss her already. All I want to do is go back home and fall asleep with her in my arms. She only has a few days left before she has to head back to Pennsylvania. I know the distance isn’t that far—and no distance could keep me from her—but I’m going to miss not seeing her every day. And once the season starts, I won’t be able to visit her as often.

Two more years, Kit. She has two more years of undergrad, and then she’s yours.

I’ve thought a lot about our future together. I’m going to support whatever career path she chooses, and if she doesn’t choose anything, I’ll make more than enough money to support both of us. I don’t know if she wants kids. I never really saw them as being a part of my life, but fuck, having a family with Faye is probably the biggest dream I have now. Bigger than winning the Stanley Cup, bigger than having the most goals in NHL history. All of that seems so inconsequential in comparison.

“You know, I should’ve seen it coming sooner.” Hayes tosses me a small smile.

Even though the truth is out now, I still freeze like I’ve been caught red-handed. “Huh?”

Hayes bends down to reach his discarded hockey stick, juggling it between his hands listlessly. “The incident with KJ, you choosing her during Gage’s drinking game, you giving her your room, you missing practices, how you’d mysteriously disappear from the couch late at night and never return.”

Embarrassment quilts my cheeks in a bright blush. “You noticed that I wasn’t sleeping on the couch?”

“When I got up to piss or get water, yeah. I thought you were just sneaking off to go meet up with a girl or something, but then it just kept happening.”

Oh, God. This is a lot more awkward than I thought it would be. I don’t think I’m pink anymore—I’m bullseye red.

All Hayes does is chuckle at my flustered expression, using the blade of his stick to swoop up a lone puck and balance it. “Relax. It was your room to begin with. It’s not like you guys were—”

His head snaps to the penalty box.

Then to me.

Then the box.

Then me.

He forgets the puck and drops his head back, screwing his eyes shut like that’ll somehow wipe his memory clean. “Oh, God. That was—you—her—in the...”

There’s no point in lying to him. He saw the evidence. The proof is in the panties. And after they were passed around like a kid’s pet rock during show and tell, I kind of figured Faye wouldn’t want them back. So I bought her a drawer full of silk and lace underwear, in a variety of colors and types.

“That was definitely a one-time thing,” I assure him.

Okay, maybe one more *tiny* lie wouldn’t hurt.

A BITTERSWEET GOODBYE

I could barely sleep, even with Kit's arms wrapped tightly around me the whole night. This is my last day with everyone before I return to my life back in Pennsylvania, where I have back-to-back classes followed by an afternoon of teaching kids. Everything is so...scheduled. If you'd ask me prior to summer, I probably would've told you that's exactly how I like it. But now, I'm not so sure. There was something so liberating about waking up, having the whole day to do something with the people I love, and seeing where the flow would take us. No structure. No responsibilities. No expectations.

I insisted I'd catch a flight back home, but in typical Kit fashion, he told me that he's driving me, and that's the end of the discussion. Four days on the road roundtrip for him, all so he can spend a few extra hours with me. I spent the better half of my morning crying over leaving. In return, Kit spent his better half making a schedule for when we can call and FaceTime, and he even picked out the weekends when he's free to come and visit.

After the truth came out, the guys were all on board with our relationship. Gage yapped to everyone how he knew something was up. If we didn't come clean, I think he would've eventually figured it out. There hasn't been any change in how they've treated me, but I think that's because they already saw me as family in the first place.

And the fans were more than supportive when they heard the news. I never imagined being paraded all over the internet,

but article after article continued to roll out the story like it was the freshest thing since sliced bread. I'd even gained fifty thousand new Instagram followers overnight just because of Kit's outreach.

I finish folding my last shirt, tucking it on top of the others shoved in my suitcase. I never realized how much of my stuff had taken up Kit's space. His room looks so barren.

Aeris sits on the edge of the bed, sniffing into a wad of tissues. "I'm going to miss you so much," she bumbles, streaks of mascara slashing through her foundation.

"I'm only a call away, Aer. And I'll be back for the holidays." I shut the lid compartment and zip up the suitcase, propping it upright before placing it by the door. When I turn to face her, the tears rain down even harder, and I hug my future sister-in-law (fingers crossed) in my arms.

Aeris abandons her tissues to squeeze the living breath out of me, her strawberry and lavender aroma mantling me. She's the closest thing I have to a girl best friend. I haven't really made a lot of friends in college, so knowing that I can rely on her for anything...it's something I hold close and dear to my heart.

When we pull away, I do my best to dab underneath her eyes without ruining her makeup, and she passes me a smile.

"Am I interrupting something?" a voice asks from the doorway.

I don't know why I expected it to be Kit—maybe because I'm always searching for his voice—but the moment I turn toward the door, something dark and heavy gathers in my chest, contaminating the air around me.

It's my brother.

He has one hand on the doorframe, the rest of his body shadowed, like he's not sure if he's invited in and doesn't want to overstep his boundaries. There's no anger circling him, no indignation in the storm-roughened gunmetal of his eyes, which have yet to turn back to their vibrant blue.

Aeris squeezes my arm one last time before she gives us the room, whispering something to Hayes on her way out.

I stay sitting where I am and let him come to me. I didn't really know if we would talk before I left. I mean, it wouldn't have been ideal if we didn't, but I didn't want to make him madder than he already was. Slowly, he drags his feet over to me, taking a seat beside me on the bed—though there seems to exist an invisible delineation that was never there before.

He doesn't need to say anything for me to know that he's hurting just as much as I am. Mussed hair, gaunt cheeks, pronounced circles under energy-sapped eyes. My stomach tangles with guilty ruminations, and my mouth drains of moisture, giving way to a rather uncomfortable swallow down my scratchy throat.

We speak at the same time.

“Faye—”

“I—”

“You go,” I mumble awkwardly, revisiting the amethyst resting against my chest, dipping my toe back into that old habit—one I thought I was strong enough to kick. I thought I wouldn't wear it again, but goodbyes have always been hard for me.

Hayes takes in a belly-filling breath, then exhales heavily. It's as if all of his rage has been vaporized, and it's exiting his body in that single breath. When he looks at me, the only affliction on his face is regret.

“Faye, I...I don't even know where to begin,” he whispers, tripping over his words.

It feels like there's a battering ram of emotions beating on my chest, trying to break through the bone, trying to get to my slow-beating heart. Tears start to dollop my lower lids, and I fight the untamable quiver of my lip.

