



FINAL

Score

Taylor James

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TAYLOR JAMES

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DEDICATION

To every girl who's gone to a hockey game and fallen in love with a player.

&

To my best friend. Thank you for encouraging me to finish this book and being there every step along the way. I couldn't have done this without you.

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CHAPTER 1



Today has been hell. A hand-crafted version of purgatory, wrapped in a bow, addressed to Kat Townsend. Is it possible to return to a gift back to the universe? I would have paid expedited shipping if it was. The depressing thing was, it would have been comical if it hadn't been so heartbreakingly stupid.

It started this morning when I woke up to a text from my boyfriend Noah asking me *not* to go to his hockey game. I should be used to this request by now. After four years of dating, it's always the same excuse. Noah gets too distracted when I'm there. Implying that he focuses on anything other than what's going on in front of him when he's on the ice. In years previous, I played the good, attentive girlfriend staying at home until the game was over. Not this time.

Every relationship has its issues, and mine isn't without its faults. Noah and I had been high school sweethearts. Young and naive to what a real relationship looked like. We met right when I moved to Seattle, and I thought

I'd found my prince.

I had even followed Noah to Seattle University after finding out he had received a hockey scholarship there. It helped that SU had the best nursing program in the state, but he was a big part of my decision making even then.

During our freshman and sophomore years of college, we became inseparable. We spent every moment together that wasn't filled with classes or hockey. There weren't many moments in between, but we made the most of what we had. Until the beginning of this year. When things had changed. Noah became distant, agitated, and cocky. His personality doing a complete 180, until I didn't even recognize anymore.

I knew there was an ulterior motive behind his words. This time felt different. It didn't help that my best friend, Fallon, had been begging me to dump Noah for months. Only, affirming my fears that something was off. If I was a betting woman, I'd say my boyfriend was cheating. A thought that would have never crossed my mind six months prior.

To make my morning worse, I burnt my toast for breakfast and slipped on the wet bathroom floor after stepping out of the shower. Collecting my emotions and the last string of my sanity, I left for the hockey game I wasn't supposed to be at.



Standing in the back hallway of Northridge Stadium, I wished I was anywhere else. NU was a historic campus built in the early 1900s, nestled among the trees at the edge of the waterline. The tall stone buildings were full of long forgotten hallways and ornate architectural elements.

Fallon lovingly called it the American version of Hogwarts. While the buildings were dated past their prime, the campus was equipped with the latest technology, causing a jarring juxtaposition between two separate eras.

Fluorescent lighting buzzed over my head as I stood frozen to the floor. I leaned against the cool, grey tiled wall for support. Knowing the freezing temperature inside the stadium, wasn't the cause of my immobility.

I watched in slow motion as another girl ran full speed down the hallway, squealing like a banshee before launching herself into *my* boyfriend's arms. My blood felt as though it had been replaced with shards of

glass. Each heartbeat causing a deeper cut internally.

The first stage of grief is denial.

That girl could have been a friend. After all, I was never the kind of girlfriend who insisted her man couldn't have friends of the opposite sex. I was over-reacting. Letting my imagination and anxiety get the best of me. That had to be it.

The second stage is anger.

My fist curled around the brown leather handle of my purse, knuckles white, as I surveyed the pair across the room. She was overly friendly. Obnoxiously so. Running a perfectly manicured hand across Noah's jersey. Caressing the Captain insignia, possessively. He made no attempts to fight her off. As he draped an arm around her petite frame, eyes glowing as he laughed at something she said.

I skipped the bargaining and depression stage, knowing those would come later. The final stage acceptance wasn't even on the horizon.

My soon to be ex-boyfriend had a type. I watched, remaining un-seen, as they began showing an uncomfortable amount of PDA. This woman could have been my twin.

I stood next to the home team's locker room. Hidden by a small group of players and coaching staff, who were now casting sideways glances at the peep show down the hall. Ducking further behind a tall group of men, I weighed my options.

One walk away. Deal with the problem in private. Two, rip it off like a bandage and deal with it now.

I almost chose the first option. I promise, I thought about it... for half a second. Until I heard the man in front of me make a vulgar comment about Noah and his mystery girl continuing their show.

Now my problem would be everyone's problem.

Before I knew it, I was steam rolling past a group of hockey players, hitting one in the shoulder as I passed. Not bothering to apologize, I stepped into the center of the hall, my eyes zeroing in on Noah. Neither of the pair heard me approach, lost in their own little world. A world that used to be mine.

If the elephant in the room wasn't already big enough, I saw the

lightbulbs flashing at the end of the hall. The other team's players now realized who I was. I wondered if they put the pieces together from the look on my face, or from the stupid jersey I wore that felt like it weighed 100 lbs. An idiotic show of support, for a man who no longer bothered to spare my feelings.

"Noah." The single word ripped raw and angry through my lungs.

Like an animal cornered in the face of a predator, he released his hold on the girl, and I watched as the blissful smile slide from his face. Paling, a grimace formed, as he turned to look in my direction. Was the sadness for my benefit, or because I had caught him cheating? Either way, it didn't matter now.

Leaning back against the worn wall, Noah looked at me for the first time in months. "Kat." He answered. The words falling from his lip's barley above a whisper, as he tapped the pick of his skate against the floor. At least he had the decency to look remorseful.

"I thought you didn't care enough to come to this game." The mystery woman sneered. Flipping the blonde ringlet curls she hadn't bothered to brush out over her shoulder.

She knew. She knew he had a girlfriend and still slept with him anyway. I knew Noah would have fans. Girls would want to be with him, and guys would want to be him. But I never expected this.

College girls were a different breed of horrible. Filling their prime years of beauty with men and booze. Never caring who they crossed if it meant they gained their desired result. Especially when it came to hockey players. I'm sure she hoped to sink her claws into one good enough to turn pro.

"Kat, listen. It's not what you think." Creeping closer, Noah held his hands up, palms facing outward as if he was the victim fending off the villain.

"Don't." I choked out, fighting off tears. "Don't you dare say it's not what it looks like when the entire world just watched you two suck faces." My voice raised an octave higher with each word as I waved my hands between them. The tears could fall later, in private. "Is she why you've been so distant? All those nights you'd disappear, and I wouldn't hear from you until the next morning? The reason you told me to stop coming to your

games?”

“We’ve had issues for a long time, Kat. I needed something easier, simpler.” Shrugging, Noah retreated to his position on the wall. “Someone I didn’t have to try so damn hard every day to make things perfect for. Someone who met my standards and who would be there when I needed them.”

“You don’t think I know that? I was always there for you. I wasted four years of my life loving you and making sure you were happy! Hell, I changed my entire life for you!” If looks could kill, both of them would be a pile of ash. I could feel my face getting hotter with every venom laced word. “Glad to see this is the thanks I get.”

“If he had been happy, he wouldn’t have gone home with me months ago. He always said you were too moody. That you couldn’t let things go. I never understood that until now.” Up close, I realized she and I were similar in every way. Sure, I was a few inches taller at 5’ 3” but we had the same slim figure, same hair, even the same blue eyes.

That was it the final straw. If I didn’t leave now, I would bruise her little face and get myself into an even bigger mess. “Forget this. It’s not even worth it.” I turned, taking one last glance at my ex.

“You both deserve each other. I hope you rot in hell.”

The crowd that had gathered to watch our own personal Shakespearean drama erupted into laughter and cheers. Snickers coming from some of Noah’s own teammates as they spilled out the locker room door, trying to glimpse the commotion going on outside.

I felt multiple pairs of eyes tracked my exit as I ran into the crisp October air. A deep breath melted the fire in my lungs as I squinted against the sunlight. Orange and yellow leaves swirled at my feet, falling from the trees overhead, as I made the short walk to my beat-up Chevy Silverado in record time. Slamming the door, I reached across the dash cranking the heat on full blast as my cellphone rang from somewhere inside my purse.

Fallon: House Party off-campus tonight. We’re going. Ordering Chinese for dinner. Want the usual?

Straight and to the point. My future lawyer roommate was always up for a party. She claimed she was getting her wild years out early. I typed a quick response, already expecting her reaction to the breakup.

Kat: Usual Chinese order please! Stopping at the store on my way home. Do you need anything?

Kat: Also - Just got rid of 200 lbs. of baggage. I'm a new woman.

Fallon: Will do.

Fallon: wait.... please tell me YOU DUMPED HIS ASS??!! I expect full details when you get home.

Laughing, I raced out of the parking lot, eager to leave this place and its memories behind me. I didn't know what the future held, but I knew one thing for certain. No more hockey players. Ever.

CHAPTER 2

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink with a white shadow effect. The signature appears to be the name "Jenner" written in a cursive, flowing script.

I have a long list of reasons I hate Noah O'Connor. For starters, he's a cocky son of a bitch who thinks he's god's gift to the world. He skates like a bull in a china shop. Pulling illegal moves on the ice that put my team in danger. He's an unpleasant human being. The kind only his mother could love. Having built an entire personality to fuel his bravado. Which is why I have two rules on and off the ice.

One: You don't mess with my team.

Two: I don't lose.

Three seasons ago, Noah learned both lessons the hard way. We got into a fight on the ice after he slammed into our goalie on purpose, pinning him against the net as O'Connor tried to score. As a team captain, I expected him to throw a better punch. Sadly, I was disappointed. Luckily for him, the ref intervened, minimizing the bloodshed. He never crossed me again. That first interaction marking me as an enemy. A badge I've worn proudly, next to the stitched C on my jersey.

Now, it seems like hockey isn't the only thing he cheats at. I watch his smoke show of an ex-girlfriend storm out of the stadium, leaving a trail of fear in her wake. While Noah clings to his side piece for protection. News flash buddy, you're supposed to protect her not the other way around. For clarity, the her, I'm referring to is his ex.

How O'Connor ever landed a girl like that I will never understand. From the second she blew into the locker room hallway like a fire filled tornado, she crashed into my brain. I mean, she actually crashed into me in a rage fueled haze. If she noticed I helped steady her before she plowed into

someone else, or that I had asked if she was alright, she didn't show it. I don't blame her for the hellfire she rained down on those unsuspecting lovebirds. They deserved more than the tantrum she threw. Personal opinion only.

I had stopped a few team members from recording their altercation. Thought I can't say the same for Noah's own teammates, who were climbing over each other to get a better view. No one should have that plastered all over the internet.

How unlucky am I to have met my dream girl at the worst possible moment? A girl like that deserves to be worshiped. Her physical appearance only amplified my attraction. A slim figure, with a perky ass that bounced with every sway of her hips... I could think of a million ways I'd like to fix her heartbreak.

Sighing, I walk back into the locker room. Finding an open seat on the bench, trying to focus on coaches after game replay.

"You boys played a good game tonight. We knew the Saints were going to be hard to beat. But you showed that entire stadium just how badly you wanted that win. Especially since the Saint's never play fair. Take Ronnie as exhibit A."

The entire team looked at where Ronnie sat, his arm now resting in a sling. The freshman player smiled despite sporting a blackened eye. We were still waiting on the official diagnosis. But if I had to guess he'd be in a cast for at least a month.

"Regardless of our win tonight, we still have a long way to go before we get to the Championship. I'm adding an extra practice every week until March to make sure we don't get sloppy. No mistakes. We're defending our title this year. Go home, get some rest. You'll need it for practice Monday morning."

Coach Taylor is a good man. After coaching in the NHL for over 15 years, this is his form of retirement. The NU Devils were lucky to have him.

The short, grey-haired man earned respect in every room he walked into. He took no bullshit and never wavered in his quest for greatness. Despite his hard exterior, he was, without a doubt, one of the nicest men I had ever met. I knew the rest of the team shared my thoughts based on how hard we worked to gain his approval.

I take pride in being this team's leader. Especially because of our legacy. When the core group of Juniors started in our freshman year, the NU

Devils were a team of misfit underdogs. Sloppy and unorganized, the team hadn't won a championship in ten years. Until Coach. He whipped us into shape, turning boys into men.

Now the school has two championship titles, and one of the most sought-after hockey programs in the country. We are a force to be reckoned with. We work hard, but we play harder. Which is why we have a party on the schedule for tonight. Typical college kids we party most nights, but after a win it's even sweeter.

Freshly showered, I pull a clean white t-shirt over my head, as Oliver St. James, my best friend and alternate captain, throws car keys in my direction.

"Ready to celebrate tonight, Cap?" He asks.

"You know it!" I grin, already dreaming about the booze and women that will pack the house tonight. It's a shame I didn't get to invite Noah's ex to the party. I would have loved to see his head explode then. A man can only dream, right?

Exiting the locker room, I pat Ronnie on the back before I go. "Good game tonight kid. You'll be back on the ice before you know it."

"Thanks Cap! Gotta let this heal so I can carry out that trophy in March." What Ronnie lacked in training, he made up for in heart. He'd even been putting in extra practice time to hone his skills. I knew he had a brilliant career ahead of him.

"Who said you'd be the one carrying that trophy out, Fitzpatrick?" I teased, ruffling his blonde hair. He shrugged bashful, easily dodging my assault. "Party at the house tonight. 10 o'clock sharp. Don't be late."

CHAPTER 3

A stylized, handwritten signature of the name 'Kat' in black ink. The letters are fluid and connected, with a slight shadow effect behind the text.

Back at my apartment, the anger filled haze that had clouded my judgment began to dwindle. Stabbing a piece of sweet and sour chicken with my fork, I recounted the day's events to Fallon. Who interjected every few seconds complaining how much she had always hated my now ex-boyfriend.

Fallon and I met on the first day of college orientation. Paired together as roommates, we couldn't have been more different. Fallon had no filter, always saying the first thing that was on her mind. Whereas I was more subdued, choosing my words carefully before speaking. She lived in the color black and listened to all different music. I loved bright colors and was a country music girl. Yet, despite our differences, we had bonded over decorating our dorm room, and the rest was history.

"God, Noah was such a prick. Do you remember when he forgot your birthday? Or when he got mad about how many times you could see him during the week? Don't even get me started on your shitty sex life." Fallon mumbled around a spoonful of noodles.

"I never should have told you that." Taking another sip of beer, I rolled my eyes. "I do, however, remember you two hating each other's guts."

Fallon smiled wickedly, waving her fork in my face. "And for good reason. He hurt my bestie more than once. That was unacceptable."

"But her? You are a million times prettier than she is. Hell, you're all

around a better person.” Fallon shook her head in disgust.

“I don’t know Fal. I really don’t. She could be a nice person.”

“We both know it wasn’t her personality that sealed the deal. Besides, McGarrett here never liked him, did you?” Reaching over, Fallon scratching her black and white Siberian Husky behind the ears before giving him a piece of chicken.

“Fal, you can’t feed him that!” I laughed as the dog moved closer to Fallon’s spot on the floor of our living room, happily wagging his tail.

“What?” She shrugged. “It didn’t have sauce on it. He’ll be fine.”

“This is why I’m your favorite, and not mean auntie Kat.” She whispered as the dog licked her face.

“You’re awful.”

“You won’t think that when we go to this party tonight.”

“Where is the party again?” I asked, clearing the table.

“I don’t know. Rebecca sent me the details during class today. Apparently, she knows one guy that lives in the house.”

“Of course, she does.” Becca Smith knew anyone and everyone in Seattle. She was the resident school gossip and made knowing other people’s business a priority.

“Just promise me it won’t be like the last off campus party we went too.”

“Never again.” Fallon vowed.

That night had resulted in one of us missing a shoe, an entire jar of peanut butter and walking 15 miles home in the dark. All orchestrated by Fallon’s on-again, off-again boyfriend Liam. Now that we were juniors, Fallon had declared she was getting “her shit together”. Making sure the pair was ‘off’ for the foreseeable future. Which really meant that Liam wanted to take their relationship to the next level, and Fallon did not.

We had moved into this apartment downtown shortly after the start of the school year. The living room held an oversized velvet green sofa we thrifted from a local market, a wooden coffee table and big screen tv. Bookcases lined both sides of a large picture window on the far wall. With candles and fresh flowers sitting on both end tables next to the sofa. The modern kitchen held the newest appliances, with a small four seat table off to

the side. Our bedrooms were separated by a long hallway and a single bathroom.

“What’s in the bag?” Fallon asked, gesturing to the plastic grocery sitting on the coffee table.

“Hair dye.” I answered, holding the box of brunette dye I had picked up on my way home from the hockey game. It was time for another change.

A fresh start. A do-over.



An hour later, the bathroom counter was littered with makeup, remnants of hair dye, and curling tools. Standing amid the chaos, I analyzed my reflection in the mirror for the first time.

The dark smokey eyeshadow I’d meticulously applied complimented my blue eyes perfectly. Letting them sparkle against my tan skin. The new haircut and color had left me nearly unrecognizable.

My dirty blonde locks were gone. Fallon had coated each strand, removing any trace of my old self as she worked. In its place was a cascade of silky chocolate brown curls flowing down the middle of my back. Long curtain bangs framed my face, giving my reflection a mysterious edge with every head turn. And turning heads was the entire point.

A new identity for a new woman. One who knew what she deserved and would never settle for anything less than green flags. I welcomed the physical change with open arms. Knowing that the mental change would take a while longer to come full circle.

I had picked up one other thing at the store: a new dress. The tight red fabric hugged my curves in all the right places, making it the perfect revenge dress. I felt confident and sexy, as I admired my reflection. Two feelings I craved at the moment.

“Don’t overthink it. You look hot!” Fallon yelled from her bedroom.

“I wasn’t. I feel good tonight.” I answered. Walking into the kitchen, I poured a shot of tequila from the bottle on the counter.

“Good! Let’s see if we can get you feeling even better.” Fallon walked

out of her bedroom, six-inch stilettos in her hand. She wore a low cut black minidress with a mesh cut out on the chest. Her auburn hair was pulled into a high slicked back ponytail, showing off sparkling silver earrings. Talk about turning heads.

“You know the only way to get over one man is to get under another.” A suggestive smile appeared on her face as she poured herself a shot.

Clinking our glasses together, I responded with a laugh. “I don’t think I need re-bound sex to feel better, Fal.”

“Come on, live a little Kat. Re-bound sex makes everyone feel better. Second only to makeup sex.”

“I don’t know.” I responded. The idea, however tempting, would never happen. One-night stands were not my thing.

“It’s happening!” Fallon sung. “Operation, get Kat laid is a go!”

One way or another, I was going to forget about the breakup. Maybe this new version of myself would be bolder than the old one?



You’ve got to be kidding me.

Identical brick houses lined both sides of a quiet street as the cab pulled to a stop at the end of the block. By the time we arrived, the party was in full swing. Loud music wafted through the front door, red solo cups littered the front lawn, and a group of people were smoking on the front porch.

Nothing unusual for a college party. Yet, Fallon had failed to mention that the party was being held at the edge of Northridge Campus. A large NU Devil’s Hockey flag flying on a pole attached to the porch told me she had left out that specific bit of information for good reason. *I did not want to deal with any more hockey players today.*

“Fallon! Kat!” Becca slurred, obviously a few drinks ahead of our two shots of tequila. “I’m so glad you made it!”

Becca’s dark skin was covered in glitter. The gold sparkles shimmered in the light as she threw her arms around our shoulders, fallen pieces sticking to our skin. Her naturally curly black hair had grown tangled slightly from the growing humidity inside the house as she pressed between us.

Fallon politely removed herself from underneath Becca's arm before she spoke. "You didn't tell me the party was going to be at a house full of hockey players."

"I know, but they throw the best parties!" Becca's eyes glazed over as she glanced excitedly around the room. "Kat, you don't mind, do you? The school's rivalry doesn't apply to girlfriends, does it?"

My muscles tensed. I never cared about the rivalry, and I certainly didn't care about it now that I had been relieved of my girlfriend duties. "It doesn't bother me in the slightest. Thanks for inviting us, Becca."

Becca wasn't paying attention, as she waved at a friend across the room, taking her exit.

Fallon nodded in the direction of the kitchen at the back of the house. "Come on, let's go get another drink. Apparently, we have some catching up to do."

As we walked to the back of the house, I noticed a group of guys sitting around a table playing an intense game of poker. From the scoreboard behind them it was clear they took the game seriously. Each of the guys, was unfairly good looking, but one stood out among the rest.

He sat at the center of the table, smoke from a lit cigarette swirling around him. Even sitting down, I could tell he was well over 6'. He dwarfed the chair underneath him, long legs stretched beneath the table for more room. Dark black hair fell across his forehead as he studied the cards in his hand.

He was in trouble with a capital T. The kind of good looking that makes you throw all your rules out the window. If the women behind him were any indication, he had caught more than one person's attention tonight. As if hearing my thoughts, he looked up from his cards... and directly at me.

My pulse raced. My breathing shallow as I stared back into brilliant emerald, green eyes. His gaze locking me in place on the floor. An appreciative smirk lifted along one side of his mouth, as his eyes traveled along my body not once, but twice.

I felt the room slip away. The crowd, the music, the lights, and smoke, all of it fading until the only thing left was him. I watched disappointedly, as another player at the table pulled his attention back to the game, breaking our

connection. Maybe Fallon was right. This party won't be so bad after all.

CHAPTER 4

A stylized, cursive signature of the name 'Jenner' in black ink. The signature is written in a fluid, handwritten style with a slight shadow effect behind the letters.

Tonight, would be legendary. Not only was the house Oliver, Ronnie and I shared packed with people, but we had an abundance of alcohol and an open schedule for the next two days. I had no doubts, that we'd each have hangovers and long-winded stories of our different vices to tell in the morning.

One vice we all shared was poker. We played harmless games during the week, but on weekends and parties were different. Especially when we had the next day off. The rules were simple: instead of using money, we traded chips for "scores".