“I am so, so sorry. I have no excuse for the way I treated you. I should've never yelled. I should've listened. I was a fucking terrible brother. I was so upset that I overlooked what really mattered in the moment, and that was making sure that

you were okay. I just...everything happened so quickly. I panicked, and I lashed out, and you didn't deserve that at all."

The genuineness in his voice, picked apart by restless nights of contrition, melts the wintry cold in my body, replacing it with a warmth I can feel all the way down to my toes. I don't know what to say. I wasn't expecting any of that to come out of my brother's mouth.

Sensing that I'm not going to talk any time soon, he continues. "I couldn't understand why you didn't come to me. I was mad at myself for not realizing it soon enough, and that anger got redirected to you when it shouldn't have been. I was so caught up in what I was feeling that I never took into consideration how you were feeling."

Moisture teems over my rouged cheeks, a tattered cry stretching in my trachea. "Hayes..."

"I don't deserve your forgiveness, Faye. I'm so ashamed of how I reacted. It's no wonder you didn't want to tell me. I'm a fucking mess. You needed me, and all I could focus on was my own pain. I never once thought to put myself in your shoes," he blunders, zircon-blue piercing the fog in his eyes, looking like the brother I know again.

"It's okay, Hayes," I soothe.

Wrinkles vandalize his skin, a frown sitting on bruised lips. "It's not okay. I never created a space where you felt safe enough to come to me with this. You were carrying all this pain by yourself, all because you didn't want to burden me. You could never burden me. Ever."

Each of his words, trigger-sensitive, have my sobs and cries falling in a steady rhythm. "I wanted to tell you. I wanted to tell you so badly. It's not your fault. It's mine. It's not that I was afraid of how you'd react—it's that I was afraid of how you'd see me," I reveal, feeling annihilated by the self-loathing, but at the same time, feeling freed from the prison cell I'd locked myself in.

Hayes grabs the hand that's in my lap, staring into my tear-stained eyes with his, the softness of his touch juxtaposed with

the urgency clinging to his face. “Faye, I would *never* see you any differently. I know you think that you’re only a responsibility to me, but you’re not. You’re my sister. You’re the most important person in my life.”

In that moment, my emotions crash over me in a tidal wave. Emotions that I’ve kept bottled for years, emotions that have varied from disgust to hatred to pity. All that exists now, however, is relief. A red needle finally tipping to the zero of a dashboard gauge.

I can’t find any words to say, so I hug him. I hug my brother for the first time this entire summer, burying my face into his shoulder, gripping the back of his shirt as if it’ll steady the shuddering of my muscles.

He embraces me with equal ardor, holding my limp body up, providing me with the support he always has. I don’t know how long I spend in his arms; I lose count of the number of wails that leave my mouth. I feel like a little girl again, running to my big brother to protect me from the absence of our father, from the harrowing death of our mother.

“Shh, it’s okay. I’m here,” he murmurs into my hair, stroking my back.

“I’m so sorry”—hiccup—“that I kept it from you.”

“Faye—”

“I’m so sorry that I didn’t tell you about me and Kit. He’s your friend. You had every right to know about us. I felt terrible keeping it from you. I never wanted to go behind your back. I didn’t think you’d approve of us, and I love him so much, Hayes. I wasn’t ready to let him go. If it came down to you and him, I wouldn’t be able to pick.” Regurgitation after regurgitation. Words all strung together that play at two times speed.

Hayes pulls away from me so he can wipe the water cruising down my face, gently brushing over the dark circles under my eyes. “I’d never ask you to pick between us. All I’ve ever wanted for you is to be happy. And Kit makes you happy. That’s the best gift you could’ve ever given me.”

My clamoring heart refuses to slow, fluxes of breath increasing as they escape my parted lips. “But your happiness matters to me too. I’d never want to do anything to disappoint you.”

“You could never disappoint me. I’m so fucking proud of you. Proud of what you’ve accomplished, proud of who you’ve become. And your happiness matters to me just as much. All I’ve ever wanted is for you to find your person.”

“Aeris is your person, isn’t she?”

“She is. She really is. The way I feel when I’m with her—I could only hope that you feel at least a quarter of that in your life.”

The thoughts in my head hit a curb. A Kit-sized curb. “I feel *everything* when I’m with Kit. I feel loved, appreciated, respected. I don’t feel shame or sadness or regret. There are times when I completely forget about the rape because he loves my body like it was never tainted in the first place.”

Hayes frowns. “There’s nothing tainted about you.”

“I know that now,” I reply, feeling the chronic pain begin to evanesce from my aching body. “Kit’s shown me how to love myself again.”

It’s true. I never thought I’d be lovable after what happened to me. If someone could ruin my body so easily, then I believed there had to have been something wrong with it in the first place. I convinced myself that I was easy, or that I gave him the wrong impression, putting the blame on myself rather than him. Nobody would ever love something that’s damaged, right?

Kit proved to me just how wrong I was. He doesn’t see me as a victim. He sees me as a survivor.

“I’m glad he could be there for you when I couldn’t,” my brother says, the beginning of a smile pushing back his cheeks.

“Does this mean he’s the first boyfriend of mine that you won’t beat up?”

Hayes nudges my shoulder. “I guess I can let it slide this time.”

Easy, addictive laughter clouds the room, and I begin to feel the heaviness in my chest lift, letting my wheezing lungs take in fresh air. Fresh air for the first time since I got here.

A sudden seriousness hardens his expression, like a blade against whetstone. “Do you want to press charges?” he asks.

“Uh, Kit kind of took care of it.”

“Took care of it?”

“Remember when he came home with a bloody hand?”

Hayes shakes his hair, blond locks fringing down his temples, a chuckle purring in his throat. “That son of a bitch.”

Before this summer—before Kit—I wanted to forget about the rape. I didn’t want to think about it. I wanted to pretend like it never happened, but that was stupid of me. It did happen. Like Kit said, it’s made me stronger. It’s made me who I am today. I can never truly forget about it, but I can stop being afraid of the memory. My trauma doesn’t own me. It doesn’t define me.

I lurch into my brother with one last air-squeezing hug, letting myself get lost in his sandalwood scent, letting his arms envelop me, letting the little girl in me revert back to early mornings when he’d help me get ready for school—when he’d hug me goodbye before dropping me off.

I miss the simplicity of that time. I miss the innocence of it. But I don’t hate where I am now. I thought I would, but I don’t. I let myself memorize the feeling of his touch, so I can remember it when I’m in Pennsylvania missing him. I don’t panic over the unknown like I usually would. I don’t yearn for control. I let myself move at my own pace, let myself come out from under the reigning thumb that’s controlled me all these years.

And instead of dreading the time away, I look forward to when I’ll get to see him again.

A CROWN FIT FOR A QUEEN

“Does it hurt?” I ask, glancing at the tray of miscellaneous tools, the tattoo gun in particular looking extremely daunting.

Kit had one last stop to make before we hit the road, which was the first session of covering up his tiger eyes tattoo. His regular tattoo artist had an open spot, so he wanted to get started with the process since it could take multiple sessions to get everything finished. And no, my brother has yet to find out about this.

The tattoo shop is quaint in size, yet extravagant in decor, with a maximalist interior design that includes checkered tiling, a neon sign that blares INK ABOUT IT, and various prints slapped to mahogany-colored walls. Each print ranges from realism to abstract, with multiple designs being fully grayscale.

I cover away from anything that involves pain. And that includes tattoos. But I wanted to support Kit, especially considering that he’s getting a tattoo of *me*.

Kit’s laid out on the reclined bed, his forearm propped on the cushiony arm of the chair, flaunting his previous ink on a golden canvas of rippling muscle. The artist—Rhen—cleans the area with an antiseptic wipe. He’s covered in even more tattoos than Kit, accompanied by multiple face piercings and giant gauges that stretch out his ears.

Kit shrugs. “It kind of feels like a bunch of pinpricks.”

I shudder at the sight of the sharp needle attached to what looks like a medieval torture device. “Yeah, but a pinprick to you is like a stab wound to me.”

He tilts his head at me, a curled tress of onyx hair flopping over his forehead. “Princess, you’re a lot better with pain than you think.”

It takes me a second to understand what he’s referring to, and when realization sets in, blood immediately warms my cheeks. My body begins to overheat, and there’s a twang in my lower belly that no number of kisses could remedy. I discreetly cross my legs, praying that the pulse down below eventually peters out.

I can’t believe he just said that. In public. Directly next to somebody. Yes, I was surprised that Kit’s dick didn’t tear my hymen for the second time, but I like Kit’s dick. I don’t like needles.

All I do is scoff and roll my eyes, but I’m sure he’s already descried my blush.

With a blown-up picture of my eyes for reference, Rhen gets started on Kit’s forearm, sketching a rough outline around the already-drawn eyes, the buzz of the gun resonating in the open-plan layout.

Kit doesn’t even wince as his dermis layer reddens over. He looks peaceful, all chiseled edges airbrushed with golden rays of sunlight. So gorgeous that my heartstrings strum out a tune of love just for him.

His other hand rests palm-side up. “Hold my hand,” he says.

I raise my brow. “I thought you said it didn’t hurt?”

“It doesn’t. I just want to hold your hand.”

Arrgh. He’s so irritatingly perfect. So charismatic and pretty and cheesy. So...*mine*.

My fingers find his, falling into the slats with ease, and he brings the back of my hand up to his mouth, peppering a kiss to my knuckles.

Rhen dabs the gun into the glob of ink on his tray, smiling at the both of us. “When Kit told me he wanted to cover up his tattoo, I almost didn’t believe him. Those eyes are famous in the hockey world. Got his name from them and everything. But after seeing y’all together, I get it.”

“Hey, I can make good decisions sometimes,” Kit grumbles, throwing a sideways glance at me.

A lovesick smile skips across my lips as the cavorting of my heart heightens in my ears. He’s talking about me. I’m his good decision. I squeeze his hand to silently communicate that I got his message, and he squeezes it back with a benign softness.

I still remember the feel of his pinky around mine when he promised to keep my secret. So much has changed since then—for the better. I never thought that I’d recover after hitting the lowest point in my life, but here I am, unscarred as I climb out from the rubble, even stronger than I was before. And it’s all thanks to Kit.

Rhen looks at me. “You’d ever want to get a tattoo, Hollings?”

“Oh, me? Oh, no. I don’t know,” I prattle with poorly crafted words, panic beginning to set in. “It’s not that I don’t like tattoos. What you do is super cool. I just—well—it’s permanent. Very permanent. And painful...from what I’ve heard.”

“Hey, no offense taken,” Rhen chuckles, lifting his arms up in mock surrender. “But if you ever do decide to get one, there are such things as small tattoos. Take up to an hour and are nowhere near as painful as people say.”

A small tattoo. I never really thought about it, but that doesn’t sound bad at all. Something small that maybe only I can see; something that holds significance that I’d want to have branded on me for the rest of my life. I’ve always liked the look of tattoos—how they hold stories from people’s pasts. I like how they’re glances into people’s souls.

I've spent countless hours staring at Kit's tattoos, wondering what each one represents, tracing the colored and noncolored ink, as if touch alone could unearth the answer for me. Some are simply aesthetic, but the bolder, bigger ones—such as the tiger eyes—hold heavier significance.

He told me that the tiger itself represents strength, determination, and courage. He told me that he could only hope to exude that out on the ice, to inspire those around him with a passionate, prideful heart. Or...that's what he believes now. I think in the beginning, it was a sign of power. But even the most powerful predators of the jungle have a softness to them—a softness reflected in their eyes.

You can tell so much from a person's eyes. If they bear grief and sorrow from indomitable trauma, if they flicker with waning dregs of life, if they darken with internalized contempt, or if they lighten with warming happiness.

My eyes tell *everything*. You could experience every one of my emotions through them. But most importantly, they showcase my vulnerability. And vulnerability is the strongest thing any individual can possess.

“You'd be so hot with a tattoo, Princess,” Kit goads.

“I thought I was already hot.”

“You are, but you'd be even hotter. Like break-the-laws-of-physics hot.”

I laugh, giving him a small head shake. “I don't even know what I'd get.”

Rhen wipes down his work before spinning over in his swivel chair, grabbing a thick binder in one of his gloved hands. He hands it to me, and I set it in my lap, the thought becoming much more real in my mind.

I begin to flip through the clear sleeves, brushing my fingers over geometric, nature-esque, and cartoonish designs, in awe of all of the different possibilities. I like the look of some of the small hearts and flowers, but they don't feel very personal to me. I could always get some scripture in cursive,

or an important date. My brother has a tattoo of the date our mother died.

For the rest of the hour, Kit and Rhen make idle chatter, and I lose myself in a world of ink and unspoken stories waiting to be brought into this world upon corporeal flesh.

A book because I like to read?

No, too on the nose.

A fairy to reference my name?

No, too...detailed.

A butterfly to represent rebirth?

No, too sappy.

I'm not sure why I feel pressured to choose something now. I know I don't have to. I think I might want to, though. My new life is all about changes and taking risks. This is a change. This is a risk. I want to start this new chapter on a fresh note.