1 Score = 1 task or favor the holders' choosing

Scores could be used for any reason. Something simple, like no chores for the week. All the way to something more complex, like completing a dare with no questions asked. The higher the stakes of the task, the more scores it took off the board.

A large chalkboard behind the poker table held a list of players and their scores. Over the past year, I had held the lead, Oliver chasing close behind. Too close for comfort some days. The other players would swap their scores easily, but I had yet to cash in. I preferred to save them for special occasions.

Tonight's game was proving my winning streak. I had four of a kind in my hand. I felt the crowd behind me creep closer. The usual groupies were hanging around, pretending to understand poker. Hoping to snag one of us for a quickie once the game ended. Over the years, I've had my fair share of hookups before, during and after these parties. As tempting as it seemed in the moment, it always left me feeling unsatisfied. *But a man has needs...*

The hair on the back of my neck stood up as I felt a new pair of eyes glance my way from across the room. I looked up, expecting to see one of the usual girls hoping to get my attention. Only to find the culprit wasn't one I recognized and a cute one at that.

Not breaking eye contact, I made sure she caught me checking her out. A low-cut red dress drew my attention to her chest first, then further down to a short skirt that clung to her ass and long tan legs despite her short stature. She had curves other girls would kill for, a perfect hourglass figure. My hands twitched, itching to see if her skin was as smooth as it looked.

I expected to find her blushing from my obvious attraction. Instead, I found her watching me with the same instant curiosity. Dark brown curls and makeup framed her innocent face as she stared back, unwavering. Mischief filling her eyes as she dared me to make a move. *Just my type.*

Oliver's thick British accent diverted my attention as he punched me in the arm. "Why don't you go talk to her instead of undressing her with your eyes?"

"The night's still young." I smirked, winking at the girl. There would

be plenty of time to catch up with her later. I had a game to finish. But that didn't stop me from letting my eyes linger on her backside, moment longer than necessary as she walked into the kitchen.



The poker table was offering a magnificent view of the dance floor tonight. Particularly of a pretty brunette in a red dress, who was distracting me just enough to throw me off my game. I watched as she spun joyfully around the floor of our living room, looking free as a bird. Yet the longer I watched her, the more familiar she seemed.

I had been racking my brain for the past ten minutes trying to figure out where I could have known her from. I was coming up empty. She didn't go to this campus. I would have known her then. Maybe she was a transfer? More than likely, she was a party crasher. Not that I would hold that against her, the more the merrier and all that. *Oh well, I'll figure it out soon enough.*

"Jenner, are you all in or not?" Ronnie asked from across the table.

"I'm in." I answered, throwing 4 more chips into the middle of the pile.

As it was, I still had the largest pile sitting in front of me. Oliver was second and Ronnie was dead last. He had yet to learn the rules of this type of game, and the kid was an open book on his best day. When he was drinking, it got even worse. One by one, everyone placed their cards face up on the table, each one more confident than the last.

Post Malone's "Motley Crew" blared through the speakers, as movement caught my eye. My girl and her friend were moving to the edge of the dance floor. There was my opening.

"Sorry boys. I'm gonna take a break."

Cheers and snide remarks rose around the table. I noted how many scores I was winning so the boys couldn't cheat before tossing my cards into Ronnie's hand, winking as his face light up.

The boys' loud arguments drowned out the music as I walked through the crowded room. Ronnie had laid the cards on the table, bringing his scores up even higher. Zach's grumbling "That's not fair!", then Oliver's swearing "Jenner, you wanker! Ronald, give me those cards!" Their voices faded into

the background as I approached the girl I'd been watching all night.

Up close, she was even prettier than I thought. Lost in conversation with her friend, she didn't notice my approach, giving me a few moments to think of a good opening line. First impressions were important, and this needed to be perfect. Running a hand through my hair, creating that messy look all girls loved, I cleared my throat, announcing my arrival.

Obviously, under the influence, the girl yelped. Oh great, I had startled her. She tumbled, tripping over heels that were too high as she turned, landing face first against my chest. Ok, not exactly the way I had planned on introducing myself, but I could make it work.

Catching her easily, I took a step back. My hands slipping from her waist as the air around me evaporated. My original thought was correct. I did know her, but she definitely didn't belong here.

This particular girl had disappeared from my life as quickly as she had entered it. Taking my heart and memories with her. And now, she was standing in my living room, a long way from home, looking more beautiful than I had ever seen her.

My right hand hung in the air between us, half extended, as if it was reaching out to make sure she was real. Surely, I was having some sort of psychotic break. Someone had spiked my drink. In a state of shock, I said the only thing that came to mind.

“Katherine?”

CHAPTER 5

A stylized, handwritten signature of the name 'Kat' in black ink. The letters are fluid and connected, with a slight shadow effect behind them.

It had been five years since I had last heard anyone use my full name. Katherine.

Just hearing it made my skin itch. The little hairs on the back of my neck prickling with those two syllables. No one on campus knew my real name. Not Fallon, not my teachers. Hell, even my mother respected my wishes and used my self-proclaimed nickname as the truth. So how the hell, did a handsome stranger know my name?

The alcohol running through my veins did nothing to ease the embarrassed blush across my cheeks as I recovered from the fall. Muscles I didn't know existed clung to the fabric of his black t-shirt as my eyes zeroing in on the hint of a tattoo peeking through the fabric of his left shoulder. Jet black hair fell into his eyes as he leaned forward to get a better look. His expression shifting between confusion and something I didn't recognize. He

looked like he'd seen a ghost. Maybe he had.

Those eyes. Bright emerald, green with flecks of gold around the iris. Those I could never forget. They had been watching me at my father's funeral and again as my mother and I packed a U-Haul, never looking back.

Until today of all days. Karma was a bitch.

The three vodka cranberries I had downed upon arrival threatened to make their way back to the surface as my fight-or-flight mode kicked into overdrive. The chokehold my anxiety held against my throat made words impossible as I stared, unabashedly, at Jenner Blackwell. Damn him for aging well and damn me for caring.

It was Fallon who broke the silence first. "Who's Katherine?" She asked, her words muffled against the loud bass rattling the speakers to our right.

Jenner stood at his full height, running a shaky hand through his tousled hair. "Let's go somewhere quieter." Nodding in the general direction of the kitchen, he exited the dance floor. No longer waiting for us to follow.

Fallon turning, raising her eyebrows as she beckoned me to follow him. "Fuck." I hissed. There was no going back now.



Fallon had handled the news better than I expected. She already knew select pieces of my past, and she understood why I kept some things private. She was, however, annoyed I hadn't mentioned I knew an 'extremely hot' man. Not caring that he belonged in the past.

Jenner poured a large glass of tequila lime on the rocks into a crystal glass before sliding it across the marble countertop in front of me.

"You know her favorite drink order?" Fallon asked.

"I know a lot of things." Jenner answered, one eyebrow arched, as he waited to see if I would accept the drink. *This was not a peace offering.*

"Whatever you think you know is in the past. That girl died a long time ago." I fire back defiantly. This entire day was far more than I had been prepared to deal with when I woke up this morning.

"I don't know." Jenner answered, matching my passive aggressive

tone. “She looks alive to me.”

I welcomed the smooth burn of alcohol that coated my throat, as I took a sip from the fancy glass. Jenner turned, a smile forming on his face, as he walked back to the poker table, without another word. Where the same group of guys sat now watching our interaction.

Asshole. If he thought this drink fixed anything, it didn't. It just meant my taste in alcohol hadn't changed. *Or your taste in men.* I thought.



A while later, we found ourselves in the basement; the boys having abandoned their card game for a quieter atmosphere. Oliver, Fallon, and I were crammed onto a small leather loveseat while Jenner sat in a large wingback chair across from us.

Oliver St. James looked like he could have been the Hemsworth brothers' long lost British cousin. Having explained his family history, we learned Oliver had moved to London when he was seven. His father was American, and his mother was British. Giving him the gift of dual citizenship and a love of hockey at an early age. To his mother's dismay, Oliver had left behind a full ride at Cambridge. Choosing instead to come back to the states to chase his dream of playing in the NHL.

For the past hour, he has been recounting stories of his and Jenner's wild adventures at NU. Much like Fallon and I, you'd never guess they'd only known each other a short time.

“So, tell me, Katherine. What made you decide to join our little party tonight?” Oliver asked. When he spoke, he gave you his full attention and a warm, welcoming smile.

Though I hated the use of my full name, I didn't hate the way it sounded with his accent. “It's Kat, please, and Fallon heard about it before I did.” I answered

“Oh?” Oliver moved on the couch to get a better view of my best friend.

“She needed a night out.” Fallon was bordering past tipsy as she answered. Which meant she had even less of a filter than normal.

“Really, how come?” Oliver asked.

I interrupted Fallon before she could speak. I didn’t need her spilling the entire day’s events with her horrible bias towards Noah. “My ex plays for the Saints, and we broke up.”

“You mean you found out he cheated on you with some random puck bunny.” Fallon interjected. “You’re much better off without that asshole.” *Great. That was the one detail I didn’t want to get out.*

A knowing look flashed across Oliver’s face before he responded. “Tell me, did you, find that out this afternoon after the game?”

Damn it. He had been standing in the hallway...which probably meant that Jenner has been as well. “Yes, why?”

“We witnessed the entire ordeal. Let me just say you gave him hell. We thought you’d burn the entire place down from where you stood. You should be proud.”

“We?” I asked, as Oliver nodded towards where Jenner sat silently. His face unreadable.

“It was hard to miss you with all the yelling.” Jenner smirked, leaning forward in the chair.

“The only other time I’ve seen Noah go that white is when Jenner threatened him on the ice a few years back. You remember, right?” Oliver asked.

“One of my favorite memories.” Jenner’s cold exterior cracked slightly at the thought.

Great. Not only had they witnessed the explosion that had been my breakup, but there was obviously a rivalry that went past hockey between Jenner and Noah.

Before I could ask what, the fight was about, Fallon bounced excitedly in her seat. She loved drama. “I decided she needed a night out to get over his looser ass and get under someone new if you know what I mean.” Pulling on a strand of curls, Fallon smiled. “But the hair change was all Kat! Doesn’t she look amazing!”

“She does.”

My head turned so fast it could have flown off. It was one thing when he undressed me with his eyes, not knowing who I was. A compliment now

was another. *Or not.* I thought.

“And which one of these fine gentlemen were you planning on seducing?” Oliver asked, leaning closer, an arm stretched along the back of the back of the couch.

Scanning the room, I came up empty for anyone I was attracted to. Except for one person I should absolutely not go down that road with. No matter how curious the alcohol clouding my better judgment made me think otherwise.

“Well, the original plan had been Jenner.” Fallon answered. I gave up trying to look anywhere but in Jenner’s general direction when I felt his gaze on me once more.

To anyone else, he looked unfazed by Fallon's comment, but I noticed subtle changes in his demeanor. His jaw clenched, nostrils flaring as he watched a warm blush spread across my cheeks. *Stupid hormones. That is not happening.*

CHAPTER 6

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink with a white shadow effect. The signature reads "Tanner" in a cursive, flowing script.

Katherine Townsend was sitting in my basement, looking like an angel with broken wings. She was heaven and hell, wrapped in one tiny perfect form. Tempting, delicious, and completely unexpected. She'd appeared out of thin air, and I knew nothing would be the same.

From the appreciative glances by the lions waiting to pounce around us. I knew I had to move fast. I'm not one to turn down re-bound sex like Fallon was implying, but Katherine was different. This couldn't just be a sloppy second's hook-up in the back of my car. No, this had to be different.

Peeling my creeper like gaze from the red dress that clung to Kat's curves like silk draped over marble, I faintly heard Oliver recounting my latest sexual encounter.

"Trust me, I've heard the things that come out of his bedroom late at night. No woman is ever left unsatisfied. Which is why there's a different one every other night."

While not un-true, I didn't need Katherine, and her shark of a best friend, forming the same assumptions everyone else on campus already had. I was a heartless playboy.

"You're one to talk, Sir." I shoot back at Oliver, knowing it would make his skin crawl in retaliation.

Oliver smirked, his eyes growing dark before bringing the crystal glass of whiskey to his lips. "Only the ladies get to call me that. You know the rules."

To my surprise, Fallon caught the unspoken meaning behind his words, and she watched Oliver with a newly reformed interest. Lucky for her, she's just his type. Unluckily, for him, she'd chop his balls off the second he even

tried.

Her pale skin was a stark contrast to her tiny black dress. Her dark red hair reading as a warning for her fiery personality. Yeah, she's definitely hurt my guy if he even suggested the things I knew ran through his mind.

“See, I was right, that’s exactly what you need!” Fallon slurred, waving her hand between Kat and I. She was officially drunk.

“Fal, give it up.” Kat whispered, “It’s not like I can use him to get back at Noah now.

“Why not?” I ask suddenly interested in the conversation.

“Umm...” Kat mumbles, the alcohol clearly having prompted her previous statement. “Well... because... because I don’t want to be another one of your puck bunnies.” Kat answered proudly.

Now it was my turn to catch her off guard. “You would never be one of them. You don’t fit that description.”

“See, you don’t even find me attractive.” Kat argued with a controlled expression.

“I never said that. I’d be more than happy to show you exactly how much I find you attractive.”

This time she couldn’t control the shocked blush that filled her cheeks. Ducking her head, careful not to look in my direction. That was a new response. Years previously, she would have fired a sarcastic remark right back.

“Yay! I knew this was a good idea!” Fallon yelled, high fiving Oliver behind Kat’s head.

“I’d have to agree with you there.” Oliver answered knowing you could cut the tension with a knife between Kat and I.

“I need another drink.”

Kat stood wobbling even more than she had when she had fallen into me. Those heels of hers were a death trap. Sighing, I stood, following her up the stairs. Keeping just enough distance between us so she didn’t know I was checking on her safety.

I found her standing at the edge of the makeshift dance floor in the living room. Chris Stapleton’s Tennessee Whiskey wafted through the speakers. That song was not on our usual playlist. Someone must have found

the iPad, hidden in the hall cabinet, that controlled the music and the lights.

Walking up behind her, I grabbed Kat's hand, pulling her onto the dance floor before I had second thoughts. She yelped in surprise as I spun her into my chest, beginning to slow dance around the room.

"What are you doing?" She asked nervously. Only couples occupied the dance floor, lost lovingly in each other's gaze.

"Dancing." I replied simply. I hadn't thought this far ahead, having only acted on instinct.

"I don't want to dance with you." Kat scoffed, blowing a strand of hair out of her face.

"I'm just doing what you asked. Helping you get back at your ex."

"Noah isn't even here."

"No, he isn't. This is just practice." I whispered in her ear, before dipping her backwards. Staring into Kat's eyes as I held her in my arms, I saw a flicker of the warmth I knew she was capable of. My girl was still in there somewhere. I just had to bring her out.

"Breathe Katherine." I whispered before bringing her upright. I don't think she noticed she had been holding her breath the entire dance.

"I was supposed to be getting another drink." She answered, removing herself from my grasp.

"As you wish." I whispered, winking. I bowed at the waist, one arm extended towards the kitchen, the other wrapped around my torso.

A giggle fell from her perfectly pink lips as she rolled her eyes, retreating into the kitchen. What she didn't realize was I was about to switch her tequila to water.



Standing on the porch, Oliver and I watched as the last few guests left the house piling drunkenly into Ubers and cabs. No one was allowed to drink and drive home from our house.

"I think we need to go home." Fallon slurred, searching for her keys coming up empty. "Where's my purse?" She asked.

"You left it downstairs." Oliver answered, finishing his cigarette before

throwing it into an ashtray on the railing. “You girls don’t need to go anywhere but straight to sleep.”

Fallon wrinkled her nose. “We are not sleeping here.” She stated. As if this place was a seedy motel instead of a house full of kids her age. On second thought, maybe she had a point.

“You don’t have to sleep with anyone, darling, but you do have to sleep.”

“Like you’d ever get the chance.”

“Yes, yes, I know. You wound my ego. Come on, let’s get you some coffee and toast to soak up some of that alcohol.” Oliver answered, ushering Fallon back inside the house.

“Come on, up you go.” I throw Kat carefully over my shoulder. She’s light as a feather, only 130 pounds soaking wet, but she’s wiggling as I walk through the kitchen, catching stares from the few stragglers left to leave the party.

“Nice ass.” Kat mumbles, poking at my backside.

Laughing, I gently tap hers as I make my way up the stairs to my bedroom. “Back at ya.”

This was going to be a long night. *My resolve was about to be tested.*



As I settle into the brown leather chair now blocking the door, I wait for Kat’s breathing to slow. I don’t need her drunkenly wandering off into another teammate’s bedroom. *Especially Oliver’s.*

Kat is different than I remember, no doubt having re-invented herself twice over since I saw her last. Creating a new life free of her old memories when she came here and again today. Her newly died hair, fans across my pillow as she’s curled up underneath the covers fast asleep. I can’t say this isn’t the first time I’ve imagined her in my bed, yet under very different circumstances.

During the day Kat pretends to not be haunted by the past, though it so clearly follows her every move. But here in the darkness, she looks peaceful. Determined to protect her, I make a promise.

“Your ex was an idiot. You deserve better, Kat. I will do everything in my power to keep you safe and happy. Even if you don’t want to let me.”

CHAPTER 7

A stylized, cursive signature of the name 'Kat' in black ink. The letters are fluid and interconnected, with a slight shadow effect behind the main text.

The first thing I noticed was the smell. Clean and dark, a mixture of pine, citrus, and bourbon. I roll nestling further underneath thick blankets and pillows. Searching for the source of the delicious scent. The comfort is fleeting as my eyes shoot open. Broken memories from the night before filling my brain.

The breakup, the party. Too many shots of tequila, which explained the construction crew trying to put my brain back together. Laughing with Fallon, meeting Oliver, seeing Jenner... then everything gets fuzzy.

Groaning, I look around the unfamiliar room. Every inch of the dark navy walls were covered in hockey gear, photos, and random memorabilia. A

wooden antique desk sat in the corner, organized neatly for school, my dress, purse and shoes neatly folded in the center. The entire room was spotless. Not a single thing was out of place, which was unusual for a boy in his early twenties.

The second thing I notice is Jenner. Fast asleep sitting up in the leather chair that belonged at his desk. He couldn't have been comfortable. His head was falling off the back of the chair, arms hanging over the sides, as he slouched uncomfortably, trying to create as much room for his long as possible. His hair was a mess, and he was shirtless. Dressed in only grey sweatpants and a large cream-colored Sherpa blanket wrapped around his shoulders. *Yum. If he was anyone else, I'd be all over him.*

A glass of cold water and a bottle of aspirin sat on the end table next to the bed, with a note addressed to Kit Kat. Rolling my eyes at the childhood nickname, I unfold the small piece of paper, squinting in the darkness to make out the words.

Take two pills and small sips of water.

P.S: Don't kill me in my sleep

I take the pills before crawling to the edge of the bed. I'm wearing nothing but his t-shirt and my red lace thong. *Lovely.* I pull the shirt over my head and once again I'm hit with his scent. Forget the fact that he's incredibly good looking. That alone is enough to make any girl weak in the knees. *No wonder he's with a different girl every few days.*

I pull the dress up over my hips, wishing I had something more comfortable to go home in. When I hear the chair move. Pausing, I turn in his direction. He's watching me with lust filled eyes, looking like he wants to take a bite out of my ass, as a slow whistle leaves his lips.

"Damn, that's one hell of a sight to wake up to."

"Oh, shut up." I answer, throwing a heel at his head which he catches easily.

"Well aren't you just a ray of sunshine in the morning?"

Years of hockey had done wonders for his body. Arms stretched above his head, the blanket falls from his shoulders, giving me a full view of his abs

and a v shape, I want to trace with my tongue, as his sweatpants hang dangerously low across his hips.

“I’ve got a hangover from hell.” I mumble, pulling the dress all the way on.

Jenner moves, standing behind me. He’s too close for comfort. The edge of the desk digs into my hip bones and my back rests against his chest. I can feel his breath on my neck as his knuckles brush down my spine. He zips the back of my dress before speaking.

“There’s a simple way to fix that.”

“Oh?” I ask.

I feel him nod against my hair before he takes a step back. “Come on, I’ll show you.”

I grip the edge of the desk, as if it’ll keep me from afloat under the wave of emotion that washes over me.. Jenner retreats to the closet before returning with a sweatshirt in his hand. “Put this on. We don’t want you getting cold.”

I slip the sweatshirt over my head, welcoming the warmth. I look at Jenner’s back, studying his tattoos. It looked like they split him in half, two sides waging war across his back and broad shoulders. The left side of his body was covered in ice, the right side in flames. Across his shoulder blades, his last name inked forever into his skin. Underneath, breaking free from the ice, was a hockey player. On the opposite side was a firefighter fighting the flames that licked up the lower half of his back. In the middle of his back was half of the Devil’s hockey logo and half of the San Diego Firefighter emblem. A C was inked underneath his left shoulder blade, and 117 inked under his right.

My breath caught at the sight. Station 117... My father’s old firehouse. I knew his tattoo represented two halves of the same person. Two paths he could have taken in life. One for family, the other for himself. Tears stung my eyelids, threatening to spill over, as I watched the numbers disappear beneath his t-shirt.



“Pancakes?” I ask as we pull into a parking spot outside the local cafe.

“Yes, greasy food will cure that hangover of yours. Coffee will help with the bitchiness.”

“I’m not bitchy.” I respond. My words lost, and muffled as Jenner jumps out of the car, closing the door behind him.

Twirling his keys in one hand, Jenner leans against the hood of his black dodge charger waiting for me to exit. *So much for chivalry*. I ought to sit here a little longer out of spite, but as the smell of pancakes causes my stomach grumble. *Fine, he wins - this time*.