The only thing I know for certain is where I'd probably want the tattoo—a toss-up between the inside of my wrist and behind my ear. Two places that I'm aware are bonier than other places on my body but can be hidden quite easily from plain view.

Kit's nearing the end of his session, and I'm still stuck at square one. I'm about to call it a day when my eyes lock onto a simple, tiny design that immediately calls out to my heart, wanting to etch its permanence into my skin, wanting to serve as a constant reminder of what's kept me going after all this time.

I don't have to think twice. I don't have to contemplate the consequences. I turn the binder toward Rhen and point at it.

“This. I want this.”

Kit inclines his head to look at the picture I chose, and it entices a smirk from him. “It's perfect,” he approves, rubbing his thumb over the curve of my index finger.

And yes, we're still holding hands. Probably will until we get in the car, only for us to retwine them once we get settled.

“Since it's so small—and Kit's one of my favorite clients—it's on the house,” Rhen says, winking at me.

Hot cinders whirl to life in my chest, the love inside me reaching altitudes and distances that I could never fully imagine. It's a spectrum of multiple kinds of love, all fused into one, and it always takes me by surprise at how febrile the feeling is. Body-squirring and mind-altering. It's everlasting—just as permanent as a tattoo.

And when it's my turn in the chair, I don't worry about the pain. I don't even focus on it because Kit's holding my hand the entire way through.

ONE MONTH LATER

I barely have the energy to make my way past the threshold of my apartment. I'm drained. I was assigned a fifteen-page essay for my literature class, applesauce got spilled on my shirt by one of my students, and the food in my fridge rotted about three days ago.

Actually, food is the last thing I want right now. I'm so nauseous that I doubt I could eat anything.

My feet ache, the waistband of my jeans feels too tight around my stomach, I'm hot as hell, and I'm so tired I can barely keep my eyes open.

Like a zombie with treacle-slow movements, I discard my backpack and shuffle over to my kitchen, hoping that a glass of water might soothe my perpetually itchy throat. Even with autumn on the horizon, I seem to be the only one still living through heat waves—which have yet to be ameliorated given that my air-conditioning stopped working a week ago. Maintenance should be getting to me soon, but there are a lot of students with problems in my apartment complex. Problems of the rodent variety. At least I'm not *that* unlucky.

When I round the corner, I'm stunned into silence at the sight of a person in my kitchen. A giant person. A person that definitely isn't the maintenance guy I was expecting.

Kit stands in front of me with a massive bouquet in one hand and a small box in the other, inducing fear and panic and every emotion in between to stutter the beat of my heart—to drench me in even more sweat.

“You’re not supposed to be here,” I croak out, my eyebrows up to my goddamn hairline.

“It’s nice to see you too,” he mutters, setting the flowers on the counter before closing the space between us with his tempting body. His bergamot cologne—the one I’d drink straight from the bottle—pollutes the air, triggering the reflex at the back of my throat.

Of course I’m happy to see him, but I don’t remember him confirming that he was coming down this weekend. Did I forget? No...I couldn’t possibly.

He gently folds my ear forward, brushing the pad of his finger over the healed crown behind it. A crown tattoo. Because I’m his princess.

“It looks good.”

Speaking of tattoos, Rhen’s been busy working on Kit’s cover-up, having added color to the drawing of my eyes on his forearm. It still feels surreal to see me on a part of Kit. A very visible part. A part that once gave him his NHL nickname and will undoubtedly be a topic of discussion once the season starts.

I pull back slightly, plowing my teeth into my lower lip. “What are you doing here?”

“I know I’m supposed to visit next weekend, but I had to see you. I didn’t want to leave this with a note,” he explains, showing me the navy-blue, velvet box in his palm.

Flowers? Box? Unexpected visit? Oh, God. This seems to be edging into proposal territory.

I hold my hands up to prohibit him from coming any closer. “Whoa, there. Hold your horses, buckaroo. I don’t want to see whatever million-dollar gem is in that box.”

An uptick of his eyebrows. “You think I’m proposing to you?”

“You’re not?”

“I mean, I will eventually, but not this soon,” he says, placing a dramatic hand over his heart. “And I’m offended at

your reaction.”

There’s a headache mounting in my skull, like a bunch of miniature spearpoints stabbing at the backs of my eyes. “Sorry, no. I—that’s not what I meant. I just...”

I feel Kit’s hand caress the side of my face, the strokes of his touch interspersed with soft-sounding coos. “Hey, relax. It’s a good surprise, okay? Just open the box.”

I let out a sigh I didn’t realize I was holding, the tension in my shoulders falling away. With shaky fingers, I do as he says, flicking that lid open, and what I find staring back at me increases my confusion.

I hold up a rusty-looking key, fairly certain I’ll need a tetanus shot after touching it. “A key?” I ask, the smell of pennies intruding my nostrils and causing my stomach to heave.

“Not just any key, Princess. A key to a house I bought in Pennsylvania.”

A key to a house he bought—

Oh. Oh, wow. I don’t know what to say. A house is a lot of money. It’ll take years for me to afford a house, and Kit’s just spending money on it like it’s a regular Tuesday.

“I love staying at your apartment, but I wanted to get a place for the both of us. For when I stay for longer periods of time.” He’s cupping his heart in his hands, offering it to me as if I’m a deity.

His words are stitched together by sentiments of love, and as much as I want to swoon and kiss him until my lips are numb, the only thing I feel is sick.

Dark spots speckle my vision as vertigo spins my world, and for once, Kit’s arms don’t seem strong enough to stabilize me. The food I’ve been grazing on all day begins to churn in my belly, and I don’t have any time to slap my hand over my mouth before I’m racing to the kitchen sink to empty the contents of my gut.

Everything spews out of me exorcist-style, until tears blemish my skin and there's nothing left for me to retch into the basin. I'd be embarrassed if I wasn't in so much pain, and Kit's dexterous hands hold my hair and rub my back simultaneously.

"Hey, hey. You're okay. Get it all out," he whispers.

As much as I don't want him to see me like this, it's kind of too late to do anything about it. Luck's playing a seriously twisted game on me today. I could've been hurling in the privacy of my own apartment, but nooo.

I get it out. And I spend what feels like five continuous minutes getting it out.

"Shit. If you didn't like the idea so much, you could've just told me."

Internally, I laugh. Externally, I continue to dry heave. Saliva dribbles from my vomit-slick lips, my pulse operating at dangerously fast speeds.

Concern bleeds into his tone. "Why didn't you tell me you were sick?"

"I...didn't...know," I pant out between gags.