“Why didn’t Fallon and Oliver come with us?” I ask as we walk into the cafe. The door chiming above my head.

“Because we need to talk about last night.” Jenner answers, smiling at the hostess before holding up two fingers.

We find a booth in the corner of the room, my mind trying desperately to pull drunken memories from my brain. Jenner’s green eyes look at me overtop a faded menu.

“You don’t remember much, do you?”

“No. What happened?” I ask, pouring a warm cup of coffee from the pitcher sitting on the table.

Setting the menu down on the tabletop, Jenner smiles, leaning closer. “Allow me to fill in the gaps in your memories.” His fingers tick off imaginary boxes as he answers. “You got drunk, tried to have seduce me, and then passed out in my bed.”

“Oh, and there’s the fact that we’re dating now.”

“I’m sorry what?” I sputter choking on hot coffee that burned my throat.

“Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten, sweetheart?” Jenner asks, hand clutching his chest, eyelashes fluttering. *Dramatic much?*

“I don’t blame you. There was nothing you could do to avoid my charms. It was only a matter of time.” He continues.

“You are so full of shit.” I emphasize waving a hand across the small space between us “We are not dating.”

“We are. I can prove it.” Jenner pulls his phone out of his pocket. On the screen is a picture of the two of us. His face was covered in my particular

shade of red lipstick. As I lay across his bare chest, laughing.

“All that proves is that I was drunk and horny.”

“Oh, I know. You tried more than once to get me naked last night.” Jenner laughs. “Now, to the topic at hand. You. Me. Dating.”

“We are not dating. End of discussion.” I answer, as the waitress sets our food to the table. Two full plates of pancakes, eggs and bacon.

“You can’t tell me you wouldn’t love to see the horrified look on your ex’s face when he sees you on my arm? Maybe push his buttons a bit?” Jenner asks, taking a large bite of his food.

“It would never work.”

“Why not?” Jenner asks, his eyebrows pulling together in confusion.

“Because we don’t like each other.” I answer angrily.

Jenner stops eating, setting his fork down on the table. “Listen. Stop being grumpy and ignore our history for a second.” He waits to make sure I’m paying attention before continuing. “We both have a common enemy. Why not use that to get back at your ex for how he treated you? The relationship doesn’t have to be real. You just have to pretend to like me for more than five seconds. And I might add, this was your idea to begin with.”

Damn it. He had a point...

“Let’s say for one second I go along with this insane plan. How would we know when to end our fake relationship?” I question.

“That’s easy. Both teams are on track to play in the Championship game in April. We could end our relationship after that game.” *April? That was six months from now.*

“We would have to pretend for six months. I don’t think we could last that long.”

“You may not be able to, but I have incredible stamina. I’ll prove it to you soon.” Jenner winks, taking a sip of his coffee.

“You’re impossible.”

Could we actually fake a relationship? I had to admit; the idea was enticing. Noah would be furious. It’s not like Jenner was a horrible option and he obviously liked the idea. If anything, it would make for a funny story later on. *Shit. Was I actually about to make a deal with the devil?*

“Ok. We’ll fake date until the championship game.” *This is a horrible*

idea. Here goes nothing. Fallon was going to be ecstatic.

CHAPTER 8



Even though we've been winning games, Coach is taking no chances at mid-season screw ups. We've been running drills at practice for the past two hours, and we're all struggling.

Ronnie looks green through his helmet as I slide to a stop beside him. "You alright kid?"

"Yeah, I'll be fine. Just tired." He whispers, removing his helmet.

"Listen, Coach can be tough, and he'll push you to your limits, but

that's also why he's the best. Allowing nothing less than perfection. It's why we've won 2 national championships back-to-back. It's also why we have 4 alumni players in the NHL."

The Ronnie nods, breathing deeply, readying himself for another round of drills. It's no doubt that everyone on this team dreams of playing professionally. It comes with the territory. Yet, despite their talent, most of our team will only see an NHL rink from the stands. Even though we have the best players in the country and killer stats, it's a numbers game and not everyone will be chosen for the draft.

Coach stands at center ice, directly over the team logo, whistle blowing. The signal for another round of endurance drills and then scoring drills right after. As team Captain I can see the guys are tired and are ready to call Coach every name in the book. Taking a deep breath, I'm the first one out on the ice. Prepped and waiting. I nod at Coach, as my teammates join me one by one.

Oliver slides to a stop beside me, grumbling under his breath. "This is bullshit."

Coach glares in Oliver's direction, his voice bellowing across the ice. "Have something to share with everyone, St. James?"

"No sir. Just preparing to kick ass at Friday's game."

"Good answer." Coach eyes us once more before checking his watch. "Let's go ladies, we have another half hour of practice before you're done."

Bumping Oliver in the shoulder, I whisper so Coach doesn't overhear. "First one done gets five scores."

Oliver smiles, getting into position. "Make it ten and we've got a deal."

Coach blows the whistle once more and we're off. Forget the fact that we have the best team in the league. This team is a family. We will always have each other's backs. Even if it means puking through the finish line.



There are three missed calls and two texts from Kat when practice is over. I sit on the bench in the locker room, my entire body resembling jello, as I scan her messages.

Kat: Call me ASAP!!

Kat: Jenner I'm serious. Call me now.

That can't be good. I pull up my call history and dial Kat's number. She picks up on the third ring.

"Why haven't you been answering my messages?" She asks, her voice raising louder with every word. I could hear her footsteps pacing across the floor in her apartment in the background.

"I had practice all morning, remember? What's going on? Why all the calls and frantic messages?"

"Check your social media."

Putting the phone on speaker, I open the app and curse. There are two videos on the screen. One of Kat going crazy on Noah the day they broke up, and the other is a video of me carrying Kat through the house like a caveman the night of the party. *Cat's out of the bag now.*

The caption below reads "Someone's been busy. Trading herself between teams in one day." The comment section is even worse. Through the phone I can hear Fallon cussing and threatening anyone who tries to smear her best friend's name.

I laugh as Fallon's voice screeches through the phone. "Jenner! This is not funny!"

"I know, I know it's not funny. Do you know who posted it?" I ask.

Hearing the commotion, Oliver walks over, raising his eyebrows in question. *What's wrong?* He mouths. I hand him the phone and watch him grimace, shaking his head, as the video plays.

"Noah, who else?" Kat answers. The anger melting from her voice as it cracks. "He's trying to make himself the victim in all of this. He's been texting and calling all morning."

Noah would have been the obvious choice; except I knew for a fact neither he or his new girlfriend had attended the party that night. Which meant someone else had to have taken the second video.

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I sighed. "Where are you?"

"Home." She answered.

“Stay there. Oliver and I will come pick you two up later this evening and we’ll fix all of this, ok?” I ask.

“This was exactly what I didn’t want to happen.” We had only been fake dating for one week and Kat was not about to back out on our agreement now. “Breathe, Kat. I’ll handle it.” I promised.

“Ok, I’ll see you later.” I grip the phone, knuckles white, as we say our goodbyes.

“Whose ass do we get to kick?” Oliver asked, his voice level, as he cracks his knuckles menacingly. I knew it took a lot for him to control the anger building inside.

“I don’t know yet.” I answer, throwing the phone into my gym bag.

But I did know one thing. No one would stand in the way of us being happy. Whatever was going on, it was my job to fix it and I knew just the spot to help kill two birds with one stone.



Hank’s Pizza was a common hangout spot for kids from both colleges, since it was located between the two. The pizza parlor/dive bar had been a Seattle staple for over 20 years. The wooden floor was worn from years of foot traffic, the bar top sticky with stale beer, and the red leather booths tattered. But they had the best pizza in the entire downtown area, plus 15% off beer for college students after game days. It was the perfect spot for Kat and I, to debut our budding romance.

Hanks was packed for a Tuesday night. After a Saints loss, more than one pair of eyes would be watching us. Oliver, Fallon, Ronnie, Kat and I sat around a booth in the middle of the restaurant, making it the perfect spot for curious eyes to wander. Kat rested her head on my shoulder as we waited for the pizzas to arrive. We were the picture of happiness.

“So, when are we going to get back at you know who?” Oliver asked, glancing around the room mysteriously.

“You can say his name, Oliver. He’s not Voldemort. Though you, of all people, might get them confused.” Fallon teased, as Oliver stuck his tongue out in her direction.

“You do have a plan, right?” Fallon asked protectively.

“Don’t worry darling, we have a plan.” Oliver answered, pouring on the charm. *Forget it buddy, you’d have a better chance wrestling a shark.*

“We?” Fallon questioned. “Oh great, it’s dumb and dumber. Live in action.”

“Where are you going?” Kat asks as I get up, empty beer bottle in hand.

“Need a refill. Don’t worry, babe, I’ll be right back.” I wink in Kat’s direction, watching her smile. She looks beautiful tonight. Dressed in a pink sweater and ripped jeans. Her brown hair pulled back into a low bun, a few strands framing her face.

What I was about to do next could either go very well or backfire horribly. Both were contingent on Kat’s reaction. Tilting the bottom of her chin upwards with my finger, I stare into her bright blue eyes. I rest her forehead against mine, pausing momentarily as Kat leans in closer. *Green light.*

I brush her soft plump lips against mine. I’m not the type of man to feel fireworks on a first kiss, but damn, this was close. My hand cupped her chin as Kat kissed me back happily. Pulling away, I stare into her wide eyes, happy to see a flicker of disappointment at the end of the kiss. *So, she was attracted to me, no matter how much she protested. Interesting.*

“Aww, aren’t you two just sickeningly cute?” Fallon jests, rolling her eyes as she shows us her phone. She had snapped a picture... *Damn, we make a good-looking couple. I’d be jealous of us too if I were her ex.*

“Post that.” I whisper.

“Why?”

“Trust me. It’s the first step in revenge, baby.” Running my thumb across her bottom lip, I walk casually up to the bar top and order another round. At a table across the restaurant, a group decked in Saint’s gear, glance curiously between me and the table. *Hook, line, and sinker.*

I take a round of drinks back as Kat’s phone rings incessantly for the fourth time since we’d sat down. I take the phone from her hand and answer. Placing it on speakerphone as Noah’s irritating voice fills the air.

“What the hell Kat! Jenner Blackwell? I know you didn’t handle the news of me moving on well but fucking my rival won’t bother me like you

think it will.”

Kat starts to speak but I place a hand on her shoulder silencing her. “Oh, I think it’s working exactly the way it’s supposed to.”

“Jenner. I should have known.” Noah sneers, his tone cold.

“From where I’m standing, I’d say you gave up on the best thing that ever happened to your sorry ass.”

“Enjoy my sloppy seconds.” Noah laughs.

“Oh, don’t worry, I will. On the way here, she gave me the most mind blowing hea-” Before I can finish my sentence, the dial tone sounds through the speaker.

“For the record, I never did that.” Kat glares up at me before taking the phone from my hands.

“Only in my dreams.” I wink, sliding into the booth next to her. Tonight, had been an amazing success. We had gotten under Noah’s skin. *Score one.* Kat had kissed me back. *Score two.*

CHAPTER 9



Mid-terms were in two days and my brain felt like a scrambled egg someone had left in the pan too long, the edges now fried and crispy. A mountain of textbooks sat in the corner of our living room, while pages of notes, highlighters, and study guides littered the coffee table.

Fallon was hanging upside down off the couch, hugging a throw pillow, and mumbling underneath her breath.

“What was that?” I asked, not catching her incoherent babbling.

“I was complaining about my choice of becoming a lawyer.” Releasing a sigh, she rolled over onto her stomach, grabbing a piece of candy from the jar on the table. “I need a mental break.”

“I feel you there.” I answered, closing my anatomy textbook, as my phone dinged with an incoming message.

Jenner: What are you doing tonight?

Kat: Most likely drying my tears with pages of a textbook. I’m studying Jenner, we have midterms in two days.

Jenner: Boo... take a break and come see me.

Kat: I can’t. You’ll just have to find something else to fill your time. I have to study for my anatomy midterm.

Jenner: I can think of a way you could learn all about anatomy without your silly textbook getting in the way ;)

Kat: You’re impossible.

Jenner: You love it ;)

That boy is something else. Pocketing my phone, I turn my attention back to the mountain of books we still had yet to open... maybe Fallon had a point.

“How’s Jenner?”

“How did you know I had been talking to Jenner?” I asked, knowing she had been too far away to see my phone.

“Because you just lit up like a freaking Christmas tree.” Fallon teased. “You like him!”

“No, I don’t. We’re just using each other. This whole arrangement is fake.” I remind my best friend, who currently looked like a cat that caught a mouse. Smug and happy.

“Oh, come on, Kat. You can’t tell me you aren’t even a bit little interested in him. The man is tall, gorgeous, muscular, and not a total asshole 100% of the time. What isn’t there to like?”

“It’s complicated, Fal.”

“No, it isn’t. You’re making it complicated. Need I remind you, you kissed him back at Hanks the other night.”

“That was fake. We were putting on a show to get under Noah’s skin and it worked.”

“You can’t fake chemistry like that. Just admit it, Kat. You’re attracted to him. You think he’s sexy and you want to make cute little dark-haired hockey babies with him.”

“Alright, alright.” I groan. “Shut up about it. First, I do not want to make cute little hockey babies with him. Second, yes, I find him attractive. You’d have to be blind not to. Are you happy now?”

“Yes, I am. Thank you.” Why Fallon ever questioned wanting to be a lawyer was beyond me. That girl could get anyone to do anything she wanted, no questions asked.

“Let’s take a break from studying and talking about fake boyfriends. Maybe order takeout, watch a movie, and then get back to work?” I ask as Fallon nods excitedly, already walking into the kitchen to get the takeout menus. *Finally, anything to get her to stop bugging me about Jenner.*



The doorbell rings inside the apartment just as we finalize our movie choice. Neither of us was in the mood for anything romantic, so we settled for a classic thriller.

“Fal, food’s here!”

Opening the door, I expect to see a delivery man holding a bag full of tacos, chips, and queso. Instead, I see Jenner leaning casually against my doorframe. He’s dressed nicely in dark jeans, a white t-shirt and grey flannel. In his hand is a bouquet of pink roses and a blindfold.

“You’re not the Mexican food I ordered.” Suddenly self-conscious, I cross my arms, hoping to hide the fact that I’m not wearing a bra. I am dressed for comfort, in short black shorts, and my dad’s old San Diego firefighter hoodie.

“No, I’m not and I regret to inform you that plans have been canceled for the evening.” Jenner smiles, showing off a row of perfectly straight white teeth. How he hasn’t lost any in a fight I’d never understand.

“They have?” I ask, wondering what he’s up to. “Why are you here?”

“Isn’t it obvious? I’m here to kidnap you. We’re going on a date.” Jenner pushes past me and into the apartment, uninvited taking it all in. “You have a nice place.” He says. I’d given him my address and phone number when we started fake dating, but I never thought he’d show up unannounced. *I shouldn’t be surprised.*

Fallon walks into the foyer, cash in hand. She stops dead in her tracks when she see’s Jenner. “What do we owe for the pleasure of your presence today?”

“I’m stealing your roommate for the evening and taking her on a proper date.”

“Awesome!” Fallon answers, giving Jenner a once over. “Don’t be rude, Kat. Thank the man for the flowers and go get ready.”

“I told you I couldn’t go out tonight. I have to study.”

“You can study tomorrow. Besides, by the looks of it, you need an escape. And it’ll break my heart if you say no.” Jenner’s bottom lip juts out as he flashes his green eyes in my direction. *Damn puppy dog look. It’ll get me every time.*

“You don’t want to be responsible for a broken heart, Kat.” Fallon

answers.

“The flowers are beautiful.” I respond, taking them from Jenner’s outstretched hand. “Give me twenty minutes to get ready, and then we can go.”

My day had drastically taken a turn. Passing by the mirror in the hallway, I glance at my reflection. My hair is in knots on the top of my head, I have no makeup on my face, and I can’t remember if I even brushed my teeth this morning.

Fuck. How in the world am I supposed to get ready in twenty minutes?! For a DATE with Jenner Blackwell!

“Take your time!” Jenner calls, answering the door as our food delivery finally arrives. He shoves Fallon’s hand away, pulling out his wallet instead, paying for what will now be her dinner instead of mine. She protests, but I hear his muffled reply. “It’s the least I can do for kidnapping your best friend, changing your evening plans, and making you eat alone.”

That was sweet. Who is he? I think as I take my hair down, brushing out the tangles. This is not the arrogant man I’m used to.



Our first official date. God, that was terrifying. Jenner had taken me to a Mexican restaurant downtown, since I hadn’t gotten to eat the food, I’d ordered at home before we found ourselves at the Seattle Aquarium. We had been the last one’s allowed entry, the aquarium only staying open for another hour.

Jenner teased me relentlessly as we strolled through the exhibits.

“So, you want to have my cute little hockey babies, huh? I hate to break it to you love, but we’ll have to wait a few years before that. A baby at the moment doesn’t go well with my five-year plan.”

I punched him in the arm. It turned out that I had accidentally butt dialed him this afternoon, and he’d overheard my entire embarrassing conversation with Fallon. I was mortified.

“That conversation was private.”

“Really? I think you called me on purpose. I think you wanted me to hear just how much you like me. You just don’t want to admit it.”

“Nope.” I answer, inspecting a tank full of coral and brightly colored fish. “What’s your five-year plan?” I ask, desperate to change the subject to something else.

“My five-year plan consists of graduating college and getting drafted straight to the NHL. I don’t care what team I play for, just that I make it there, ya know? You don’t make as much in your rookie years as you do later on, but it would be more than enough to buy the finer things in life. A nice house, expensive car. Who knows, maybe find a nice girl, and settle down. What’s yours?”

“I don’t have one.”

“You don’t have a plan for your future?” Jenner asks, his face contorting with a million questions.

“Nope. Life is too short. I’ve learned not to plan too far in advance. You don’t know what’s going to happen. All your plans could change in an instant and then all the hoping and dreaming you’d done would be for nothing.” It was a heavy answer to a simple question, but it was an honest one.

“That makes sense.” I watched as Jenner chose his next words carefully. “You never talk about it. The past. I hope you know I’m always here if you ever need to. Your dad was a good man.”

Guilt washed over me as I took in his sincere expression. There was no hidden meaning or agenda behind his words, just genuine care. Not talking about it was a self-defense mechanism to protect myself from memories that were far too painful to think about.

“I appreciate that. Thank you. I don’t talk about it because it’s still too fresh. Too painful.” I answered. “When mom and I moved here, we packed away a lot of his things. Except for one. His truck. Well, it’s my truck now, I guess. Driving it every day helps. It makes me feel closer to him in a way. Some days, it’s the only thing that keeps me sane.”

“Grief is a powerful thing. We all have to cope with it, and it sounds like you’ve found a good one.”

We moved out of the dimly lit exhibit down the hall to another much brighter space. I’m not ashamed to say I squealed like a kid in a candy store.

“What?” Jenner asked, reading the sign above the exhibit that said

Marine Animals. The Aquarium had dedicated an entire exhibit to different species seals and otters.

“Otters are my favorite animals on the entire planet.” I run towards the glass, feeling Jenner’s eyes watching my every move, as the two most adorable sea otters play in the water.

Jenner let me stay at the otter exhibit as long as I wanted before we moved into the glass dome underneath the Puget Sound. The concrete dome overlooked the wildlife below the sound’s surface. It was beautiful. The 360-view left you feeling as if you were actually under water.

“What are your other favorite things? I’ll exclude myself from that list.” Jenner asks, coming to stand beside me.

“Hmmm... color red, movie Sweet Home Alabama, season winter, flowers roses, food anything but fish, candy white chocolate.”

“Good to know. Maybe that’s why your heart is so cold.”

“Alright, smart ass. What are your favorite things?”

“Color blue, movie Fast and Furious, season summer, food Italian, candy, anything sour.”

“Why did you leave California if you love the warm weather?” I ask.

“I was looking for a girl. I knew I had a higher chance of running into her one day if I was here.”

A blue light reflected off the water as I looked at Jenner, a million questions running through my mind. *He had come looking for me? How did he even know we had moved to Seattle? Had he really chosen to go to NU because of me?*

One thing was clear: there was much more to Jenner than met the eye.

CHAPTER 10

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink with a light grey shadow effect. The signature reads "Jenner" in a cursive, flowing script.

It's Friday, and it's an off day. Which means our house is full of people. After getting under Noah's skin Tuesday, I'd added a few additional names to the guest list tonight. I had something special planned upon their arrival. I took another sip of Jack Daniels, scanning the crowd once more. I wasn't entirely sure we'd come out unscathed from what I had planned for this evening, but it would be worth it either way.

"Looking for your girl?" Oliver asked, pouring himself a glass of brandy. Oliver had expensive taste. Growing up as a trust fund baby would do that to you. He was protective of three things: alcohol, cars, and women. One of which he was in short supply of at the moment.

"She'll be here soon. What about you? Who's the special lady this week?" I asked.

“Ahh, that is yet to be determined. I do have my eyes on one, but she’s proving to be difficult.” When Oliver set his sights on something, he always got what he wanted. We had that in common. It was how we started keeping score. A fun game to see who was better at getting what they wanted. Which typically resulted in a tie.

“Did you invite our guests of honor?” Oliver questioned.

“Yes. I sent a message this morning via carrier pigeon.” I respond with an eye roll. “If they’re smart, they’ll stay away, but we both know they’re not the brightest bulbs in the bunch.”

Leaning against the kitchen counter, Oliver looked confused. “I never understood that phrase.”

“Don’t even get me started on the things you say that none of us understand.”

“I’m just trying to educate you on the proper ways to insult someone.”

“Then consider us all failing.”

“Rightfully so. I’m going to go smoke. You want to join?” He asked, tapping the pocket of his black leather jacket. Oliver liked to smoke cigars when he was drinking.

“No, I’m alright. Thanks though.” I answered. Not in the mood to end up coughing all night.

I had asked Kat to bring something with her to the party tonight, and I was hoping she had followed through. My plan relied on it.

Oh great. Vanessa was making her way into the kitchen. Having been one of the revolving girls going in and out of my bedroom, Vanessa was holding a grudge. She was nice but she had her own thoughts on what we were going to be. *All of them incorrect.*

She tossed a glare my way grabbing a bottle of vodka off the counter. “Are you dating that girl from SU?” She asked. Her lips pursed sourly as she poured more than her fair share of liquor into a crystal glass. “I thought you didn’t do relationships?”

“She’s the exception.” I answered. I had made it clear in the past where things stood between us, yet Vanessa had never taken the hint.

“There were girls at your own school who could have been that exception if you would have given them the chance.” She fired back. Vanessa

was beautiful. Tall, blonde, and all legs. But she wasn't Kat.

"Maybe I should have clarified. She's the ONLY exception." As if on cue, Kat weaved through the large crowd, a bag in hand. My girl had followed through.

A wicked smile crossed my lips as I set my now empty glass down. "Excuse me."

Dressed in tight black leggings and a red cropped hoodie, her brown hair in a messy bun atop her head, she even looked the part she didn't know she was about to play. The bonfire party invitation had come with specific instructions, no fancy clothing. This was a comfort only event. It was also Oliver's favorite party theme. He'd spared no expense on snacks and alcohol on his Mother's credit card.

"Hi gorgeous." I looped an arm around her shoulders, kissing the top of her head.

I was determined to melt that ice box heart of hers and judging by the way she no longer pulled from my embrace, it was working. I waved at Fallon, who ignored me entirely, walking out the back door towards the bonfire.

"Hi. Are you going to tell me why I needed to bring this?" Kat asked, waving the plastic bag in front of my face.

"Soon." I answered. "First we're going to enjoy the party." Ushering her through the doors and out onto the patio. Hoping she hadn't seen the jealous looks from a group of girls in the kitchen.

The back yard was lit up with fairy lights around the large brick patio. Couches and chairs were scattered around a plastic table set up for beer pong. Music filled the air through the speakers as we passed a table of snacks and a cooler full of beer. The bonfire was located at the far back corner of the yard, right by the edge of the woods.

The bonfire created a quiet environment away from the initial party zone. Perfect for anyone who needed a break from the craziness. Most of the chairs around the fire had already been taken. Finding an open spot, I sat, pulling Kat into my lap. Oliver, Ronnie, and Fallon sat a few feet away, obscured by the fire and cigar smoke.

For the first time in a long time, I felt at peace. The constant noise in

my brain quieted, and the world stopped for a moment. It was unusual. I always felt this way on the ice, never off it. I had a strong feeling my current state had to do with the woman sitting in my lap.

The orange glow from the fire highlighted Kat's features in the darkness. *She is dangerous.* We were becoming more comfortable with each other's presence every day, and I was falling for Katherine Townsend. There was no stopping it now.

Being with Kat felt like a breath of fresh air. Something I hadn't realized I'd needed until now. I wasn't about to tell her how I felt. That would go against everything I was trying to do. I needed to win her over and let her decide how she felt in the end, on her own terms. But damn, if it didn't feel good to hold her in my arms with everyone thinking she was mine.

Commotion on the patio pulled me from my thoughts, letting me know our guests had arrived. *The show was about to begin.* I felt Kat tense in my arms as she looked toward the house. Realizing just who I'd invited tonight.

"Why the hell did you invite my ex-boyfriend to your party?" She asked, crouching lower, as if she could make herself disappear into my chest.

"I thought he should see something." I whisper, watching Noah and his friends join a group playing beer pong table on the patio.

"Let's hope he's better at pong than he is at keeping women." Oliver laughed, blowing a puff of smoke into the wind.

Tapping Kat's side, I motion for her to stand before grabbing the plastic bag sitting at my feet. "Is this why you asked me to bring his jersey to the party?"

"Something like that." I respond, nodding at my teammates sitting around the fire. *It's showtime.*

The team stands, forming a circle around the fire as I speak. "We've been National Champs 2 years running, and I know this year won't be any different. You all know I don't lose and now I've got my very own good luck charm." I smile as I pull Kat closer.

"With those things in mind, I thought we'd sacrifice this to the hockey gods tonight, just to be safe." Holding the old Saints jersey above my head, the crowd erupts into cheers. The ugly green, white, and gold jersey lights up in the fire-glow like the bat signal for arrogant hockey players. Just as I had

planned, it gets Noah's attention. He charges toward the fire, his group of burly henchmen trailing close behind.

Kat tenses at my side as I toss the jersey into the fire. The flames engulfing it whole. "That is the last time you'll ever wear another mans name that isn't mine." I promise, taking a long sip of the whiskey in my cup.

Kat laughs, her eyes sparkling with joy as she watches the fire dance across the jersey. "You're insane." *She isn't mad.*

"Only the good kind." I respond, kissing her firmly on the lips. "Don't worry, love. There's another jersey upstairs on my bed with your name on it." Blushing, Kat buries her face into my chest. Right on cue, Noah pushes his way through my teammates at the edge of the fire.

I move Kat behind me. "Go sit with Fallon." I tell her, not taking my eyes off the threat in front of me. I feel her leave as Oliver comes to stand at my right, blocking the girls from Noah's sight line even further.

If it came down to a fight, Noah and his two friends would be outnumbered in a second. Not that he would have the balls to fight me, but I had to be prepared just in case. Noah knew it too, his eyes blazing with hatred.

"I will beat your ass right here and now." He yelled, puffing out his chest in a poor attempt to look menacing.

"I don't think you could, even if you wanted to. But you're more than welcome to try." I motion for him to step forward. "I'll even let you have the first hit."

"Your team can't win a championship without its Capitan."

"Is that a threat?" I ask, taking a step forward. Noah retreats, as I knew he would, bumping backwards into his friends.

"It's a promise." He sneers. "I'll get the evidence to prove it."

"Evidence of what?" I ask, taking another step forward. "That I'm devilishly handsome? The king of hockey and have a smoking hot girlfriend? Thanks for that, by the way." I smirk, enjoying the fact that I'm getting further under his skin with every word. "You've got nothing."

"You better watch your back, Blackwell." Noah threatened, taking half a step forward.

My jaw clenches and I'd love nothing more than to pound his sorry

face into the ground. “I think it’s time for you to leave.” I announce. Without even having to say another word, Oliver steps forward, along with two other teammates. Quickly ushering Noah off our property. *I should have hit him.*

Kat walks up beside me, watching Noah’s form retreat into the darkness. “What evidence was he talking about?”

“I do not know.” And I didn’t. If I had to guess, the entire thing was a half-assed attempt to make me feel threatened. “It’s nothing you need to worry about.”

I certainly would not spend the rest of my night wasting any more time wondering about empty threats. I did, however, plan on spending it with Kat.



“Let’s go see how it looks on, shall we?” I ask, laying across my bed, not so patiently waiting for Kat to come out of the ensuite bathroom.

“I still can’t believe you did that.” Kat yells through the muffled door. She had been scolding me for the past hour over the night’s events. “Oh, come on. You enjoyed it a little.”

“Maybe I did, but it was still stupid.” Her voice was louder now, filling the room as she opened the door. As Kat walked further into the bedroom, I sat up at the edge of the bed to get a better look.

“You look disappointed.” She pouted. “That is not the reaction I was expecting.”

The red and black jersey dwarfed her small body, looking more like a dress than a top. She looked beautiful, and yet all I wanted to do was rip it off her body. “I’m only disappointed because you kept your pants on.” I answer honestly.

“How many other girls have worn your jersey?” Kat asked, spinning around in the center of my room.

“You’re the first.” I had never been serious enough about a girl to let her wear my jersey until now. Using it as a ploy in our fake dating plan had been a bonus on top of the reality that I was using it to mark her as mine. I needed everyone in the stands to know that I belonged to her and she belonged to me.

Kat smiled, moving to stand in between my legs. I ran my fingers along the bottom edge of the jersey. “You should add this to your regular wardrobe. Preferably without pants.”

“You are ridiculous.” She answered, running a hand through my already messed up hair.

“Even if I am, will you wear this to the game next week?” I ask, gripping a handful of the jersey, pulling her closer.

“Of course, what kind of girlfriend would I be if I didn’t support my man?”

“A very naughty one.” I smirked as Kat looked down at me with lust filled eyes. I knew she wouldn’t make the first move. As soon as I saw her bite her bottom lip, I took that as an opening.

I tugged her closer before crashing her lips to mine. That damn red lipstick had been driving me crazy all night and seeing her in my jersey added another level of attraction I didn’t know was possible. She kissed me back relentlessly, her lips parting as I ran my tongue along her bottom lip. A breathy moan escapes her mouth as our tongues tangled together, exploring.

Grabbing her hips, I lifted Kat with ease. She settles onto my lap, her legs straddling my hips. I break the kiss long enough to make my way down her neck. Kissing the spot behind her ear, that drives all girls crazy. I suck hard enough to leave a mark tomorrow. Yet another way to mark what is mine.

When I move, biting the skin by her collarbone, Kat gasps, rocking her hips into the growing bulge in my grey sweatpants. A rough growl leaves my throat as I grip her hips harder, thrusting upward so she can feel just what she’s doing to me. She pulls back, biting her lip as she rocks her hips once more, finding the friction she’s craving against her clit. Pulling her lip from her teeth, I take it in mine, biting and before kissing her once more.

Her hands roam over my shoulders before gripping the material of my t-shirt, pulling me closer, removing what it left little space between us. My hands grip her perky ass and I groan. Thanking God for giving her the perfect behind.

My grip tightens, no doubt leaving a handprint in her flesh. *Too many clothes.* I pause, pulling at the bottom of the jersey, hoping she’ll let me take it off. Holding her arms above her head, Kat allows me to pull it from her body. My mouth waters at the sight of her breasts spilling out of a

black lace covered bra. *She's perfect.*

Quickly removing my shirt, I roll us further onto the bed. Her legs open, allowing me to lie between them. Kat's hands roam across my chest, her fingers running lightly along the ridges of my abs. I rock my hips against hers, letting her feel the full length and hardness of my cock as Kat's fingers inch below the waistband.

Not so fast. I think. Moving her hands against the headboard, trapping them between mine, loving the site. Her chest heaves as she takes a deep breath, drawing my attention back to that sinful lace. Kissing down her chest, I mold my hand across one breast, squeezing tightly as Kat rocks her hips upward. Smirking against her skin, I lick a line between her breasts, blowing lightly across her skin. Pushing the padded fabric down, I exposing a perfectly pink tight nipple. I lean forward, gauging Kat's reaction before sucking it harshly into my mouth. The sting causes her back to arch.

"Does that feel good?" I ask, already knowing her answer. A moan is all the response that I get from Kat before her hands tangle in my hair, pressing me closer to her breast.

I suck lightly at her flesh, my other hand pinching and twisting her nipple between my fingers. I release her nipple with a wet pop, moving back to her lips as my hands run further down her body.

She's so soft. Her curves... My mind wanders, filling with fantasies. But those are for the future. I slow Kat's frantic kissing, rolling her on top of me. My mouth lingering on hers a second longer, before I pull back all together.

"Why are you stopping?" she asks, trying to pull me back under her spell.

"Because we have plenty of time and as much as it's killing me to say no to you right now. I'm not fucking you just to get back at your ex." I answer, running my hands up and down her back, waiting for her to catch her breath.

"Then don't." She whines, pushing her hands against my chest in protest. Her gorgeous body and swollen just kissed lips almost get me to cave. Shaking my head, I sit up against the headboard, which does nothing to help our situation, as her hips slide against mine once more.

“When I finally get to be inside of you, it’ll be because you want me to, not because you’re pissed at your ex. And Katherine?” I ask, making sure she’s paying attention. “When we do have sex, you’ll be begging me for more.” I whisper against her lips, running a hand across the wetness that’s pooled against her thighs.

“Fuck you, I’m begging now.”

Smirking, I brush a strand of hair from her face. “Not even close.” Kissing her forehead, I slide her off me. “You’re cute when you’re angry.” I laugh as she sits on my bed, arms crossed against her chest, pouting as I hand her the dis-guarded jersey.

“Oh, you haven’t seen nothing yet.” She responds, taking the jersey from my hands before walking out my bedroom door and back to the party below. *Fucking hell, this girl will be the death of me. I’ll be taking a cold shower tonight.*

CHAPTER 11



Standing in front of the full-length mirror in my room, I take a long look at myself in Jenner's jersey. It falls well past the middle of my thigh. *Dang giant.* Wearing his jersey doesn't feel suffocating like wearing Noah's did. If anything, it feels comforting.

An idea pops into my head as I grab my phone off the dresser and pose, snapping a quick picture. I'm standing in the mirror, exactly the way he wanted me to be the other night. One hand lifts the jersey, showing the tiniest glimpse of the black lingerie I have on underneath. The memory of our make-out session flashes through my mind as I hit send. *This is payback for stopping the other day.*

Kat: For Good Luck. ;)

Jenner's response was instant.

Jenner: I was right. It looked better without pants. But I think it looks best on the floor.

Kat: That was payback for stopping the other night

Jenner: Payback, huh? We'll see about that.

Finishing getting ready, I pair the jersey with ripped jeans and red converse. Keeping my makeup simple, I adjust the black beanie on my head. *I certainly looked the part of his girlfriend, no matter how fake it was.*

Knocking on Fallon's bedroom door, I look around her boho chic room. Books, plants, and crystals were everywhere in Fallon's room. A white

comforter was draped over her queen-sized bed, half hidden by a green blanket, and rows of pillows. The main wall behind her bed was painted black. With four large golden picture frames hanging above the headboard. Clothes and shoes were scattered across the floor, a telltale sign she had been struggling to pick an outfit.

“Fallon?” I call from the doorway of her bedroom.

“In here!” Her voice answers from somewhere inside her walk-in closet.

“Did you pick an outfit yet?” I ask, giving her a once over. She had on black ripped jeans, a vintage rolling stones t-shirt, and a denim jacket.

“Yes.” Fallon answers, digging through her jewelry box. “What do you think? It’s in the school colors, at least.”

“It’s very you.”

“Thank you. Besides, I wouldn’t be caught dead wearing one of those jerseys.” She answered, grabbing a pair of combat boots from the floor. “No offense.”

“None taken. You have never been a sports person. I wouldn’t expect you to take an interest now.” It was a miracle I had convinced her to go to the game at all. Fallon hated most sports and never saw the point of going to games.

“Correction, I like hockey for the fighting. That’s all.”

“You would go for that reason and not the hot guys.” Fallon rolls her eyes in response.

“Do I look ok?” I ask, suddenly nervous. Picking at the strings peeking through a hole in my jeans.

“You look fabulous! While I can’t pull off one of those jerseys to save my life. It suits you.” Fallon reaches over, tapping the back of the jersey. “Especially the name on the back.”

“Shut up.” I answer, covering my face so she can’t see the smile threatening to break through.

“I told you so.”

“Whatever. Are you going to be ready to leave soon?” I ask impatiently.

Fallon pauses, squinting, her head tilting to the side, as she assesses my

mood. “What’s wrong?” She asks.

“I’m nervous. This is the first game I’ll be going to as his fake girlfriend. What if I screw it up?”

“You’re going to be great. Just picture him on the ice in his underwear if you get too anxious. That should clear it right up.”

“Have I mentioned lately how weird you are?” I ask.

“Yes, now quit stalling. We need to make it to the arena before this snowstorm hits.” Fallon answers, checking the radar on her phone.

The local forecast was calling for a blizzard this weekend. I may have been born in the land of sun and palm trees, but I had always wished for a white Christmas. It looked like this year; I’d be getting my wish.



Fallon’s suggestion of imagining the players in their underwear would never work. An entire zoo of butterflies and anxiety had taken over my body the second we arrived at the arena. When Jenner said he had seats for us, I assumed they’d be decent, but I never imagined they’d be rink side. I guess that’s what dating the captain of the team will get you. *Fake dating Kat. Fake. Dating.*

It’s not lost on me that there are more than a few glances and whispers being thrown our way from other bystanders. Fallon threw daggers back, before snapping a candid picture to ‘commemorate your first game as his girl.’ Her words, not mine.

With every passing second on the clock above the center rink, my anxiety grows. Bouncing my knee, I narrowly avoid spilling popcorn across my lap while looking around the arena. The stadium was filling up with college students and parents alike despite the threat of imminent weather. Sensing my discomfort, Fallon started people watching adding her commentary on relationships, wardrobe choices, and overall cleanliness to make me laugh. It helped, but only for a second.

At the five-minute mark, my phone buzzes with an incoming message.

Jenner:

1. Have Fun
2. Relax Kit Kat
3. I'm keeping score. Every goal we get tonight equals one orgasm you'll get tonight.
4. Enjoy getting to watch your boyfriend kick ass
5. Be at the house at 11. Don't be late beautiful.

I blush, angling the phone away from Fallon's prying eyes. She didn't need to know about this message. Though she would have been overjoyed if I had shared. Before I could respond, a booming voice came over the speakers, announcing the starting lineup for each team. One by one, the players exited a tunnel to our right, starting their warm-up drills.

Jenner was the last man out of the tunnel for the home team. I'd have to be blind not to notice how good he looked in that uniform. *Damn*. Even underneath the pads and gear, you could still his muscles move as he skates around the rink. On his second pass by our seats, Jenner smiles underneath his helmet before tapping on the glass three times. He turns skating backwards for one last glance in our direction, as I wished him good luck. Blowing a kiss in his direction. He caught it in midair tapping his chest.

For the next hour, Fallon and I watched the Devils crush their opponents. Individually, Oliver and Jenner were talented players. Parred together? They were unstoppable. The team was leading 2 - 1 when the refs called for a pause in the game. Snow was already accumulating on the road. The game canceled and the scores final. *2 goals. 2 orgasms*. I wondered what I was getting myself into as both teams exited the ice.

"You alright?" Fallon asked, noticing the change in my demeanor.

"Yeah, I'm great. Let's head over to the guy's house before the roads get any worse."



By the next morning, six inches of snow and ice covered the ground, just five days before Christmas. That meant Oliver, Fallon, Jenner, and I were stranded inside the boy's house for at least another day until the roads cleared. Thankfully, none of us had flights out of the city until the day before

Christmas Eve, so we had no reason to be out in the elements.

Stocked with enough food and drinks to feed a small army, we were set up comfortably for a nice long weekend. That is, if we could keep Fallon and Oliver from killing each other. They were currently in a heated debate about whether or not *Die Hard* was considered a Christmas movie.

Fallon was not backing down. She'd even gone as far as creating a chart to back up her side of the story. She really would make a brilliant lawyer one day.

"Alright enough, you two." Jenner called from the kitchen, as the scent of popcorn filled the air. "We've already watched our favorite Christmas movies. We need a new activity."

"Have any ideas?" Oliver asked, pausing mid argument.

"I don't care, just anything to get you two to shut up."

"We could play poker." Fallon answered leaning across the poker table, picking up a deck of cards.

"I don't think you could handle playing with us, my dear."

"I'll take that bet." Fallon shot back, expertly shuffling the cards as Oliver watched eyebrows raised. What he didn't know was Fallon's grandmother lived in Vegas. She was an avid gambler and had been teaching Fallon the best card tricks for two weeks every summer since she was ten. "Care to make it interesting?"

"Always. What did you have in mind?" Oliver asked, eyeing Fallon like she was little red riding hood, and he was the wolf in sheep's clothing.

"Two words. Strip Poker."



30 minutes later, Fallon proved her skills, by having the most clothing still on her body. Sitting in the corner in an oversized t-shirt, she watched as Jenner and I both folded this round. Jenner and Oliver were both in their boxer briefs, and I was in nothing but a bra and panties. Oliver watched Fallon intently before throwing a handful of chips into the center of the table.

A mischievous grin spread across Fallon's face as she laid a royal flush on the table. "Read em' and weep."

“No way! You cheated! Where are you hiding the cards?” Oliver yelled, his accent becoming stronger with every word. Throwing his full house of cards down, he moved Fallon’s chair away from the table with her still in it. Proceeding to inspect the table around her.

Oliver was just as muscular as Jenner, and I watched as he stood defeated and mumbling underneath his breath., I caught Jenner’s heated gaze a second later. He’d caught me admiring his best friend’s body... I was in trouble now. Jenner pounced. Throwing me over his shoulder, as I came face to face with his tattoos.

He carried me up the stairs and into his bedroom before I can say anything. Trapping my body against the door, he kisses me deeply every inch of his body pressing against my own. Skin on skin, our hands roamed each other lazily. Just as the kiss was getting heated, Jenner pulls away, panting.

“You are mine.” He growls, his eyes blazing with lust as they trail down my body. “You’ve been torturing me all night and I have a promise to uphold.”

Jenner leans closer, wrapping a hand around my back, un-snapping my bra, letting it fall to the floor. He gives each breast a hard squeeze before bending onto his knees, his hands slowly making their way down my body. My breath hitches as he kisses each hip bone, pulling my lower half away from the door. I watch as he takes the black thong into his mouth, removing them from my body with only his teeth. *God, that was sexy.*

My heart races as he walks me backwards toward his bed, kissing me hungrily. “Lay down.” He commands.

I do as I’m told, laying diagonally across his comforter, as Jenner pulls a chair in front of the bed. Sitting, he watches me carefully before speaking. “For your first orgasm, I want to watch.”

“You want to watch?” I ask, self-consciously.

“Yes.” He answers calmly, spreading my legs open wide. He stares longingly at the apex of my thighs before locking his gaze with mine. “You are gorgeous. Now show me how you like to be touched.”