Kit turns the faucet on, washing away my utter humiliation, all while keeping the disgust—I'm assuming—off his face. While the water continues to run, he grabs a glass from my cupboard, filling it up to the brim.

When he hands it to me, I drain nearly half of it, feeling it settle in my stomach like a boulder.

"I'm sorry," I blubber. "I love the key. But I do think you're an idiot for spending that much money."

Kit simpers, brushing a strand of fallen hair off my feverish forehead. "I've been called worse."

As I reorient myself and gather my bearings, praying that I don't puke again, Kit fishes his car keys from out of his pocket, twirling them around on his pointer finger.

“I’m going to head down to CVS to get you some medicine, and then I’m spending the rest of the day taking care of you. Do you think you’ll be okay while I’m gone?”

I nod, because opening my mouth is a disaster waiting to happen.

Smooching a kiss to my cheek, Kit’s out of the door faster than I can blink. I smack my lips together, wanting to rid myself of the vile taste on my tongue. With as much strength as I can muster, I straggle my way to the bathroom, trying to shake the dizziness away.

I plant my butt on the closed toilet seat as anxiety ferments inside of me. There’s a flu going around campus. I probably caught it at one of my lectures. Being sick is the last thing I need right now considering I’m behind on my schoolwork.

I pull my phone out to text Kit that I might need a pack of Gatorade, tissues, canned chicken noodle soup, and a thermometer, but before I can even get to my messages, a notification pops up on my screen.

FIFTEEN DAYS LATE.

Fifteen days late? Was there an assignment that was due? Did I forget to schedule an appointment? I don’t remember putting anything in my calendar.

Worst-case scenarios begin to hijack my brain. If I don’t get good enough grades, I won’t make it into grad school. And if I don’t make it into grad school, it’ll be even harder for me to find a decent paying job. The last thing, however, that crosses my mind, is the subheader at the top of the gray circle that says PERIOD TRACKER.

The minute the puzzle pieces fall into place, it’s like a bucket of ice water has been thrown onto me, soaking me all the way to the bone. The penalty box.

Oh, shit.

KEEP IN TOUCH

If you'd like to stay in contact for updates on new releases or just to talk, look down below! Subscribe to my newsletter for more details regarding the Reapers series! ♡

Instagram: [@celestebriarsauthor](#)

TikTok: [@celestebriarsauthor](#)

Website: <http://celestebriars.com/>

Keep reading for a sneak peek of *The Fleeting Kind of Always*
(*Reapers* #3), Gage and Calista's story! Stay tuned for the
release date! ♡

**THE FLEETING KIND OF
ALWAYS**

HOPE YOU HAVE INSURANCE

CALISTA

I'm late. This week's goal was to work on punctuality, but the universe is conspiring against me.

My dance class went over time, so I had to cram a twenty-minute drive into a measly eight minutes. I'm surprised my car even covered that much distance within a small timespan since it's on its last wheels.

I promised my little brother, Teague, that I'd be on time today. Another broken promise to a little kid who deserves so much more. With our parents out of the picture, Teague is my responsibility. A ten-year-old, adorable, bad-mouthed ball of responsibility. But I wouldn't trade that responsibility for anything in the world.

When I pull into the massive parking lot, somehow, every spot in the vicinity is occupied by a vehicle. Sure, Riverside is a big hockey city, and if you arrive at the arena after three o'clock, you're guaranteed to endure some off-the-road traffic, but this is preposterous. There's no game or event today that would warrant such a crowd. And my brother is inside that teeming sardine can, where a simple "I'm here" text won't be enough to compel him out of the door.

If I'm going to get my brother home, cook him dinner, and get back to the studio for my final dance class of the night, I'll need to run in and get him. Right now, that's looking like the equivalent of voluntarily running into crossfire. But I have no choice.

Whipping my head around, I try to search for the nearest “parking space” that won’t get me a ticket or my car towed. I can’t park against the sidewalk because there *is* no fucking sidewalk, and I can’t park in front of the rink with my hazards on because I’d be blocking the mouth of the parking lot entrance. I’m panicking. It’s a mild panic, but panic, nonetheless.

And then, breaking through my figurative haze—and a literal foggy haze—is a single spot calling to me from the hockey team’s reserved parking spaces. Home to the Riverside Reapers. One of the best professional hockey teams in the league. And Riverside’s pride and joy. Nobody knows about Riverside aside from the fact that it’s produced some of the greatest hockey players in the NHL. We got close to the playoffs last season, and now everyone and their mother thinks we’re going to win this season.

Look, I’m not blind, I know what the signage says—RESERVED PARKING. But I’ll be out in less than five minutes. I highly doubt a team member is going to arrive in the next five minutes, find that I’m in *his* designated parking spot, and get me towed. Plus, these are the closest spots to the arena.

Kiss my ass, time management classes I should probably be attending! I’m in control, and I’ve got this.

I pull haphazardly between the white-painted lines, kill the engine, and jump out of the car quicker than I think I’ve ever moved in my twenty-two years of life.

My threadbare shoes squelch in puddles of murky rainwater, and crushed autumn leaves disintegrate into muted hues of fiery crimson against the soaked pavement. The sky is the color of dragon’s breath, with nebulous clouds shrouding the parking lot in an uncomfortable darkness—one that makes the rink look a lot more foreboding than usual. Cold licks up my spine, raising goose bumps on the exposed flesh of my arms as my ivory palms try to circulate some warmth.

I push through the double, weatherproofed doors and into the arena. My eyes start to tear up, and my nose stings from

the acreage of subzero ice in front of me. To say that the rink is packed would be an understatement. Hundreds of skates and little legs. A cacophony of shouts that ricochet off the tall, hollowed walls. Pucks zinging around like miniature missiles.

I bear the chill of the atmosphere, wishing I'd had a chance to slip on a jacket before entering the goddamn arctic. Dance attire wasn't made for a hockey rink. All I have on is a black bralette and booty shorts, and despite them covering all the needed areas, I still feel like I'm going to contract hypothermia.

"Teague!" I shout from behind the plexiglass, waving my arms overhead like a lunatic.

My brother glances in my direction and says his goodbyes to his friends before skating over to me. The messily illustrated fire symbol on his helmet sticks out in a snowscape of white, and he steps off the ice with his hockey stick gripped tightly in his gloved hand.

"You're late," he says, jutting his lower lip out.

"I know. I'm sorry, Squirt." I sit him down on a nearby bench and start to untie the laces of his skates, all while he glowers at me with sharp eyes. "I ran over time. It won't happen again."

Teague sheds his gloves, then removes his helmet, unveiling a mess of sweat-slicked spikes on the top of his head. "You always say that. And it always happens."

My fingers falter in the polyester strings. I feel terrible. I do always say that, and nothing ever changes. I'm trying to juggle so much at one time. Teague is my main priority, but so is keeping a roof over his head and food on the table.

With some expert detangling and tugging, I manage to yank his skates off, mentally chastising myself for being the worst sister on the planet. With a feathery exhale, I rise to a stance, gripping a fistful of laces in a bleached knuckle. "I know you're mad, T, but we really have to go," I tell him, unable to ignore the disappointment seeping into his expression.

He doesn't argue with me. He doesn't say much of anything, actually—which is unlike him. My brother's usually always a bundle of untold stories waiting to deluge an ear willing to listen. But I don't push him to talk to me, and the silence that follows is deafening.

I burst out of the rink, fumbling for my keys as he slogs behind me, when I'm accosted by the blinding sight of a bright red Jaguar sitting horizontally behind my car, boxing my sad little Honda in.

No, no, no.

A scream thunders from my throat, loud enough to garner the shocked looks of families milling about the parking lot. "Fuck!"

Okay, think, Cali. Just...just go inside and ask the owner to move his car. And also pretend like you didn't drop the F-bomb in front of your ten-year-old brother.

I set Teague's skates down before grabbing him by the shoulders and forcing him to look at me. "I'm going to be right back, okay? Please, please stay here. This will only take a minute."

"Why can't I come with you?" he whines.

"It'll be less stressful for everyone if you *stay* here. And I mean it, Teague."

My brother goes to open his mouth, but no protest comes out.

My eyes flit over the obnoxious license plate as I scoff at the sheer idiocy of the personalized words emblazoned on the aluminum. Of course this person would be the biggest asshole out of Riverside's three hundred thousand population.

I turn on my heel, march back into that godforsaken rink, and *politely* ask the attendant at the front desk if he could be so kind as to call out the license plate to the red Jaguar parked illegally out front.

With a sigh, his monotonous voice bellows over the loudspeaker, "Will the owner of the red Jaguar please come to

the front? I repeat, will the owner of the red Jaguar please come to the front? Uh, license plate: HUGE STICK.”

Impatience cracks through me and sizzles along my ribs. I’m going to show this cum-hungry demon bastard that he messed with the wrong woman. He couldn’t wait a few seconds before boxing me in? Seriously? The world doesn’t revolve around him!

A few minutes pass before there’s any movement in the sea of hockey helmets, and then, sauntering over, is a man nearly half a foot taller than me. He’s dressed from head to toe in hockey gear, exuding a nonchalant air about him that triggers that fight response boiling inside me—popping bubbles of acid that have every intention of melting flesh off the bone.

He has the *decency* to take off his helmet, and what I’m greeted with is a handsome face, much to my misfortune. Shaggy, brown hair flares out a bit on the sides, a few strands falling into hazel eyes. His long, dark lashes tickle his brow bone, his seemingly flawless face complete with a chiseled jawline, angular cheekbones, a set of pouty lips, and a nose too straight to belong to a hockey player’s. A few moles pepper his face, ranging from small to microscopic, residing above his eyebrow and below his cheek and underneath his ear. He has a face made to be seen, a face that could cure cancer, a face that could do some serious damage to me if I don’t treat this situation with the utmost caution.

“This better be important. I’m in the middle of practice,” he snaps, pinning his arms over his chest. A muscular-looking chest. Or maybe that’s his hockey padding.

Who does this guy think he is? He’s acting like he’s a goddamn gift from the gods and I should be blessed for simply existing in his presence.

The attendant immediately livens. “Oh, I didn’t realize it was your car, Gage. You want me to deal with this lady?”

Excuse me?

Gage shakes his head, glaring down at me from his stupid, towering height. “I’ve got it, Ernie.”

From the parking lot to the rink, I’ve had plenty of enough time to gather an arsenal of insults for the douche in front of me, and I’m ready to send those suckers flying like bullets from a machine gun. “You boxed me in, you fucking prick!” I shout, torrents of anger pouring through my veins as opposed to the usual trickle.

“Whoa, there. You’re the one who parked in *my* parking space.”

“I was only going to be a minute!”

“You can read, can’t you? Those spots are reserved for team players. And last I checked, you’re not on the team, sweetheart.” Gage gives me a condescending head tilt that makes me want to pop said head off his spinal cord.

I’m fully aware of the audience we’ve amassed from the volume of our altercation, but I couldn’t care less if someone gets my meltdown on camera. This dick needs to be knocked down a peg.

“I’m just asking you to move your car. I have somewhere to be, and none of *this* would be happening if you just waited for me to move!”

His tone drips with sickly sweet sarcasm. “Oh, I’d love to stop what I’m doing right now for your benefit and move my car. In fact, I’ll ask Coach to stop practice until we get this whole thing resolved. Do you want monetary compensation for your time too?”

A growl rumbles in my throat, and the scorch in my cheeks isn’t from the fact that this irritatingly attractive hockey player is dangling my freedom inches away from my face. “You think the world revolves around you just because you’re a hotshot hockey player?” I hiss.

“You think the world revolves around you just because you’re a stuck-up bitch?”

That’s it. I’m about to kill him and make everyone in the rink an accessory to murder.

“Move. Your. Car. Before I shove it up your ass and gun it.”

Gage steps closer to me, charming grin and all—lopsided, blindingly toothy, with just the right amount of confidence to churn a storm of butterflies in my stomach. He’s daunting. All brawn and muscle, and his hockey gear adds on extra pounds.

He’s so close to me that I can feel his breath plume over my face, can smell the intoxicating hint of spices in his cologne, can anticipate on my skin where he could touch me if he moved slightly north.

“She has a bark,” he drawls, impressed.

Our eyes clash for a moment—a world of arctic blues and forest greens meeting each other for the first time—but I smother whatever amicable feelings are cresting inside me. Any nonviolent feelings will be immediately terminated upon discovery.

Don’t get too close, Cali. Long-term Gage exposure could result in radioactive poisoning.

My glare has enough venom in it to paralyze a single person, and it’s reserved for Gage, and Gage only.

“You couldn’t handle my bite.”

Something in him changes. It’s fleeting. And thanks to being up close and personal with him, I can see how blown his pupils are, how the brown from his inner irises have somehow widened in diameter underneath the harsh, recessed lighting, drowning out the previous green.

“How about I show you where you can bite me, and then we’ll see about that?”