I take a deep breath, closing my eyes, running my hands along my sides. *You can do this, pretend you’re alone. It’s not like you haven’t thought about him doing this before... it can’t be that different, right?* I cup my breasts, rolling

the already hard nipples between my fingers once, twice, three times before drifting my right hand down my body. I hesitate, my fingers hovering just above my clit. *This is weird.*

As if sensing my thoughts, Jenner closes his hand over my own, bringing it to the warm wetness between my thighs. “Touch yourself, Katherine.” He urges, his hand disappearing. My eyes open at the loss. Jenner is sitting legs spread in front of him, one hand down his briefs.

Biting my lip, I watch as he runs a hand over the growing bulge in his underwear. *Ok, I can do this.* I run my fingers down up and down my wet folds, mimicking Jenner’s movements. Picking up speed, I circle two fingers over my clit, applying more pressure with each passing stroke. My breathing increases as I close my eyes again, lost in the pulsing sensation building in my body. I move my hand further down, slipping a finger deep inside when I hear Jenner groan.

“Keep going.” He whispers, his voice filled with lust as wetness pools from my body and onto the comforter below. Removing a finger, I insert another, wishing it was Jenner’s hand inside of me and not my own. I pump my fingers in and out in a steady rhythm, rocking my hips with each pass. My back arches as I find just the right angle, curling my fingers and picking up speed. The pressure had been building since Jenner pushed me against the door and I was close already.

“Oh god.” My breath hitches, taking in the sight of Jenner’s briefs pulled low, a hand wrapped roughly around the base of his long, hard cock. He had to be eight inches, at least. He worked a hand quickly up and down the shaft before squeezing the head, a drop of pre-cum spilling from the tip. Watching a moment longer, I work my fingers furiously, adding a third, rubbing my clit with my other hand. A loud moan leaves my lips as I spiral into a long, intense orgasm.

Jenner pushes the chair back from the bed, running his hands up my legs, his face hovering between my thighs. “You’re so wet. I need a taste.”

“Jenner, don’t I’m too sensitive. Give me a second.” I squeal as his arms pin me in place before his tongue licks a single swipe up my pussy. My hips move off the bed of their own accord, as my head falling to the side. “Screw what I just said. Do that again.”

Jenner pauses, staring into my eyes. “No one else gets to see you like

this, understood?” He asks.

I nod as he licks me once more. My body shaking, already sensitive, as he wraps his lips around my clit, sucking and licking the hardened bud. He laps at the wetness seeping from my core, like a man dying of thirst, curling his tongue inside. My hips rock against his face, searching for more friction. I can feel the pressure building inside as my temperature rises, a fresh sheen of sweat glistening against my skin. Placing powerful hands against my hip bones, Jenner devours me.

I can't breathe. I can't think. All I can focus on is the feeling of his tongue and lips against my skin, and I never want it to stop. *Hockey isn't the only thing he's the best at. Damn.* Then he hits a spot deep inside me that makes me beg. “Please, Jenner.” I ask, not caring how desperate I sound. I need release. Groaning against my skin, he sucks my throbbing clit into his mouth, releasing a moan I'm sure Fallon and Oliver could hear from downstairs.

“Faster,” I beg, almost on the edge. He continues his assault while slipping two expert fingers inside my pussy, moving them quickly back and forth. He sucks my clit harder, biting it softly as he curls his fingers, and that's all it takes. I'm thrown off a cliff and into my second orgasm in 20 minutes.

I don't know when I come down, but when I do, my head is laying on a pillow, and Jenner is holding a warm washcloth between my legs.

“Hi beautiful.” He whispers, kissing me on the lips.

“Is this heaven?” I joke, waiting to re-gain feeling in my limbs.

“It's my kind of heaven.” He laughs, laying next to me on the bed. I roll closer, my body brushing up against his still hard cock.

Jenner's eyes roll into the back of his head, his body tensing as I place a hand overtop of his boxers, squeezing it through the fabric. “Let me return the favor.”

“One day you can, but tonight was all about you.” He answers, removing my hand before covering us both with a blanket. “For tonight, we get some rest. I think you need it after that.” He chuckles, kissing my shoulder and wrapping an arm around my waist.

He wasn't wrong. My eyes were already closing as I welcomed his

warmth against my skin. I fell asleep listening to the sound of Jenner's breathing. He was nothing like what I had expected going into our agreement.

He was a walking contradiction. Both kind and arrogant at the same time. I never knew which version I was going to get, and even then, I had a feeling there was more to him than I had yet to figure out. He was a mystery. I didn't know how to solve while simultaneously keeping the walls up around my heart, but I was willing to try.

CHAPTER 12

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink with a white shadow effect, reading "Tanner". The letters are fluid and connected, with a prominent loop at the end of the 'r'.

As much as I might act indifferent to the holidays, Christmas is my favorite time of year. Between the lights, the music, and the overall atmosphere, it brings me joy. Though I wouldn't let anyone in my personal life find that out.

My mother has made Christmas an entire production year after year for as long as I can remember. We spend Christmas Eve baking sweets, watching our favorite holiday movies, and going to a midnight mass service at our local church. Christmas morning would be organized chaos. Full of presents, a large breakfast, helping at the firefighters' local toy drive, then an evening swim on the beaches of Southern California. As kids, my brother Trey and I used to hate volunteering at the toy drive, but this year I'm looking forward to it.

Maybe it's Kat's influence, but I want to make this holiday memorable. Not just for myself but for my family, too. I hate knowing that she's spending Christmas alone. Well, not alone since she's spending it with Fallon and her family but without her mom. Having one parent missing during the holidays is hard enough, but spending it without either, I couldn't imagine.

It's those memories that run through my head, filling me with nostalgia as the cab pulls up to my parents' bungalow style home. The tan house blends into lush gardens, with pink flowers lining the entryway and a large tree in the middle of the yard. I had fallen off that tree one summer after Trey dared me to climb to the highest branch, breaking my arm at the age of 9. Mom had been furious. 'The trouble twins' she had called us from then on, despite Trey being five years older than myself.

Smiling at the thought, I grab my bags from the back of the cab before tipping the driver. After finding a last-minute connecting flight, I was three

hours ahead of my scheduled arrival. I haven't seen my family since last Christmas, and at Mom's request, all her children would be under one roof this year.

I texted Kat to let her know I had arrived safely as I walked inside the house.

Jenner: I made it home, beautiful. How's Fallon's?

Kat: Glad you made it safe! Everything is great here. McGarret says hi & Merry Christmas!!

Attached was a picture of Kat smiling brightly for the camera as she loved on Fallon's dog. *She was adorable.*

The inside of our family's house looked like it belonged in a Christmas decor catalog. Christmas music was playing through the speakers in the living room, where a brightly decorated tree took up half of the space. Decked with multi-colored lights, homemade ornaments, and popcorn garland, the tree shimmered in the late afternoon sunlight streaming through the picture window at the front of the house.

Our Mother always kept the house cozy. She wasn't the type to fill the house with modern decor and elements, despite living in a well-to-do neighborhood. She preferred a classic and comfortable environment. The kind where you weren't afraid to put your feet up after a long day. A place where everyone was always welcome.

Walking through the living room and into the kitchen, I found Mom singing along to Bing Crosby's "White Christmas" as she pulled a fresh batch of cookies out of the oven. Dressed in a lightweight cream sweater, jeans, and a Mrs. Claus, themed apron Charlotte Blackwell looked like she belonged in a Hallmark movie herself. She had let her hair go grey a few years ago. Yet a few black strands were still woven through the messy bun at the base of her neck.

"Hi Mom." I called over the music, announcing myself. She jumped, startled by another person in an otherwise empty house. I watched as she avoided dropping the entire pan of cookies on the floor, placing the baking sheet on the counter before clutching her chest.

“Jenner Anthony Blackwell. You scared me half to death.” She laughed, the wrinkles at the corner of her eyes becoming more prominent as she smiled. My mother rushed around the island counter crushing me in a hug. “I’ve missed you!” She exclaimed, before glancing at the clock on the stove. “Wait, what time is it? You weren’t supposed to be here for another few hours.”

“I caught an earlier flight.” I answered, grabbing a warm cookie from the tray in front of me. Cookies fresh out of the oven were my weakness, and I was hungry after traveling all morning.

“That is just the best surprise! More time with my baby boy!”

“Are Dad and Trey still at work?” I asked, knowing they always volunteered to take the longer shifts leading up to the holidays.

“Yes, it’s their last shift before Christmas Eve tomorrow, but they’ll be home around 6 for dinner. Why don’t you go get freshened up from your trip, and then you can tell me all about school and how the team is doing this season?” Smiling, she handed me another cookie across the table before shooing me away from the kitchen. Cooking was her specialty and a time she used to think and relax. Besides a few select times I asked to help, it was a rule to stay out of the kitchen while she worked her magic.

“Oh, and don’t think I’ve forgotten about the fact that you’re dating Katherine Townsend. I want to hear all about it.” She called as I made my way up the stairs to my childhood bedroom.

I shouldn’t have been surprised she would want details about my relationship with Kat. Our mothers had been close friends before her father’s accident. After that, everything changed.



I was filling Mom in on life at college when the back door opened. Loud, gruff voices filled the room as Trey and my father walked into the house recounting the events of their shift.

“Little Brother!” Trey yelled. Slapping me on the shoulder as he walked into the living room.

Trey was my favorite and only brother, but he was still a pain in my

ass. At 27, he looked like an older version of me. Same jet-black hair and a tall, muscular build. He stood a few inches taller than my 6'3" frame and had a nice five o'clock shadow growing on his face. Otherwise, you'd never be able to tell us apart. The genes in my family ran strong, seeing as we were both carbon copies of our father. It was nice to know I'd still be good looking at any age.

Trey had gone into the family business and worked alongside our father at the 117. He had fulfilled his lifelong dream of becoming a firefighter and was on the fast track to becoming Capitan of his own station soon enough. No one had doubted that Trey would follow in our father's footsteps. He had always been an adrenaline junkie, running towards danger instead of away from it like any sane person would.

"Where's my favorite niece?" I asked, waiting to be tackled in a hug by a tiny, sparkle wearing, sugar fueled ninja.

"She's with Bethany today and tomorrow. I'll have her on Christmas Day."

Trey had gotten Bethany pregnant when they were 22. Their relationship had ended soon after Charlie was born. After a rough few years and a nasty custody battle later, Trey and Bethany were finally getting along and doing their best to co-parent their daughter. I couldn't imagine having a child at this age... On a good day, I can barely take care of myself, let alone another human. Yet, anytime I was in town, my niece was a tiny shadow following my every move.

"Jenner!" Dad smiled warmly as he walked into the kitchen, by-passing Trey, and me, to kiss Mom on the cheek before handing her a bouquet of bright red roses. Growing up, our father had made it a priority to show us how we should treat a woman by providing the example himself.

My father's hair was thinning at the sides, grey patches peppering themselves into his short dark hair as he adjusted the ball cap on his head. His tan skin was a stark contrast against his blue San Diego Firefighter t-shirt. The same one was worn by Trey. Noticing my stare at the shield across his chest, Gregory Blackwell crossed his arms before leaning against the counter.

"You know it's not too late to re-consider signing up for the academy. As long as, I'm Capitan, you have a steady job lined up here after college anytime you want." He said, his blue eyes holding my stare.

I knew he meant no ill will with the offer. Even though I had chosen a different path in life, my father had been nothing but supportive in my dreams of playing in the NHL after college. He made sure I knew that a backup plan was ready and waiting.

“I know, thanks Dad.” I responded, unwilling to say what we both knew. Becoming a firefighter was never in the cards for me. Even if I didn't get drafted into the NHL in a few years, which was unlikely, I lived and breathed hockey. I would figure something out.

“You let me know when the Championship game is this year, and I'll be there.” He nodded proudly. “Your stats this year look great but watch the penalties. Scouts won't take on someone who doesn't play well with others.”

“Come on Dad, you of all people should know Jenner doesn't play fair.” Trey teased, moving from his spot on the couch. “Besides, he's got a new girlfriend to show off for.”

“Ahh, that's right. It'd been so long since your last serious relationship I'd forgotten.” Dad joked, high fiving Trey as I glared at them both. “How is Katherine?”

“She is great. She goes by Kat now.” I answered carefully.

“And her mother?” Mom asked, tossing salad into a blue ceramic bowl.

“I don't know. She doesn't talk about her family or the past.”

“That's understandable. Her father was a great man, and an even better firefighter. That family and ours suffered an incredible loss that day.” Dad answered, his voice soft. I knew he was referring to the station and their brotherhood. Losing a fellow first responder was an inevitable part of his job, but I knew from the action reports my father had done everything he could to save Kat's dad that night.

“I'm not surprised you two are together. You cared for her, little brother. I remember when they moved. You moped around for weeks after she left. It was pitiful.” Trey laughed as I punched him in the arm.

“I found her again, and I am not letting her go. She's perfect.” I answered. They didn't need to know that the foundation of our relationship had been a lie. The instant Kat came back into my life, I had fallen hard. My feelings were continuing to grow, and I could tell hers were as well, even if she didn't say it out loud. Now I just had to convince her it was safe to fall. I

wasn't going anywhere.

“Good, we're happy for you, son.” Mom smiled as the oven chimed. “Ah, dinner is ready. Let's eat!”

Trey and I began setting the table with plates and silverware as Dad pulled the honey glazed ham from the oven and Mom put the finishing touches on the sides. Looking around the room, I realized how much I had missed. No matter how crazy my family was, it felt nice to be home. A twinge of guilt and sadness cut through my chest as I realized Kat would never come back here to visit. For her, the memories this place held were still too fresh in her mind and that was a wound that may never close.



The holidays passed in a blur, and before I knew it, I was back in Seattle... at a shopping mall... the day before New Year's Eve.

“I hate shopping malls.” I griped, dodging yet another group of people rushing to get the latest after holiday deals.

“It's not all bad.” Oliver answered, swerving in the other direction, catching the eye of a pretty blonde a few feet away. To my surprise, he didn't even give her a second glance. “So where to next?” He asked as we continue our trek through the chaos.

“Victoria's Secret.” I answered as the pink and black awning come into view.

“Oh good. I need to pick up a few things as well.”

“What in the world do you need at a lingerie store?” I asked, eyebrows raised.

“Something for a new friend.” He responded suspiciously. I knew better than to press for answers that Oliver was unwilling to give at the moment. He would tell me when he was ready.

“You mean your newest puck bunny?” I laughed.

“Something like that.”

We were met with lace, rhinestones, sequins, bras, and every color thong imaginable as we walked into the store. I didn't know where to look for what I wanted to find, and I was not about to ask the saleslady for help. *Lord*

help me. Kat better be surprised.

Forty-five minutes later, we were out of the store, bags in hand. We almost came out unscathed... until we ran into the walking scumbag himself. Otherwise known as Noah O'Connor. He eyed the bags, interested in what laid inside.

"Victoria's secret and Kays. Which girlfriend are you shopping for today?" He asked.

"Only one. Unlike some people, I don't cheat, and it's her birthday tomorrow." I answered, glaring daggers into his stupid face.

"Tomorrow is New Year's Eve. Her birthday isn't for another week." *What a dumbass, four years of dating and he couldn't be bothered to remember her birthday correctly.*

"Right, which is also Kat's birthday."

"Whatever. You're the one that's going to look like an idiot, not me." He laughed coldly, pushing past us and into the store.

"The only idiot here is you for ever letting her go." I yelled back; voice raised. "I will never make that mistake."

"Let's hope he's still that much of an idiot on the ice at the Championship." Oliver spoke, not looking up from his phone.

"He always is. That will never change and I'm going to take great pleasure in beating his ass come April." I answered.

"Fallon just texted. Plan is a go. We're all set for tomorrow."

"Perfect." Kat was about to have the best birthday of her life, and she didn't even know it was coming.

CHAPTER 13



Fallon walks into my bedroom at the crack of dawn, holding a cupcake with number 22 candles lit on top.

“Happy Birthday!” She yells loud enough to wake our neighbors.

“Thank you.” I yawn, squinting as she turns on my bedside lamp.

“What do you want to do today?” Fallon asks, as I accept the cupcake, blowing out the candles.

I shrug, still half asleep. “I thought I would just hang out here. Watch the ball drop, write our resolutions for the new year, maybe order in Chinese food?”

“Are you sure that’s how you want to spend your birthday? Not that it doesn’t sound like a brilliant plan. It just isn’t anything special.”

“It doesn’t need to be special. It’s just another day.” The past few years, I haven’t been in the mood for celebrations.

“It is NOT.” Fallon scolded. “You are going into your 22nd year of life and we are celebrating the hell out of it.”

“Fal, we don’t even have anything planned.”

“You may not, but that doesn’t mean you don’t have plans for the day.” She responds.

“What did you do?”

“I never said it was me.” As if on cue, Jenner walks into my bedroom.

“A little birdy told me you needed to get out of the house today.” He smiles.

I throw my grey comforter over my head, my response muffled. “You don’t have to. I don’t need to celebrate.”

Footstep’s sound across the carpet and the comforter is pulled from my grasp. As Jenner’s annoyingly perfect face comes into view. “Then we’ll make it an anti-birthday celebration.”

Jenner pulls the rest of the blanket from my body before grabbing my arm. “Come on, Kit Kat, time to get up. We’ve got a schedule to keep.” *A schedule? So much for a low-key birthday.*



Jenner wasn’t kidding when he said he had a schedule to keep. He had planned out the entire day, hour by hour. We started with breakfast at the cafe, then a trip to my favorite bookstore in Pioneer Square and a walk around Pike Place market for lunch. The entire city was covered in lights and New Year’s decorations, as businesses and shop owners closed early. An excitement filled the air as everyone prepared to go home and ring in the new year with their loved ones.

Jenner had been checking his phone every few seconds all day and had been avoiding my questions about what was so important on his phone. “It’s nothing.” He promised, only to check his phone again 15 minutes later.

Something was definitely going on. I had a sinking feeling. Whatever he was planning was a surprise for later tonight. Even though I had specifically asked to not have a birthday party. An early evening sunset lit up the Seattle skyline as we exited the Space Needle viewing deck, as Jenner suggested we go back to the apartment to warm up and relax. *Funny, that's how I wanted to spend today to begin with.*

We arrived to find the apartment spotless. The snacks and study materials had been cleared from the living room and the entire apartment was cleaner than I'd seen it in days. Fallon had started her cleaning ritual early. She hated going into a new year with a messy space and considered it bad luck to clean on New Year's Day. There was only one thing out of place. A single red gift bag sitting in the middle of the coffee table.

"Why don't you go see who it's from?" Jenner suggested, closing the apartment door behind us.

There was a card attached to the bag that read: Katherine. Flipping over the white paper, I saw a note written in hurried script on the back.

Happy Birthday beautiful!

Don't kill me for getting you a present. I saw this and couldn't resist. It's perfect for you. Love, your boyfriend.

"Jenner, what did you do?"

"Why don't you open it and see?"

My curiosity gets the best of me as I tear the decorative paper from the top of the bag, looking inside. I laugh. It's the first genuine laugh I've had all day.

"Really, Jenner?" I ask, as I pulled a red lace bodysuit out of the bag, holding it up for him to see.

"You look amazing in red. I couldn't resist."

Shaking my head, I fling the garment at his face. "Let me guess, you want to see it on?" I asked.

"Absolutely, but there's another gift in the bag." He answers, pulling me onto his lap.

Searching inside the bag, my brows furrow, confused, as I dis-guard the

bag onto the floor. In my hand was a small rectangular box with the word KAYS written across the top in shiny silver lettering. My heart pounded in my chest as I removed the lid. I was curious now. Inside was a silver bracelet with six charms. A palm tree with diamond leaves, a snowflake, a hockey stick and puck, the universal nurse's logo, and the number 117. In the center of the bracelet was a small oval covered in diamonds.

"Open it." Jenner whispered.

All the air in my lungs vanished. Inside the oval, I now realized was a locket, was the last picture I had taken with my father. It was my 17th birthday, six months before he died. My throat constricted as I stared at the photo, afraid to move. It was the perfect present. It was clear Jenner had put a lot of thought into it, each charm having a special meaning. The most significant one in the center.

"I had some help with the photograph. I got your mom's cellphone number and called her over Christmas break. She was very excited about the idea and picked a photo that would mean the most to you." Jenner brushed the hair back from my face as he assessed my reaction to his gift. "If you don't like it, I can change out the charms."

"No, it's perfect. I love it." I whisper, closing the box, and setting it on the table.

"Don't you want to try it on?"

"Later." I responded. "For now, I have a better idea."

"You do?" He asked, one eyebrow arched high across his forehead.

"We have an entire apartment alone, and you were kind enough to buy me new lingerie. We should take advantage of it."

"I think I like the way you think." Jenner laughs, picking me up and carrying me into the bedroom.



The red lingerie Jenner had bought... was crotchless. *Easier access.* I thought as I adjusted the straps along my hip. Lace covered my chest and crotch, while lines of red fabric ran across my stomach and hips, leaving very little to the imagination. It was beautiful, but it had taken a second to figure

out how to put on. It made me feel sexy, and I secretly loved that he had picked out what he wanted to see on me.

I walk into my bedroom, the only light coming from a few candles scattered across the room, hoping I looked as sexy as I felt in the moment. Jenner was already in bed and under the covers. Judging by the clothes on the floor, he was naked. *Even easier access.* I smirked as I crawled across the bed before sitting on his lap over the covers. *Yep, definitely naked and liking the lingerie.*

Jenner's eyes roamed across my body, absent of their usual lust filled hunger. Instead, I saw a slow burning fire in its place. He cupped my cheek with one hand, the other having a firm grip on my hip, as his eyes found mine.