Something about the way he just said that makes the lower half of me tingle. That shouldn’t be a normal bodily response, especially not with *him*. I tamp down whatever the hell is budding between my thighs and try to drown out that oozingly warm, honey-like lilt in his tone.

Ugh! He’s so infuriating. Gage is the rudest, most arrogant, and most conceited person on this fucking planet. I’d rather

have a Pap smear performed by Wolverine than be within a ten-foot radius of him.

My heart punches against my ribs, indignation fully seeping into every part of my quivering body. “Fuck you!” I spit.

“That’s all you got? Come on, I know a spitfire like you really wants to *give* it to me. Go ahead. Do your worst.”

“If you don’t move your car, I’ll...”

You’ll what, Cali?! What can you do that isn’t illegal?

Everyone’s staring at me. The whole rink has quieted. No scuffle of blades or clink of pucks on ice. There aren’t even any whispers commenting on how utterly embarrassing this whole interaction is for me.

The words die on my tongue, and my confidence goes with them.

Gage pastes on a too-wide smile that has pearly enamel twinkling underneath the fluorescents. “That’s a shame. Looks like you’ll be waiting to get your car back after my practice is done. It should only be one to two hours,” he drawls. “It’s not like you have anywhere else to be, right?”

Shock drives my precursory fury all the way to the state line. “I—”

But he’s gone. He’s turned around, gotten back on the ice, and resumed practice like he didn’t just singlehandedly ruin my entire day. And everyone stood by to watch while it happened.

So, pushed to the brink of madness, I do what any reasonable person would do in this situation. I force myself to retain some semblance of calm, and I walk out the door with my head held high.

Teague perks up as soon as he sees me, anxiously bouncing on the balls of his toes. “Is he going to move his car?”

I navigate my way around the crimson complication, opening the passenger door for my brother. “Nope.”

“Then why are we getting in our car?”

“Because we’re going to get out of here another way.”

Gage doesn’t think I have the balls to do anything, does he? I’m going to prove him wrong. I’m going to prove him so wrong that he’ll regret ever speaking to me like that. In fact, if I *ever* see his smug face again, I’ll make sure to rearrange it with my fist.

As I get myself situated—with that wicked plan of mine forming in my head—I stick my key in the ignition, make sure Teague’s seatbelt is tightly secured, and then brace my hand over his chest before propelling backwards into Gage’s expensive car.

If you haven't read Reapers Book One yet, be sure to check out Hayes and Aeris' love story! Keep reading for a sneak peek of *The Best Kind of Forever (Reapers #1)*. ♡

**THE BEST KIND OF
FOREVER**

THICK THIGHS RUIN LIVES

Tits or ass: that's the eternal question. That's the question I've been asked my entire life, by friends, flings, teammates, my ex-girlfriend. I'm not going to lie. For a long time, I was a tits man. But tonight, I think my answer is gonna change.

And that's thanks to the girl's thighs currently straddling me. They're lean with muscle, and it's clear she sticks to a rigorous workout regimen. I'm a thigh guy. Definitely. Is it wrong that I want her to crush my head with them? I really shouldn't be thinking about this when I should be wining and dining sponsors, but she's wearing such a short dress, so short that from this angle I can see practically everything.

Her lips ghost the shell of my ear, and her tongue tickles the column of my throat, doing wonders for my hard-on. I understand that I'm fully making out with a girl at a sponsor party. I understand that there's media around every corner covering the new merger between the Reapers team and Voltage Sports Drinks. I should be mingling instead of acquainting myself with the inside of some girl's mouth.

I don't care, though. I need the distraction. After seeing my ex with one of my hockey rivals—after she cheated on me during the biggest game of my career—I lost my mind.

It's my fourth season playing for the Riverside Reapers. I entered the NHL draft when I was nineteen, and I was fourth overall-pick in 2019. My quick puck handling is what put me on the map, but at the time, I was racking up eighty penalty

points in my collegiate midseason, which made me the most penalized player in NCAA hockey at one point. Not something scouts are necessarily looking for. I'm a hothead when I get on the ice. If somebody bodychecks me or gets between me and the puck, I'm not afraid to hit them back—whether those hits are illegal or not.

It's been my dream to go pro since I was little. My parents signed me up for minor ice hockey when I was eight, and I've been playing ever since.

Despite me getting lucky enough to enter the NHL, my life hasn't been a walk in the park. My father's a shitty excuse for a parent, and my mom is dead. I'm honestly not sure which is worse.

Sherry passed away of cancer when I was eight, and it broke my dad. He became distant, closed off, a shell of the man I remember from my childhood. I didn't realize I'd lost two parents that day.

I don't think my mom was even planning on telling us she had breast cancer. The only reason I found out was because my dad got a call from the hospital after she was admitted for fainting. We all knew she had been acting a little off more than usual—curt answers, lapses in memory and judgment, distancing herself from us. I chalked it up to her being stressed with work.

I was wrong.

After she died, my father abandoned me and my sister. I had to take care of my younger sister, Faye, while I juggled school and hockey. We still had a roof to live under because of the monthly paychecks our dad sent us, but besides that, he wasn't in our lives. He disappeared to some faraway, forest-grown part of the Michigan mountains where he made sure his tracks weren't traceable. He wasn't there for any of Faye's milestones. He wasn't there to see me off to college. He wasn't even there to cheer me on at my first NHL game. The only contact he's maintained is the occasional text whenever he needs something.

I want to forget this whole week. I want to stop feeling. The alcohol's already helped a bit with both, but if I can rely on one thing in this damned world, it's good sex.

In my defense, I haven't slept with anyone in sixty days. And that's a deliberate abstinence, okay? I haven't really been able to trust anyone after my ex-girlfriend, Macy, broke up with me.

While I was ruminating over what went wrong, incriminating pictures of her tongue down Quentin Cadieux's throat surfaced in the media. Quentin Cadieux, center for the Atlanta Avocets, and the bane of my fucking existence. Both me and Cadieux were top prospects for the Riverside Reapers, with me being chosen out of the two of us. And ever since then, he's made it his life's goal to make mine a living hell.

When I confronted Macy about the photos, she admitted to only using me for my money, my name, and my fame. She dumped me before I could break up with her.

The girl in front of me is shaking the bed with how much she's bouncing on top of me. We went from a fifteen-minute make out sesh to her riding me like rent was fucking due.

I'm not sure I even asked what her name was. She knew my name, though. Sponsor parties are always crawling with puck bunnies.

I can't stop staring in awe at the way her perfectly proportioned tits recoil as she fully clenches around me, her head lolling back, dark hair spilling down her shoulders like ink.

My hands are gripping her thighs so tightly that red marks are rising in their wake. I love when girls are loud, but fuck, is she *loud*. I bet the whole party downstairs can hear us, despite the outdated EDM music playing. Her moans are heaven-sent, and they unravel the knot of desire in my stomach. She's rolling her hips and playing with the curve of her breast, two images that rev the static inside of my brain. The warmth in my groin intensifies, erupting into a fire that sears every inch of me. Her perky ass slaps against the tops of my thighs.

I'm close to coming. My dick is practically begging me to release inside of her, and it's a good thing I snagged a few condoms before leaving the house because no matter what dude you talk to, pulling out rarely works.

The minute I saw her across the room, I think a part of me knew how the night was going to end. Before I even got the chance to talk with my teammates, her hand was stroking me. Yeah, self-control has never been my strong suit.

"Fuck..." I groan, though I think it comes out more like a frustrated growl.

We move together in a synchronized pattern of movements, and I watch her pick up the pace. Her pussy squeezes up and down my length as she nears her climax, and when she comes down hard on the hilt of my pubic bone, an avalanche of arousal suffocates me. The tip of my dick tingles, and it feels like a supernova is exploding in my veins, coloring my vision with constellations. Before I know it, I'm spilling myself into the latex in hot, wet bursts.

When I get up to dispose of the condom, she has the bedsheets pulled up to her chest.

"Are you coming back to bed?" she asks, hope playing in her amber eyes.

"I should probably head back to the party. You know, rub shoulders with some sponsors, maybe a few geriatric sugar daddies," I joke, but her lack of laughter hits me in the face like a wicked slapshot.

"Oh, right. Will I see you again?"

My cock loves the idea of seeing her again, but I really shouldn't be entertaining a relationship when I have my career to focus on. This was a one-time thing.

A wrecking ball of anxiety swings to the center of my chest, making the air in my lungs diminish. "Sure, I can get you tickets to an upcoming game."

I take my time getting dressed, because I'm definitely not in a rush to get back to the party.

My response must've been convincing enough because she perks up, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "That would be great. Uh, can I see your phone?"

I hand my phone over to her, slowly slipping one pant leg on at a time so I don't look like I'm in a hurry to get out of here.

Look, I don't want to hurt her feelings, alright? I know she's gonna put her number in there, and I'm not going to stop her. I'll just let her down nice and easy over text. That way I don't have to deal with the tears and the yelling.

She hands me back the device, exposing her tits as she reaches down to pick up her shirt. "I put my number in there. I hope you use it."

I'm only able to nod because I'm currently contemplating how moral it would be if I proposed we go for a second round.

Verdict: not moral.

I shake the thought from my addled brain, say a quick goodbye, and give her a half-hearted hug. Then I slip out of the bedroom, ready to sprint for the exit to evade any prying eyes. And I foolishly think I'm in the clear before I come face to face with the last person I wanted to run into.

The top buttons of my shirt are undone, my hair's a mess from the girl gouging her fingers through it, and I'm pretty sure I saw at least three hickeys decorating my neck in the mirror.

"Coach?" I sputter, the air around me seeming strangely distilled.

"Hollings, I—"

Coach takes in my disheveled state, and then his eyes turn as round as frisbees.

"Please tell me that's not Sienna Talavera's bedroom," he bellows, that one vein on his forehead pulsing with a mind of its own.

Who?

My back goes as stiff as a board when I hear that drill sergeant voice of his, like it's a conditioned response. "I...I don't know, sir."

I've never heard that name in my entire life.

"Sienna. Talavera," he reiterates slowly. Those behemoth arms of his are barred over his chest, reminding me how easy it'd be for him to squash me like a cartoon mouse.

I wait for him to elaborate, and judging by the death glare he's giving me, I know I just fucked up. My hands are so clammy that I keep wiping them on my pant legs, my heart is galloping like a racehorse in my chest, and my stomach is seconds away from revolting the hors d'oeuvres I polished off an hour ago.

Coach expels what I think is supposed to be a cleansing breath, but his nostrils are still flared. "Son, Raymond Talavera owns the sports drink company sponsoring our team," he explains.

Fuck me.

"Coach, I swear, I had no idea," I blurt, desperate to temper the anxiety racing through me at warp speed.

"Hollings, this cannot get out, do you understand? If Raymond hears that you slept with his daughter, he'll pull, and we need his sponsorship."

"I promise I won't say anything, Coach."

"If it comes down to it, the team owner will have no problem picking Talavera over you. Every player is tradeable, expendable."

"Understood."

Shit. I can't get traded. I can't imagine the rest of my NHL career—if I even have one—without my teammates. Not only would I have to move, but I'd have to somehow seamlessly weave my way into already-lasting relationships.

"And Sienna? Do you think she'll talk?" he asks.

“I took care of it.” Right? Sure, I’d offered to get her tickets to the next game, which she clearly doesn’t need, but we parted with a hug. We both knew the deal going into the night.

“I—it won’t happen again,” I swear.

How have I fucked up...fucking? I’m great at fucking. If I wasn’t a professional hockey player, I could probably make it as a porn star.

“It better not. And I better see you working your ass off at practice tomorrow.”

I nod, trying to keep my nerves from catapulting themselves up my throat.

“Look, Hollings. I want to give you a piece of advice. And I’m only saying this because I truly want you to succeed, okay?”

That doesn’t sound good.

The redness in his face has started to fade. “Mistakes like this can make or break a career. I know how much hockey means to you. But with the way you’ve been playing recently, you’re treating this privilege like it means jackshit. And now you go and complicate things with our biggest sponsor. You’re lucky I’m the one who caught you and not some news-hungry paparazzi. You need to start thinking before you act, otherwise a warning will be the least of your worries.”

“Yes, sir,” I say, my voice hiking a pitch louder than intended. Anxiety batters at my chest like exploding shrapnel, and I fear that my knees are going to give out despite my back being against the wall.

Coach knits his furry eyebrows together, deepening that wrinkle on his forehead. “I expect you to fix this,” he demands, and just like that, my world full of carefree living has just been turned on its axis.

“And *do not*, under any circumstances, repeat what happened here tonight.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Celeste Briars is an indie author who specializes in spicy hockey romances. She's a UC Davis alumnus with a bachelor's in psychology. She loves creating memorable meet-cutes and happily ever afters. When she's not writing, you can find her binge-watching horror movies, playing with her cats, or dancing the night away with her friends. If you're looking for books with spice hot enough to question your religious values and feel-good moments that make your heart sing, please cuddle up with a Reapers novel and stay a while!