"God Kat, look at you." His deep voice filled the room, flooded with emotion. "Five years of fantasies didn't do you justice."

Unable to hold back any longer, I lean forward, capturing his lips with mine in a heated kiss. His hand pulls my hair back at the nape of my neck, our tongues tangling together. Pressing my body closer to his, I grip his shoulders. As, Jenner lifts me into his arms, moving the comforter from his waist and rolling me onto my back, in one fluid motion.

Jenner sucks lightly at my neck, positioning himself above me, strong arms braced on either side of my head, as my hands trail down his abs, moving lower until they find what they're searching for. He groans into my neck as my hands squeeze the length of his hard cock. I run my hand up and down his length in long, forceful strokes. Paying special attention to the head, I wanted to run my tongue across.

"Fuck." Jenner mumbles, pausing my movements. "If you keep doing that, this won't last."

"Then hurry up and get inside me." I taunt, lifting my hips closer to his.

"Not yet." He answers, removing my hand from his dick.

Sitting back, Jenner uses his knees to spread my legs open even wider. He sits there for a moment, watching me as I squirm against the sheets, my body aching to be touched. Biting his lip, Jenner moves, pulling at the lace covering my chest. He rolls a nipple expertly between his fingers the bud tightening, as my back arches, a breathy gasp leaving my lips. "So sensitive."

He chuckles against my skin, sucking the nipple into his mouth.

His other hand moves across my hip, snapping a band of red fabric across my skin. It didn't hurt, but the sting warms my body, causing more wetness to pool against my thighs. I squirm against his hold. *Enough of this teasing shit.* I rock my hips against his, begging for friction. Just as I'm finding a perfect rhythm for my aching clit. Jenner moves further away.

I groan, pulling his hair as he bites my already sensitive nipple. Mercifully, a finger runs across my folds, but Jenner keeps the friction away from where my body craves it the most. Kissing me, his finger moves upward running hard, tight circles against my clit. I cry out at his touch, electricity spiking in my veins, as my body begs for more. *Yes, there. Just like that.*

Jenner moves, not stopping the glorious movements that have my insides feeling like a pressure cooker. This time he reaches for a condom on the nightstand. I take it from his hand, easily rolling it onto him as Jenner settles himself back between my legs. He doesn't remove the lingerie, hitching one across high across his hip. *He can rip it for all I care.*

He pauses, the engorged head of his cock brushing against my entrance. Kissing me once more, he rests his forehead against mine. "I'm not holding back tonight. Kat. I let you go once, and I'm never doing that again. Fake dating or not, you're mine." Thrusting his hips with his last two words, we both gasp, stuttering, as he slides fully inside me.

Can some moments last forever? If so, I'd like to live in this one please. I relish in the fullness of finally having him inside me, as Jenner moves, instantly rocking his hips in a steady rhythm. He's much bigger than Noah. Once my body has adjusted, I meet him thrust for thrust. Jenner shifts lifting my legs higher across his chest, his cock pressing even deeper inside me. My legs shake low moan escapes my lips.

Hit that spot again and I'll be done for.

Jenner to pick up speed as he kisses me. "I love hearing you make that sound." I squeeze around him, my body pulsing as my fingers grip his back, nails clawing at his skin. "Please don't stop." I cry, as he applies a sinful pressure to my clit.

"I wouldn't dream of it." He answers, pounding harder with forceful strokes. Each one pressing me further into the mattress.

It doesn't take much longer before the pressure explodes, and I cum, screaming his name. Jenner's thrust become erratic. He buries his in my shoulder, moaning as he follows. His hard cock twitching against the spasms of my pussy. The full weight of his body crashing onto mine.

We're both sweaty and panting, fighting to catch our breath, when he moves, rolling onto the bed beside me. My body feels heavy, molded into the mattress, and I'd be happy to never move again. *So that's what good sex is.* I giggle to myself at the thought.

"Laughing is not what I guy wants to hear from his partner after sex. You alright over there Kit Kat?" Jenner asks, an arm folded underneath a pillow, as he eyes me warily.

"I'm great." I answer, exploding into another giggle fit.

"Are you sure? You didn't seem to have any complaints just now, but I'm starting to wonder."

"No, I'm good. That was amazing. I just forgot what good sex was."

"Ah, so the ex wasn't good in that department either? Yet another win for me." Jenner smirks, brushing a strand of hair from my eyes.

"Don't go getting a big head about it." I answer.

"I think we both know, my head isn't the only thing that's big." Jenner mocks, rocking his hips against my side, sending me into another giggle fit. I pull a pillow from the bed, smacking him with it, as his phone rings on the nightstand.

Jenner answers, and I can hear Oliver's muffled British accent on the other end of the line. Jenner rolls his eyes before answering Oliver's question. "Yes, we are on our way now. Calm down." Hanging up the phone, he moves off the bed. I admire his tattoos and the fresh scratch marks I left across his back.

"Where are we going?" I ask.

"It's a surprise." He answers simply, pulling his t-shirt over his head.

Of course, it is.



The boy's house is dark when we pull into the driveway at 9:00 pm. I'd

called Jenner out on the surprise party on the way over, and he'd caved. Telling me that He, Fallon, and Oliver, had been planning this party since we'd been snowed in before Christmas. Despite his protests, he'd been outnumbered, so the surprise party planning had begun.

Placing the blindfold over my eyes, I let Jenner lead me into the house. I didn't want a party, but I wasn't about to deny my friends the chance to celebrate New Year's Eve. Plus, I wanted the red velvet cake I knew was waiting on the other side of the door.

All the lights turned on inside the house, as Jenner removed the blindfold from my eyes. I had expected a gigantic party, but what I saw was the exact opposite. The boys' living room was decorated with balloons, streamers, and New Year's Eve banner. The cake, a large order of Chinese food and presents sat on the kitchen counter.

Fallon and Oliver jumped from their hiding spots behind the sofa, yelling surprise. Each wearing a colorful paper hat on their head. It was simple, and exactly what I needed.

"Thank you." I answered, hugging each of them. "It's perfect."

"You didn't think we'd really go that far against what you wanted, did you?" Fallon asked.

I shook my head as Oliver answered. "Yeah, we're keeping it simple this year. Happy Birthday love & Happy fucking New Year!" He yelled, his voice echoing off the empty walls.

All three of my favorite people were in one room, and we were ringing in the new year together. It was the closest I had come to an actual birthday party since my 17th, and it was perfect. I touched the bracelet on my wrist absentmindedly, thinking about my dad. He would have loved this, and all of them. I knew in that moment I was where I was supposed to be. *I was home.*



10...9... 8... 7...

The four of us sat around the room watching the NYE program on tv, waiting to ring in the new year. Since Jenner had taken me on our 'anti birthday celebration date' I hadn't made my usual resolutions. As I looked around the room, I realized the only thing I wanted was more nights like this

one. The four of us had spent the entire evening, playing games, watching movies, and drinking too much alcohol.

6...5....4...3...

Jenner pulled me close as the last few seconds of the new year expired. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Oliver and Fallon sitting as far away from each other as possible. Awkwardness filling the air between them.

2...1...

The new year was here. As Jenner kissed me firmly on the lips, I had a good feeling what was to come. We had 4 more months left of our agreement, and I had a feeling things were about to get very interesting.

CHAPTER 14



-February-

My surroundings were clouded in fog, an obnoxious ringing echoed around my room. The further away I was pulled from dreamland, my consciousness slowly registered that the incessant ringing was coming from across the room. It wasn't my alarm clock then. That would have been a much louder sound right by my pounding head. *Fireball shots were not my favorite thing at the moment.*

My cell phone. That's where the noise was coming from. Groaning, I rolled out of bed in the darkness, scratching my chest, as I shuffled across the floor. Apparently, my sense of depth perception was still fast asleep, as a sharp pain shot across my hip. *Damn desk.*

Pulling the phone from the charger, I glanced at the screen. Ready to raise hell at whoever was blowing up my phone before sunrise the day before Valentine's. I didn't have hockey obligations and there was a gorgeous girl in my bed.

Shit.

8 missed calls from Dad.

4 texts from Mom.

2 voicemails.

Even in my tired, hungover state, I knew that something was wrong. Squinting in the bright light of the screen, I opened the call log. Pulling up the last voicemail from my father.

“Jenner, I need you to call me back as soon as you get this. There’s been an accident while we were on the job. It’s Trey, and it’s not good.”

My stomach dropped through the floor, no doubt splattering onto the kitchen counter below. From the broken, stressed edge in Dad’s tone to the emergency room noise in the background. I knew that everything I had known was about to change.

The bed sheets rustled as Kat moved, blissfully unaware of the bomb that had just gone off in my life. I checked the time, 4:30 am. Had I only been asleep for two hours? In true Seattle fashion, an intense thunderstorm rattled the windows, as thunder rolling through the room like a freight train. *How fitting, as my life implodes.* Mentally, I was preparing for the worst as I returned my father’s phone call.

Happy fucking birthday to me.

CHAPTER 15

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink with a white shadow effect, reading "Jenner".

It was official. I was in the world's longest line. Waiting for coffee with 20 other weary passengers, I replayed what Dad had told me over again in my mind. It was like a bad horror movie. You just couldn't look away, no matter how hard you tried.

Station 117 had been assigned to fight a nasty wildfire that had spread across the mountains fanned by the Santa Ana Winds. The fire had come

close to several residential areas; trapping a couple who had been trying to evacuate inside their car at the edge of a cliff. Trey had helped rescue the couple, but not before getting knocked unconscious by a blast from the impending wildfire. He had taken a hard hit into the rocky cliff side. Resulting in a concussion, spinal fracture, and 2nd degree burns along the right side of his body.

He had been life flighted to the nearest hospital and placed under a medically induced coma. Dad had a right to be worried. He'd seen other firefighters take lesser hits and not make it to the other side. But Trey was the strongest person I knew, and if anyone could make it through the long road ahead, it was him.

I placed an order with the barista for two coffees, one black, and the other a mixture of sugar and syrup, as I checked my phone. 7:00 am. Even though I knew our flight would land in San Diego in a few brief hours, it wasn't fast enough. The thought of something happening and not being there... well, that wasn't something I wanted to think about.

I hoped I didn't look like too much of an asshole as I accepted the coffees. Though from the restless crowd behind me, and impatient eye rolls, they all seemed to possess, I doubt I was the worst of what the barista would see today. *That makes two of us.* I thought as I made my way back through the terminal towards gate seven.

There Kat sat on a bench, surrounded by the luggage we had packed before rushing out of the house less than an hour ago. She had woken up as I finished the phone call to Dad, promising that I'd be on the first flight out. Once I had explained everything, she hadn't missed a beat before asking when **we** were leaving. It hadn't mattered how many times I'd told her I could go alone. She wouldn't take no for an answer.

My girl is truly something special. I know how hard this trip is going to be for her. She'd made herself a promise to never set foot in California again, and now she was walking back into the lion's den. For me. Lost in a mystery book she'd purchased at the gift shop, I kissed her forehead, placing her iced coffee in her open hand. She looked up at me, her eyes scanning my face for any signs of distress. Finding none, she nestled back into her chair, resting her head on my shoulder, before returning to her book.

She looked small, curled up in the chair as we waited to board the

plane. Dressed in sweatpants, sneakers, and my oversized hoodie, I wondered what strangers thought when they looked in our direction. Did we look like a young couple in love?

The lines between reality and our agreement were blurring more with each passing day. For the past two months, we had spent every moment talking, laughing, and getting to know the new versions of each other. My fingers brushed across the cold metal from the bracelet that never left her wrist as I took a sip of my coffee.

We were in a good place, and I'd be lying if I said I wasn't worried about what this trip could mean. It seemed as if Kat had just forgotten about my part in her past, and now we were going back to the scene of the crime. Literally.

"Thank you." I whispered for the millionth time.

"Jenner, stop saying that. I would never let you face this alone." She responded, not bothering to look up from her book.

Placing a finger underneath her chin, I lifted her face to mine. "I will not stop." Claspng her face so she knew I was serious. I felt her lean into the touch. "This. You being here. Means more to me than you know. It's not something I take lightly."

Kat tried to hide behind her hair as it fell across her face. Having none of that, I tucked a long strand behind her ear. She needed to know what this meant to me. How sincere I was in understanding how difficult this was for her to do.

"You're welcome." She answered softly. Finally, giving me a glimpse of those beautiful blue eyes that gave her emotions away every time. No matter how hard she tried to hide behind her mask. *Anxiety, Sorrow, Fear.* She was trying to be strong for me.

Brushing my lips against hers. I conveyed every emotion I couldn't say without sacring her off through that kiss. This beautiful, amazing woman was mine, and I was in love.

A voice cracked through the speakers overhead, announcing our flight would begin boarding in ten minutes. We were on our way home.

CHAPTER 16

Kat

Walking into Southern Memorial Hospital was something I promised I'd never do again. The last time I walked through these doors, my entire life had imploded in on itself. Everything about my surroundings was the same, yet I was a completely different person. A hollow broken shell of the girl I had been, and five years later I was still picking up the pieces.

My therapist, Dr. Patten, would classify this trip as 'emersion therapy' in more ways than one. As if sensing my discomfort, Jenner squeezed the lower part of my back, pushing me further into the hospital. Guilt formed a knot in my stomach. I should be comforting him, not the other way around.

Pull yourself together, Katherine.

I look at Jenner as we walk into the hospital lobby. To anyone else, he's the definition of calm and collected, but I know better. The muscles in his jaw are tense, his eyebrows are furrowed, and his hand still on the small of my back has fisted into the material of my sweater as if I'm a life jacket, and he's holding on for dear life.

We round the corner down a long hallway into the main waiting area when my steps falter. *Emersion therapy, my ass.*

If I didn't know better, I'd say I had been sent back in time. The entirety of Station 117 was sitting, standing, and mingling around the waiting area. Making our way through the crowded lobby, we search for Jenner's parents. In a sea of uniforms, I try not to focus on the stares and sad smiles that pass my way, following the whispers of my father's name. First responders are family. Not a single one is left behind, even long after they're gone.

The walls were closing in around me, my throat constricting due to the lack of airflow. Was it getting hotter in here? My nervous system wasn't getting the memo that it needed to chill the fuck out. *I need to get out of here.* Before I could excuse myself, the crowd parts slightly and I see Jenner's parents huddled together in the corner of the room. I nudge Jenner with my shoulder, as I feel him tense before walking towards his parents. The second he's not beside me, I miss his warmth. The chill of the hospital air goosebumps across my skin.

His Mother hasn't changed at all since the last time I saw her, at my father's funeral. "Oh Jenner." She whispers, her cheeks stained with tears as she embraces her son.

His father walks towards me, a sullen grimace across his face. “Katherine. It’s nice to see you again, though I wish it was under better circumstances.” My eyes water as he pulls me into a powerful hug. I hold back the tears with every ounce of strength I can muster, as I realize just how much this hug reminds me of my father’s. Warm, welcoming, protective, and full of strength.

“It’s nice to see you as well. How is Trey?” I ask.

Before he can answer, a doctor in light blue scrubs, appears in the doorway, pausing any further conversation. “Trey is stable and awake. You can see him now if you would like.”

Jenner moves to follow his parents down the hallway before pausing. A single strand of dark hair falling into his eyes as they pleaded with me to follow, extending his hand in a silent offering. For the first time today, I see true fear peek through his facade. Without speaking, I interlace our fingers, rubbing the back of his hand with my thumb in small soothing circles. A memory breaking through the walls in my mind.

At 18, I had just received the worst news I would ever hear in my entire life. My father was gone. There had been a warehouse fire downtown. The fire marshal would later rule it as arson, started by a disgruntled ex-employee from the company that owned the warehouse. My father had been clearing the building, making sure it was empty of workers and civilians, when a steel beam overhead had fallen, pinning his lower half to the floor.

Other firefighters from his unit had dragged him away from the flames, but the burns and crush injuries were too great. We sat in the waiting room for hours while the doctors worked tirelessly to save his life. Station 117 was taken off duty for the rest of the day as they awaited news about their captain.

I sat alone, as the doctors spoke to my mother in hushed whispers. Even if I had been allowed to hear their conversation, none of it would have actively registered in my mind. I watched helplessly as Gregory Blackwell stood beside my mother, awaiting the news of the man he had pulled from the flames, his friend and partner.

That was until Gregory’s son, whom I had only met on one other occasion, wordlessly pulled a chair next to mine. We sat in silence for hours. He held my hand in comfort, never once letting go. A silent reassurance that I wasn’t as alone as the empty hole in my heart now made me feel.

Whatever awaited Jenner in that hospital room, we would face it together. After all, I owed him that much. It had just taken me five years to repay the favor.



I don't know what I was expecting when we walked into Trey's room, but it certainly wasn't a man cracking jokes with a little girl sitting on the bed beside him. For someone who had 2nd degree burns covering their right leg, a spinal fracture, and a concussion, he was in good spirits. Though that could have been due to the myriad of pain meds he was on. The lights were dim, as we stood around his bedside.

"Guys, I'm fine, really. Just a few bumps and scrapes. You weren't getting rid of me that easily." Trey laughed, a mega-watt smile on his face as the little girl placed a toy stethoscope to his chest.

My stomach lurched as I realized just how much he looked like Jenner. I said a silent thank you to whoever was listening above, that Jenner had chosen hockey over the family business. I don't think I could have handled seeing him in the same position.

"All better, Daddy!" The little girl smiled, proud of her work, before snuggling close to his side.

Daddy? Taking a closer look, I realized the resemblance was there. Trey and his daughter shared the same mischievous smile and familial jet-black hair. Dressed in a white ruffled shirt, hot pink overalls, and sparkly converse; the little girl swung her feet over the edge of the bed.

"Thank you, pumpkin." Trey answered lovingly. "See, I have the best doctor. I'll be good as new in no time."

I waved as the little girl watched me curiously before whispering in Trey's ear.

"Kat, this is Charlie, my daughter." He introduced us. "Charlie, this is Kat, Jenner's girlfriend."

"Hi. You're pretty." Charlie smiled a large toothless grin. "Is your name Kat because you like cats?" She asked completely serious.

I crouched down next to the bed, getting on her level. "Hi Charlie, it's

nice to meet you. Kat is my nickname. My real name is Katherine.” I answered shaking her little hand.

“My real name is Charlotte, but everyone calls me Charlie. I like her, Uncle J. Can we keep her?” She asked.

“That was my plan, kiddo.” Jenner answered, picking her up off the bed. “Why don’t we go get some dinner and let your dad rest?” He asked, spinning her around in a circle.

“Yay! I want spaghetti.” Charlotte squealed in his arms.

“Then it’s a good thing Grandma is cooking tonight.” Jenner answered, looking at his brother. “Get some rest, bro. We’ll be back in the morning.”

I moved to follow them out the door when Trey called my name. “Kat, would you mind staying for a second?” He asked. I paused in the doorway, glancing in Jenner’s direction. He nodded in approval before leaving me alone in the room with his brother.

“I know coming back here couldn’t have been easy for you, but I appreciate you coming for him.” Trey spoke, a grimace crossing his face as he moved back into the center of the bed. “My brother isn’t always the easiest person to deal with. When he came home at Christmas, he was different. Happier, more relaxed. I know that’s your influence.” Trey smirked. “It’s none of my business, and Jenner would kill me if he knew I was telling this. No matter what you decide going forward, you should know. He’s loved you for the past five years. I think that feeling’s mutual, but be careful with him, Kat. Losing you again would crush him.”

“I just want him to be happy.” I answered honestly. “I hope you get some rest.”



“Dinner was wonderful.” I said, thanking Mr. Blackwell for the millionth time.

Dinner truly had been amazing. Homemade spaghetti, salad, garlic bread, and apple pie for dessert. Sitting in the company of my father’s old co-workers and my fake boyfriend’s family had made me anxious. Even when the conversation flowed easily, I felt like I was stepping back into a time

frame I didn't want to repeat.

A twinge of guilt hit my heart as I thought about what Trey had said in the hospital. Jenner's family was wonderful. They were everything you wanted, your significant other's family to be. Kind, respectful, endearing. Every single one of them had made me feel included tonight.

Yet, I didn't know how I felt about their son/brother. If I did, I wasn't ready to admit it to anyone, let alone myself. I knew things had changed between Jenner and I. It was getting harder to ignore. Especially when it no longer felt like we were pretending to be a couple. I was excited when I got to see him and sad when he wasn't around. Hell, I had agreed to go on this trip with him. Something I swore I would never do, just, so he didn't have to do it all alone.

I couldn't admit out loud what my heart was screaming. It went against everything I had promised myself years ago, and I was stupid enough to let it happen. Jenner had worked his way past the walls surrounding my heart without my permission, and I didn't know how to put them back up again.

What I wished for most was clarity. Lost in my thoughts, I didn't hear Jenner's father speak until he stopped walking. "Sorry." I apologized. "What did you say?"

"I would like to show you something, if you don't mind." He answered.

"Of course."

Walking past the bright red engine, Jenner's father led me down a hallway and into the station's break room. He stopped in front of a large golden plaque on the wall. My heartbeat faster as I read the words engraved in metal.

"In memory of our fallen heroes. You will be missed. Your sacrifice never going un-noticed. Forever in our hearts."

Underneath was a picture of every firefighter the 117 had lost. At the top, directly underneath the plaque, was a picture of my father. Forever immortalized in his uniform, smiling down at his fellow first responders. He looked young. Younger than he had been the last time I'd seen him. They would have taken the picture when he was assigned as Capitan ten years before his death.

My heart broke at the sight. It was a beautiful gesture, and a perfect

display of the brotherhood I knew was forged between the firefighters in this station. Seeing my face, Jenner's father pulled me in for a hug.

"I think about him every time I put this uniform on. When someone asks for the Capitan, my first instinct is to look for your father even after all these years. I do this job every day in his honor. Hoping to make him proud." His voice cracks, and I know he's thinking about the friend he lost.

"He loved this job. I know he would be proud of all of you." I answer, hoping to provide him some comfort.

"You were his pride and joy. You've grown into a wonderful young lady. He would be very proud of you too, Katherine."

I nod, unable to speak. I hope he knows how much that means to me and my family. Wiping tears from my cheek, I take one last look at my father's picture on the wall. *I love you, dad. I wish you were here.*



Jenner had left the firehouse early, explaining that he had an errand to run, before asking his father to drive me home. When I walked into our hotel room, Jenner had yelled through the closed bathroom door instructions to wait outside until he said it was ok. So, I had been sitting on the bed for fifteen minutes listening to him clumsily move about the bathroom. *What on earth is he doing?* I thought as another loud crash and a colorful cuss word sounded behind the door.

The door opened, and Jenner walked around the corner looking disheveled, an impish grin on his face. "I have a surprise for you." He said, hand outstretched.

Weary, I followed him into the bathroom as he covered my eyes with his hands. "Surprise!" Jenner exclaimed.

Rose petals were scattered across the marble floor and along the edge of the white claw-foot tub. A Sherpa lined robe was laying across the vanity and candles were lit next to the bathtub, that was full of steaming hot water and bubbles.

"No matter how hard you tried to hide it, I know today wasn't easy. I figured a nice relaxing bath would be the perfect way to end the day." He

responded, answering my unspoken question. “I’m going to go watch the NHL game on tv. You get to relaxing, ok? Call me if you need anything.”

Kissing me sweetly on the lips, Jenner closed the bathroom door, leaving me to my thoughts. Sinking into the near scalding hot water, one thought came to mind.

I do not deserve this.

CHAPTER 17



The first rays of early morning light shine across my face, as a light breeze flows through the open curtains. My hands search across the mattress for Kat coming up empty. Opening one eye, I look around the room. She's nowhere to be found.

Walking out onto the balcony, I see a lone figure sitting on the beach below dressed in a sweatshirt that has my name across the back. Watching the sunrise, Kat sits in the sand looking peacefully out on to the water.

It's the first time I've seen her truly at peace this entire trip. Weighing my options, I take in a deep breath of salty air. I know that brain of hers. If she spends too much time alone, she will think herself into a cyclone of anxiety that will only make things worse. I should go talk to her. Bring her coffee as an apology for disturbing her peace.

Lost in her thoughts, Kat remains unmoving as I walk up behind her. The sound of waves crashing against the shore, drown out my footsteps.

Settling down behind her, I pull her back to my chest, wrapping my arms loosely around her shoulders, her legs curling between mine. Everything about her stance screams that she's protecting herself. From her past, from her thoughts... from me. Resting my chin on her shoulder, I give her a few more moments of silence before I speak.

"It's a beautiful morning." I murmur quietly into her hair.

"It is." She answers too quickly.

Kat fidgets in my arms, like my touch is an annoyance. I drop my arms, placing them into the sand beside me, giving her the space, she needs.

"Do you want to tell me what you're thinking?" I ask as Kat sighs before folding herself inward even further.

"My dad." She pauses, her voice cracking. "My dad was the best person I knew. He was kind, funny, always understood my jokes. I never imagined there'd be a day he wouldn't be here. I knew the job was dangerous, but he always promised he would come home, and he kept his promise until one day he couldn't anymore."

I wanted nothing more than to fix the pain I knew was ripping through her heart at the moment. Kat never talked about her dad, never mentioned her past. It seemed that now she needed to open the Pandora's box she kept so tightly closed around her thoughts.

"He always joked he was Superman. That his only kryptonite was my mom. They loved each other so deeply. God, even when they fought, I'd never seen a couple more in sync. It was like they were the same person split into two bodies. Soulmates to the very core. When dad passed, I didn't think mom would ever recover. Looking back on it now, the only way she knew how to move on was to run as far away as she could from the place that reminded her of him the most." Kat shifted, her long hair blowing against the warm breeze off the water as she studied the water intently. As if she was willing it to wash away her pain.

"So, we packed up our entire life into one van. Left everything else behind and moved to Seattle. I tried to adjust the best that I could and not cause her any more stress. Kept my head down, finished school, enrolled in college, got a scholarship. I did everything I was supposed to do. But it never felt like home." Leaning further into my chest, she continued.

“Mom eventually picked herself up off the floor. Met Tom and remarried. He’s nice, he really is. But he’s not my dad. Her new marriage doesn’t even come close to what they had together. After seeing the wreckage, loving someone that much created in her life. I couldn’t... I made myself a promise. I’d never let someone in like that. Never love someone so much that it took over my entire life. That I’d never let someone all the way in, always keeping walls up around my heart. And I didn’t. Even with Noah, he never really saw me. He didn’t know the deepest, darkest parts of me. He saw what he wanted to see, and that was it.”

Kat turned, “It’s funny. I thought coming back here would heal some broken piece of me. Make me less angry, less bitter about the world. But then I realized California isn’t home anymore. Seattle is home... you are my home and with all of our friends. That’s where I feel safe, and calm. Like maybe I can finally be the authentic version of myself.”

I wait silently making sure she’s done before speaking. “I told you, I’d get you to change your mind and fall for me.”

“Shut up.”

“I have an idea.” I respond, suddenly itching to wash away the sadness from this moment. I needed to see Kat smile. “Why don’t we go have a fun day? Let loose, feel like kids again. Let’s go to Disneyland.”

CHAPTER 18



Jenner hadn't left my side all day, checking on me every second he got. He hadn't let me out of his sight since the moment we arrived at the park. It was sweet, really, but I knew he was only doing it because of the conversation we'd had that morning.

I hadn't been to Disneyland in years. True to his word, Jenner and I had spent the day playing like children. We had ridden every ride possible, taken pictures with characters, and had even indulged in overly expensive seveners.

Catching a small moment to myself, I ducked into a shady area near the Castle and waited for Jenner to finish ordering our dinner. We were buying time, waiting for the fireworks to begin.

Checking my phone, I pulled up our flight information for tomorrow, and hesitated. Was I really about to run away from this man because I was afraid, he'd break my heart? After all, we had said this was no strings attached and like an idiot; I fell for him in a way I hadn't for anyone else. He had fallen for me too, harder, and faster than I had. If there was one thing I knew, it was that no matter how brightly we burned together, we would destroy each other in the end. And I couldn't watch the destruction loving him would cause. My stomach rolled as I weighed my options. Stay and prolong both our suffering by allowing us to fall harder for each other or leave and have the hurt last only for a moment.

My fingers hovered over the accept button, as a bright blue pop up on the screen told me I had just sealed my fate.

Flight Information changed: LAX - SEATTLE

One Passenger

Departure: 6:00 am

Arrival: 8:00 am

There was no going back now.



I quietly packed the last of my things into my suitcase. Praying that Jenner wouldn't wake up. My anxiety spiking with every snore. He was a heavy sleeper, but I couldn't take any chances. I had left a note with Trey the night before when we'd visited him for the last time before leaving. It would explain everything I couldn't say to his face. Trey had accepted the letter, giving me no grief over my decision. He had wished me only the best, a sad smile on his face.

I am a coward. Leaving like this. In this moment I was no better than Noah.

My heart broke as I took one last look at Jenner sleeping peacefully in

the queen-sized bed. His hair sticking up in all different directions, the blankets wrapped tightly around him. He looked small. *I was about to ruin everything.* Grabbing my suitcase, I closed the door behind me, placing the do not disturb sign on the handle. When Jenner woke up, he'd be angry. I knew he wouldn't forgive me, but I hoped maybe one day he would understand.

Every cell in my body begged me to go back into the hotel room and crawl into bed with him for just one more second. I ignored the feeling, walking towards the elevator. Every step taking me further from the man I knew I didn't want to live without. *This is for the best.* I thought. My brain trying to rationalize my decision, while my heart screamed at me to turn around.

The elevator door opened, and I walked inside. For the second time in my life, I was leaving a piece of my heart in California. After this, I wasn't sure I'd have any pieces left to give. They all belonged to him now. Tears ran down my cheek, as the elevator doors closed, taking me to the lobby and the waiting cab below.

I love you, Jenner and that will be our undoing.

CHAPTER 19



One month. It's been one month since Kat disappeared from my life again. Do you want to know what the worst part of it all was? I knew she was scared, and she knew I was willing to do whatever it took and wait as long as necessary for her to feel comfortable enough to tell me how she felt.

Frantic, I had searched our hotel, her old house, her father's gravesite, and every place I could think of that she might have gone. There wasn't a trace of her anywhere. I found her letter at the hospital. She had left it with the person I least expected. My brother. I had read that letter so many times over the past month that I could recite it from memory.

Dear Jenner,

I'm sorry that I'm leaving this way. I hope one day you can forgive me, but I will understand if you don't. I can't continue with our agreement any longer. It's not fair to either of us...

You deserve to be happy, and I hope you have the most amazing life. I'll always be cheering you on from the sidelines.

Love, Kat

I had flown home crushed. The empty seat beside me a constant reminder that she had left, yet again. Her bullshit excuse that she couldn't continue with our agreement any longer made me furious the longer I thought about it over the course of the three-hour flight back to Seattle. What had started out as a ploy to get back at her ex had turned into something more for both of us, and she was running away out of fear.

Every call and text I sent over the next 30 days went unanswered. The

first weekend after I got home, I sat outside her apartment in the rain, hoping she would answer the door until Fallon had finally appeared, asking me to leave before their neighbors called the cops.

Our friends had no choice words of wisdom to provide other than ‘give her time.’ I had come to hate that phrase.

One night Oliver had even gone so far, as to throw my keys into the pond behind our house. Successfully stopping me from driving drunk to Kat’s apartment. He left me to fish them out the next morning alone.

I’d even stooped as low as tracking Fallon down outside her law classes, fully ready for her to rip me a new one. What I didn’t expect was her pity.

“Go get some sleep. For the love of God take a shower. You reek of whiskey.”

“Please, please let me talk to her.” I begged, following Fallon to her next class.

“I’ll try my best. She just needs time.” Fallon answered, looking at me with dismay.

“If one more person says that I swear I’m going to fucking lose it!” I yelled, punching the wall beside me, a large dent forming in the plaster.

“We’ll figure this out, but no one needs you to be an asshole right now. Go home. Sleep off your anger and talk to Oliver when you’re sober enough to come up with a plan.”

Sensing I was about to argue, Fallon walked into her next class, calling back over her shoulder. “Just do it, Blackwell.”

After that, life resumed as usual. Or my new version of normal that is. The only thing left to do was work my body to the point of exhaustion, so I didn’t have time to think. I logged more practice and conditioning hours than I had in the last three years combined. We kept throwing parties, and I watched the door like a hawk every night, praying she’d waltz through it and back into our lives. But she didn’t.

Word spread around campus that things had ended badly, causing old friends to come out to play. While I wasn’t stupid enough to sleep, around knowing if she ever came back that would ruin my chances of getting her back, that didn’t mean I’d say no to harmless flirting.

Even using every distraction, I could think of it never cleared my mind fully that she was gone.

Until one day she wasn't... and this time I fucked it all up on my own.

CHAPTER 20



Love. One stupid, insignificant word that could put you back together or break you even further apart. Right now, Jenner and I are breaking. Cracks splintering their way through both our hearts, and I didn't know if we'd ever be able to put the pieces back together again.

It's even worse when you know the damage is your fault. I didn't regret my decision to leave California. I did, however, regret the pain I had caused. Between Oliver texting me details of every dumb ass decision Jenner had made in the past month, and Jenner's constant texts and phone calls. I had silenced my notifications indefinitely. I needed space and time to think. It was already hard enough not talking to Jenner without the onslaught of daily messages coming through my phone.

I just had to wait until he moved on... which he would eventually, and hope I was strong enough to handle it when he did. It's that thought that goes through my mind as I sit on the couch, in my fuzzy pajamas, a tub of ice cream in hand and trashy reality tv in repeat. Ben & Jerry will be my new boyfriends. *At least they don't act like a cocky asshole, but in reality, have a soft side and are one of the kindest people you've ever met.* I burrow further

into the blankets, wondering how long I have to sit on the couch in order to leave a permanent imprint. One more weekend couldn't hurt, right?

I hear the front door open and for a split second my heart flutters, thinking maybe he's on the other side of the door. I'm not above the feeling of regret I felt when Fallon opened the door carrying a large shopping bag. Not bothering to glance in my direction, she walks into the kitchen rummaging around before un-plugging the tv from the outlet. She stands over me looking annoyed.

"You look pathetic. Get up." She barks as I stare at her, speechlessly. "Don't look at me like I just kicked your puppy. You got yourself into this mess and now you're going to fix it."

"Seriously Fal?" I ask suddenly, furious at my best friend. "Way to rub salt in the wound."

"What? No one made you leave that hotel room with the gorgeous man. That decision was all for you. Because you were scared." Fallon answers, pointing a finger in my face before continuing. "Let me tell you something, woman. Everyone is scared. Life is scary. But you have to be scared, say fuck it, and do it, anyway! Falling for Jenner was the happiest I've ever seen you. Don't even try to deny it."

"Tell me how you really feel." I snap around a spoonful of chocolate ice cream. Fallon pulls the spoon from my mouth before I can take another bite.

"You know I love you, but you're an idiot. So, you're going to get off this couch and stop looking like a commercial for the next sappy romcom and go get your man. There's a party tonight and we are going."

"Fallon, I can promise you. He doesn't want to see me." I answer, trying and failing to hold on to the blanket she's forcefully pulling off my body.

"I don't care about him and what he wants. What I care about right now is not seeing you be a permanent couch potato." Fallon responds, falling slightly as she wins our game of tug-o-war. A smug smile on her face, as she folds the blanket neatly back into the basket under the end table.

"You're messing up the energy in the apartment. I'm going to have to do a serious cleanse once you're back to normal."

“If I agree to go, can I finish my ice cream when I come home?” I ask sweetly.

“Fine. Now go get ready, we’re leaving at 9pm.” She yells already on her way into her room. The door shuts, as I stare at the clock on the tv. I have 2 hours to get ready. Great.



It’s decided I’m never leaving the couch again. Because Jenner is drunk and surrounded by puck bunnies. Whom is he not flirting with but still not trying to fight off? They need to get lost. My blood boils as one draws a finger down his biceps, trying to get his attention by putting her tits in his face. His eyes glaze over, not bothering to look in her direction as he finishes what looks to be his seventh beer of the night.

“Kat.” Fallon whispers beside me.

“Don’t start. You made me come here. You told me it would be a good idea. I should have stayed home.” I whisper yell, not wanting to draw attention to my position against the far wall and closest to the exit.

“Kat wait.” Fallon answers, grabbing my hand.

“Don’t.” I snap, pulling my hand from her grasp. I storm outside to my truck. Fallon can find her own way home. *I don’t give a damn.*

Tennessee Whiskey floats through the speakers, lulling my anger to a slow simmer as I pull out of the driveway. Raindrops slide down the windshield as I see Jenner run out the front door, down the wooden steps and onto the pavement below. Rushing in my general direction. Oliver and Fallon aren’t far behind him. I can’t hear what Oliver says, but it causes Jenner to stop in his tracks.

In the rearview mirror, illuminated under the single streetlamp, I see Jenner, standing motionless in the middle of the street drenched from the rain as I drive further down the road. I don’t take my eyes off the rearview mirror until Jenner’s figure blurs into his surroundings in the darkness. I can’t tell wither he’s blurred by the rain or my tears, as a wretched sob rips from my chest. Another, much larger crack, forms in my heart forms as I drive into the darkness.



I wake up to hushed whispers coming from the kitchen and the distinct smell of coffee.

“Do not wake her up.” Fallon snaps.

“The sooner she wakes up, the sooner we fix this.” Oliver answers, not bothering to whisper.

At least Fallon made it home safely. I hadn’t heard her come in last night, but I wasn’t paying much attention either. Sitting up, I look at my reflection in the mirror. The makeup from last night I hadn’t bothered to wash off is smeared darkly across my face, tear stains melting it like snow. I am a mess.

Let’s get this over with. I think before opening my bedroom door. The voices in the kitchen stop arguing instantly. An awkward silence settling over the apartment as I walk into the kitchen. I don’t care enough to wash my face, though I know my skin will hate me for it later. Oliver and Fallon are sitting at the dining room table, doughnuts, and coffee between them.

“I brought doughnuts from the cafe.” Oliver answers in a greeting. I don’t miss the fact that the logo on the box is from the cafe Jenner, and I went to that first morning, when we discussed our idiotic plan.

“Can we talk?” Fallon asks. I nod, taking a glazed doughnut from the box. It may have been a bribe, but it was a damn good one.

Oliver gives me a once over, taking in my messy hair, smeared makeup, and stained pajamas. He looks at Fallon, one perfect eyebrow arched. Giving her a look that says, why the hell didn’t you tell me it was this bad?

“Maybe you should just listen to this.” He answers, pressing play on a voice note in his phone.

My blood chills. The doughnut threatening to make its way back up to the surface as I listen.

“Hi Kat. Listen. Everything you think you know right now is wrong. I can’t excuse my actions last night, only apologize for them. You are the only one I want.” Jenner’s voice sounds tired, like he hasn’t slept. He sighs and I

know without having to see that he's running a hand through his hair. "I've tried to prove that time and time again. Damn it Kat, just let me love you. How hard is that?" He asks, his voice softening with every word. "I'm downstairs. I don't expect you to come see me, but I'll be here when you decide you're ready. You're my best friend, Kit Kat." His voice breaks at my nickname. "I miss you." He finishes, before static overtakes Oliver's phone.

Tears threaten to spill as I look at the ceiling. I want to listen to that recording over and over until it's burned into my memory. I hadn't realized how much I'd missed his voice until now.

"He's miserable without you, and from the looks of it, you aren't doing much better."

I shake my head, prepared to say I'm fine, as a single traitorous tear falls down my cheek. I wipe it away quickly, but not before Oliver sees. Handing me a tissue, he speaks, sliding two tickets across the table.

"Come to the game tonight. Work things out afterward. It won't be the same without either of you there. Besides, I think we could all use a little luck right about now."

"I'll think about it." I respond as Fallon says, "We'll be there."

Oliver stands, motioning for me to stand as well. The second I do; he pulls me into a hug. "Don't worry darling, it's all going to be ok. Call me if you need anything." He winks.

The second the door shuts behind him, Fallon starts talking. "So, what are you going to do?" She asks, sticking one ticket into the pocket of her jeans before holding the other out to me.

Over the past six months, Jenner and I had both made wrong decisions. But we had also formed a bond, I wasn't ready to let go of just yet. He had waited five years to find me again and six months for me to love him back. It was well past time for him to stop waiting and time for me to stop running.

I was in love with Jenner Blackwell. The boy who held my hand during the worst moment of my life and the man who'd picked up all my broken pieces years later, carefully putting them back together.

"I'm getting him back." I answered. I just wasn't sure exactly how that would work yet.

CHAPTER 21

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink with a white shadow effect. The signature appears to read "Jenner" in a cursive, flowing script.

Here's a little piece of advice. If you're ever thinking about getting drunk the night before a big game. Don't. No amount of Tylenol, greasy breakfast, or hair of the dog could fight off this monstrosity of a hangover.

Stumbling down the stairs, I thanked God that the sun had yet to rise before walking into the kitchen to face my teammates. Judging by the disapproving glares they tossed my way it wasn't just my head that was about to hurt.

"Morning Sunshine." Oliver greeted. As he leaned against the kitchen counter, sipping a hot cup of coffee. "Get your head out of your ass yet?"

“Really Cap, the night before a big game?” Ronnie mumbled unhappily.

“Sorry.” I snapped pouring myself a large cup of coffee, wishing none of them had spoken at all.

“Don’t apologize, just pull yourself together before the game. We need our Capitan.” Ronnie answered.

“You look like you forgot. I don’t lose.” I tease, hoping to break the ice.

“You really can’t say that anymore.” Oliver shoved a piece of burnt toast into Ronnie’s mouth. “Shush kid. I have a plan.”

“Oh?” I ask.

“Yes, but it requires you to stop being an idiot for the rest of the day. Think you can manage that?”

I listened intently to every word of Oliver’s plan. If anything would work, it would be this.



“Do you think she’s going to come to the game?” I ask lacing my skates before warmups. The Championship Game was finally here.

“I hope so. I texted Fallon asking what they’re decision was but got no response. I don’t know if that’s a good thing or a bad thing.” Oliver responded.

At least we had tried. I appreciated Oliver’s help more than he knew. Especially since I had been a raging asshole and a horrible friend the past month and a half.

“Let’s go bring home another championship boys!” Coach yelled, shaking each player’s hand as they made their way onto the ice.

“You ready?” Oliver asks.

“As I’ll ever be.” I answer, “Let’s go kick some ass.”

Despite my issues in my personal life, I was not going to let that effect our chances at winning. We were bringing home that trophy. No questions asked.

CHAPTER 22

A stylized, handwritten signature of the name 'Kat' in black ink. The letters are fluid and connected, with a slight shadow effect behind the main text.

The atmosphere in the arena was nothing short of electric from the moment we walked in. A sea of black and red jerseys flowed through the concession stand and into the seating area, as students, parents, and teachers alike showed their school spirit for the boys. As the current champions, there was a lot at stake in this game. Not only the team's reputation but also the heart of its captain.

On opposite sides of the ice, the two men that had held my heart over the course of the last year would be fighting for their lives. One was my past, and the other if he forgave me, would be my future.

Leaving California, the way that I did was at the top of my list of mistakes in life. Jenner had said and done everything a girl in love wished to hear and, like an idiot, I had run away from him. Too frightened by my own traumas and feelings to believe any of this could be real. I mean, come on, falling for the guy you're fake dating. Talk about a cliché.

Jenner had surprised me in the best way. When we first met, he was an obnoxious playboy with an attitude that rivaled my own. I had planned on using him for nothing more than revenge. But if there's one thing I know about life, is that nothing goes according to plan. And because of that I fell harder for him than I had for anyone else in my life.

The thing that scared me the most was just how quickly I fell for him. Despite my best efforts at keeping my guard up around my heart, he broke down the walls like they were meant to keep him in instead of keeping him out. Being with him was the happiest I had felt in years... He calmed the

chaos in my mind and my heart.

Now I just had to figure out if he would forgive me.

We had twenty minutes until the boys would be on the ice for warmups, and Fallon had decided we would be using that time to get snacks.

Her exact words had been, “I need popcorn to watch the drama unfold. You need chocolate for either celebration or to eat your feelings” She was right, of course. No matter what happened, it would be an evening to remember.

I was surprisingly calm as we walked down into the arena, our seats right next to the glass. Jenner had gotten them for us when things were good. It’s not like we were going to let them go to waste. Though, I wondered if he would be angry that we were using them. Maybe he already knew we were here. Though I doubted he would get a notification on his phone when the tickets were scanned at the gate. It’s not like he would be checking his phone right now, anyway. He would be in pure attack mode, ready to defeat Noah and the Saints, no matter the cost.

“Hey, Kat.” Trey said, sliding into his seat in the row behind ours.

“Hey, it’s nice to see you up and about.” Other than the use of a cane and a few bandages peaking out from underneath his clothes, Jenner’s brother looked good as new.

“I told you all you can’t get rid of me that easily. Though I was really hoping my brother could have said the same about you.”

“I’m here to fix that.” I answer honestly.

“Good. You are family, kiddo.” Mr. Blackwell answers, taking the seat beside Trey.

Fallon came down next. Popping into the seat beside me, passing me a candy bar and coke. She exchanged pleasantries with Jenner’s father and brother as music filled the arena. Motley Crew by Post Malone. The boy’s warm up song,

“Well, here goes nothing. Go get em’ tiger.” Fallon smiled, throwing a handful of popcorn into her mouth.

“You came prepared.”

“You bet I did. No, quit stalling and go get your man back.”

Sighing, I walked the few steps down to the glass, and watched one by

one as players stepped onto the ice. With each name I recognized, my anticipation grew. The butterflies in my stomach could have lifted the entire arena off the ground. Oliver was the first to glance in my direction once he stepped onto the ice. He nodded an all-knowing gaze in his eyes as he glanced into the tunnel beside me.

Holding my breath, I watched as Jenner stepped onto the ice. His gaze was cool and focused on his team in front of him. He made it to the center of the ice and began to warm-up drills without so much as a glance in my direction.

Maybe he hadn't seen me.

Maybe he had, and he didn't care.

With each passing lap he took on the ice, ignoring me entirely, the more the knot in my stomach grew. *You shouldn't have come, Katherine.* This was a dumb idea.

Wrapping my arms tighter around my body, I resolved to stay in my spot and make him see me. Angry or not, he had to know I was here. From the ice, Oliver was watching, waiting to see if his captain would recognize me on his own. Jenner never glanced up once.

I watched, a laugh caught in my throat, as Oliver took off skating for Jenner, as he was about to pass me yet again. The pair collided into the glass a few feet away, and I watched as Jenner pushed Oliver off him, cussing him out.

"Dude, what the hell! "Jenner's focus was still solely on his friend until Oliver turned him around on his skates to face me.

Oliver held up his hands, smiling. "I'm trying to get it through your thick skull to pay attention to your surroundings."

After a month of not speaking, I don't know why I expected Jenner to be different. Thinking there would be some outward change or sign of the time that had passed. But there he was, the same tall, dark-haired, crazy boy I had fallen in love with. And now he was standing in front of me, and I was lost for words.

Jenner skated towards me; his green eyes shining. "Hi." I mouthed over the noise. "Hi." He mouthed back, placing a gloved hand against the glass. I opened my mouth to speak as a whistle blew to my right. Coach glared in

Jenner's direction, motioning for him to hurry before pointing back towards the ice. "Later?" He asked, tapping the glass three times. I nodded as he skated backwards, his eyes never leaving mine. Testing the waters, I blew him a kiss and watched as he caught it in midair before tapping his closed hand against his chest.

Maybe we fix this after all.

CHAPTER 23

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink with a white shadow effect. The signature appears to read "Jenner" in a cursive, flowing script.

I have the unfortunate dis-pleasure of facing off against Kat's ex for the ceremonial puck drop. The bastard oozes confidence, skating to a stop in front of me, tossing ice shards across my skates. What a tool. I wanted nothing more than to wipe that smirk off his sorry face.

"I'm really disappointed Kat won't be here to see you lose." Noah taunted.

"Who said she wasn't? I'll enjoy watching you cry again when this is finished."

The ref looked nervously at us. No doubt wondering if he was going to have to break up a fight before the game even started. Keeping the onslaught of insults on myself, I waited. The second the puck dropped onto the ice, I snatched it away from my overly confident opponent.

Our team went into attack mode as the buzzer sounded, signaling the beginning of quarter one. The first few minutes of a game set the tone for the entire night. We needed those first few moments in our favor. Any player worth their salt knew just how quickly things could change, especially during a high stakes game like this one and I wasn't about to let go of the puck, as I raced towards the goal.

It was then you could tell just how much the other team wanted to win. I was surrounded by a sea of green and gold when I spotted the tiniest opening. I shot the puck to Oliver, who carried it the rest of the way, right into an open net.

Score one. The Saints could think they were going to win all they wanted, but I wasn't about to let that happen.



Of all the games I've played in my career, this had to be the toughest most satisfying of them all. The Saints were down 3 points going into the second quarter and we were out for blood. Neither team was willing to go down without a fight.

There had already been multiple calls for stick checking and aggressive hitting. We all had a few bumps and bruises from hitting the glass at the wrong angle. But the other team was far worse. One of their players was currently sitting in the penalty box, which meant we had the advantage of having more players on the ice for two minutes. *Don't fuck it up boys.*

Noah was right on my heels, matching my every turn, as we fought for control of the puck. He pushed me from behind. I slammed into the screen, rattling the glass, the crowd booing and cheering against my skull. Gritting my teeth, I raced to catch up with the asshole. I wasn't going to let that slide.

Where Noah made up for in confidence he lacked in technique, his coordination and control of the puck was sloppy. He wasn't even aware he had given me the perfect opening for a steal until it had already happened.

This was it. Moments like this were what I lived for. It was the closest I would ever be to flying. My skates moving smoothly against the ice, my heart pounding in my chest, muscles burning as I pushed myself faster.

The puck soared into the net as Noah came to an abrupt stop to my left. He was pissed. The crowd roared, we gained another point, and I scored a hat trick, my seventh this season. Nothing was going to ruin my day.

Yelling over the crowd, Noah taunted me, "You know, I never got to thank you."

"For what" I asked, annoyed that he was trying to make conversation in the middle of the game.

"For teaching Kat new things. She was mediocre before, but I bet she's an even better lay now. She'd have to be to keep you entertained for so long. I think I'll fuck her one more time, just to see now that you two are over."

My gloves came off and I didn't even think before landing the first blow across his sorry face. My fists flew. One, two, three times. I blacked out

as my knuckles bruised with each swing. *This had been a long time coming.*

CHAPTER 24

A stylized, handwritten signature of the name 'Kat' in black ink. The letters are fluid and connected, with a slight shadow effect behind the main text.

“Hell yeah!” Fallon yelled. My blood boiling, as we watched Jenner punched Noah right in the mouth, his head snapping back at an odd angle.

“Ouch! That’s got to hurt.” Trey winced as Mr. Blackwell sighed. “I told him not to start anymore fights.”

“This one is well deserved. That guy is Kat’s ex.” Fallon exclaimed, not taking her eyes off the bloodshed.

“Then it’s excused.” Jenner’s father laughed, shaking my shoulder.

The refs swarmed both men, pulling them off each other. Jenner took another swing, as blood ran down his chin. Noah’s left eye was swollen shut, and his nose was gushing blood. He’d most likely lost a tooth or two as well.

Each player was then escorted to an individual penalty box on either side of the ice. Like children, they were placed on a two-minute timeout for fighting.

Screw this. I stood rushing towards the penalty box only a few feet

away. Empty seats lined either side as I banged on the glass to get Jenner's attention. He turned, startled, wiping blood from his lip with a clean towel.

"What the hell was that?" I screamed, undoubtedly looking like a crazed fan to anyone who didn't know about our relationship. The one I was trying to repair, without my current boyfriend killing my old one.

Jenner smirked, his green eyes bright, wet hair dripping against his face. "I'm not supposed to talk to you when I'm in the penalty box, love. But I've gotta know. Are you mad that I hit him? Or are you mad that you didn't get to hit him first?"

"Both." I yell as the crowd goes wild, the Saint's scoring a goal in retaliation.

"That's my girl."

The buzzer sounds as the doors to the penalty box open. Jenner leans closer towards the glass. "Gotta go beautiful. Save some of that anger for later, ok? I've got a better use for it."

Winking Jenner raced back onto the ice and into the action. I glared at the numbers on his back. The same ones that were on mine.

Lucky number 13.

CHAPTER 25



Hitting O'Conner had been the icing on the cake of an already great day. It was worth the ass chewing Coach would give me later just to see the furious look on Kat's face. God, she was hot when she was angry. If I had anything to say about it, she'd be taking that anger out on me as soon as I was done beating her ex for the Championship title.

With half a period left in the game, we were tied. The crowd had gone wild during our fight. The energy lingering still. Everyone was waiting to see who would come out on top, and each team was fighting to make sure it was them. What the Saint's didn't know was we had a secret weapon. And he was about to come into play.

Coach called for another switch and Ronnie came onto the ice for the first time tonight. We had been practicing this drill for the past two weeks, and I knew he was ready. It had taken a lot of convincing from Coach to agree to this plan, and I was honestly surprised he had followed through after my actions.

But Coach knew how much this meant to our team. To have everyone included, even though Ronnie hadn't technically been cleared to play by the team's trainer. *What Steve didn't know wouldn't hurt him.* The other team would be focused on Oliver and I. We knew no one would be paying attention to Ronnie.

The clock was ticking, counting down the final seconds of the game, as I quickly passed the puck off to my teammate. He had been putting in additional practice time and deserved to make the game winning goal.

I could have taken the shot myself, but that wasn't how a Captain acted. I knew this moment would stick with him long after he had grown old and

stopped playing the game. This was his time to shine.

. Ronnie was open and waiting, halfway to the net. Having a clear shot around the back corner. I skated quicky around the ice, and as predicted most of the Saint's players followed behind me. I snuck Ronnie the puck as I skated directly into the Saint's players creating a diversion.

Ten seconds... five seconds... two...

I held my breath as the Ronnie shot the puck. *This was it, our last chance.*

I watched like a proud father, as the puck bounced off the goalie's glove and into the net. The play was good

Our teammates rushed to center ice, as the buzzer sounded signaling the end of the game. The Devils were taking home the State Champs title for a third year in a row. The noise in the stadium was defining as we celebrated our victory lifting Ronnie high into the air above our heads. *There was nothing better than this.* Winning was a high we wouldn't come down from until next season.

I caught a glimpse of my family standing at the edge of the rink, cheering us on. I had won more than just a State Champ title tonight. I had won the heart of the girl I loved. We could sort out the details of what it all meant later, but right now I wanted to celebrate both victories. Each in their own special way.

CHAPTER 26



The hallway outside the locker rooms was empty as I waited for Jenner to exit. Everyone else had gone back to the boys' house in preparation for the after party. I was beyond proud of Jenner and the team for winning another championship title. The high stress game wasn't what had kept my stomach in knots for the past three hours. Jenner and I needed to talk, and I wasn't sure how that conversation was going to go.

He had seemed happy to see me before the game started, but now that we would be alone and away from the adrenaline of the hockey game, I wasn't sure how he would feel. I wouldn't have blamed him if he told me to

go to hell, never wanting to see me again. At the same time, I wouldn't put it past him to chain me to his bed, and never let me leave.

I waited as the locker room door opened, and Coach Taylor walked out pausing as he saw me waiting by the door.

"You're Kat, correct?" He asked

"Yes Sir." I answered shaking his hand.

"It's nice to finally meet you. You've been the topic of conversation more than once during practice."

"Hopefully it wasn't anything too horrible." I blush.

"It was mostly good." Coach Taylor adjusts the ballcap atop his head, having already traded his nice black suit for a sweatshirt and jeans.

"Jenner's in there. He's always the last to leave on nights like these. You're welcome to wait on the bench inside if you'd like."

"Thank you." Coach Taylor exits the arena as I contemplate his offer.

The thought of going into the boy's locker room was less than appealing. No woman should ever know what went on behind those doors. But at the same time, the empty hallway was becoming slightly creepy in its silence. Gathering my resolve, I opened the metal locker room door loudly.

My footsteps echoed over the linoleum floor, as I stood in the middle of the NU Devils locker room. The teams loco had been painted across the main wall. Coach and staff offices were to the right, a row of bright red lockers lined the middle of the room. A bulletin board was tacked to the wall next to the door, full of flyers and practice schedule memos. The team's bathroom and multiple showers at the far end of the hall.

Walking further into the room, I saw a single locker open a practice bag sitting on the floor below. Jenner's jersey number etched into the red metal. Tapped to the inside of the open door, were three pictures. One of his family in California, another from the Devils first championship win, and lastly the picture Fallon had taken of us at the pizza parlor.

"Jenner?" I called, as he walked around the corner, looking startled running a towel through his freshly showered hair.

"Kat? What are you doing in here?" He asked.

"I was waiting outside the door. Coach Taylor said you were the last to leave. He told me it was ok if I waited in here."

“He willingly let you in here. That’s unusual.”

“I can wait back outside if you’d like.” I answer suddenly feeling foolish.

“No, no it’s alright. Besides this is as good a place as any to talk. Probably the most privacy we’ll have the rest of the night.”

Jenner sits on the bench beside his locker, motioning for me to sit beside him. I sit a good amount of space between us, unsure of where we stood. I knew if I got too close to Jenner too quickly, I would act on the hormones racing through my bloodstream, and we wouldn’t have the conversation we needed to have.

“I know Oliver played you the voice note I left this morning. I meant every word.” Jenner drums his fingers along the side of the bench anxiously.

“I know you did.”

“I owe you an apology.” I look Jenner in the eyes, so he knows how serious I am. “The way I left California... that was in excusable. I was scared. Scared of my feelings for you, scared of my past, and what the future might look like with you in it. Please know you did nothing wrong. My decision was made completely of my own stupidity.”

“Apology accepted.” Jenner answers.

I try to steady my breathing, choosing my next words carefully. “You have every right to tell me to go to hell. That you never want to see me again. But I really hope you don’t. Because I... I’m in love with you. I have been for months; I was just too damn scared to admit I before.”

“You love me?” Jenner asks, his eyes brightening as a large smile stretches across his face.

“So much.” I answer.

Jenner grabs my leg pulling me towards him. “I’m not going to lie to you. When you left, it hurt like hell. I didn’t sleep, barely ate, and made more than my fair share of shit decisions. You were all I thought about, all I talked about.”

“I never meant to make you feel like you had to choose between your feelings for me, and your independence. I love who you are, because of those things. I never want that to change going forward.”

“So, there is a future? I didn’t completely ruin everything?” I ask, as

Jenner's hands cup both sides of my face.

"Baby, you couldn't ruin it, ever. I would have figured out a way to get you back one way or another with or without our friends help. I don't lose remember. I do have one request. Can we do this for real?"

I nod against his hands. "I'm so proud of you for the win today. It was an amazing game. My boyfriend is three-time championship winner."

"Your damn right I am and we're going to celebrate."

I check my phone, the afterparty would start in one hour. "We'd better hurry so we don't miss the party."

"We will but there's one thing I need to do first."

"Ok, what's that?" I ask

"This." He answers bringing his lips to mine. The kiss is soft, and unhurried, like we have all the time in the world. *I've missed this.*

"I love you." Jenner whispers against my lips deepening the kiss.

Pulling me into his lap, my knees resting on either side of his hips, I run my fingers through his hair. One of Jenner's hands cups the back of my neck, the other rests against the small of my back pressing me closer.

Taking his full bottom lip in mine, I suck lightly. Jenner groans, a hand landing harshly on my ass. My breath hitches at the sting. Leaning me backwards Jenner stands pressing my back against a closed locker door. The metal shaking with our weight. I move my neck giving Jenner better access as he kisses down my throat. He sucks on my collar bone leaving a mark, as he rocks his hips against mine.

I can feel him hardening, the seam of my jeans providing the most wonderful friction against my clit as he runs his length against me.

"Clothes off." I order. Pulling at the back of his t-shirt pulling it over Jenner's head.

He follows, stripping me of his jersey and my bra. The cool metal of the locker nips at the skin on my back, as Jenner places small kisses across my chest. My eyes roll backwards as he pulls a nipple between his teeth, his hand squeezing my other breast roughly.

My breathing is erratic, my body aching for his touch already dripping with need. I had gone too long without it.

Jenner pulls back, releasing my nipple with a wet pop. "Let's make this

interesting, shall we?” He asks carrying me away from the lockers and into an open shower.

“Shower sex, how cliché?” I laugh as Jenner sets me on my feet, making quick work of removing my jeans.

He kisses across my stomach, my body flinching, as the tiniest bit of stubble on his chin, tickles my skin as he removed my underwear. Standing Jenner moves to unbutton his jeans, as my hands stop his movements.

“Let me.” Removing his hands, I pull the zipper of his jeans down slowly. Trailing light kisses down his chest, I focus on his hips. My tongue reaching out to lick the v, carved into his skin. Jenner’s breath hitches. Pulling his jeans and underwear off at the same time, I kneel and am I’m face to face with his already rock-solid penis.

I look up. As Jenner watches me with darkened eyes, I lick the drip of pre-cum from the tip. Flattening my tongue I run it across the engorged head of his cock, over and over, before sucking it into my mouth.

Both hands grip his impressive length moving in time with my mouth, as I hollow my cheeks, sucking eagerly.

“Fuck, Katherine.” Jenner moans watching me take his cock in my mouth inch by inch. When he hits the back of my throat, Jenner grips the back of my head holding me in place. Thrusting his hips, Jenner fucks my open mouth. The sounds he makes urging me to take him deeper and suck harder. There’s something empowering about giving a man this kind of pleasure. My pussy drips, wetness pooling against my thighs as Jenner pulls his cock from my mouth.

Reaching behind us, Jenner turns the shower on. Warm water cascading down around us. Jenner positions the shower head so it’s hitting directly across a bench built into the shower. Jenner sit on the bench, turning me so my back is facing his front. He gently pulls me into his lap, bending my knees so I’m straddling him in reverse.

From this angle, the water hits my body warming it, while also providing an extra source of stimulation. I shift in Jenner’s lap ever so slightly as the water hits my clit with the perfect pressure. Moaning I lean my head back against Jenner’s shoulder as his hands kneed the inside of my thighs.

Jenner waits, letting the water pulse against my pussy a few extra moments, his dick resting against my back.

“Is this cliché?” He asks, inserting two fingers inside me, my body tightening around them holding them in place.

I shake my head unable to form words, a jolt of pleasure shooting through my body, as he moves his fingers in a slow rhythm.

“Use your words Kat.” He commands.

“No, it’s not cliché. I was wrong.” I answer breathlessly, rocking my hips against his fingers, begging him to increase his pace.

He obliges kissing my neck, as my back arches. The combination of the water against my clit, and his fingers is too much. I cum, as he holds me tightly against him, controlling my movements as spasms roll thorough my body.

He lifts me easily off his lap, my body weak as we stand. He places my hands against the cool tile wall, spreading my legs wide and pulling my hips backwards so I’m bend at the waist.

He lines his cock at my entrance, water flowing between our bodies. I moan loudly as he slams into me from behind. Jenner groans his hands gripping my hips as he thrusts quickly.

“You feel so good.” I answer breathlessly, as he fills me to the max his hips pressing hard against my ass.

“Shh.” Jenner answers, pausing, a hand covering my mouth gently.

My heart races, eyes widening as I hear what caused him to stop. The distinct sound of a locker door opening. We weren’t alone.

“As much as I want to make my teammates jealous at how much you love my cock. I need you to be a good girl and stay quiet until we’re finished.” Jenner whispers in my ear.

Wait what? He wasn’t going to stop knowing that someone else was on the other side of the locker room wall? My worries are short lived as Jenner thrusts hard and fast, working quickly to get us both off.

Jenner’s breath is harsh against my neck, as my hands claw the shower wall, meeting him thrust for thrust. My body tightens, as an orgasm rips through me. His hand muffling the moan I can’t control. Jenner thrust hard three more times, his body tense, as he quickly pulls out, his cum spilling

across my back. Breathless, I turn letting the warm water wash it away.

I have no idea how we are going to get out of here. From what I can tell whoever was in the locker room hadn't left yet. Not that it would matter. The trail of clothes we had left in the middle of the room would be a clear indication of what was going on inside the shower.

Reading my mind, Jenner turns off the shower, handing me a towel, before grabbing one of his own as a voice calls out from close by. A very distinct British accent.

“Well, it looks like you lovebirds did a lot more than kiss and makeup.” Oliver throws the rest of our clothes over the shower door. Thank goodness he couldn't see anything inside. “Not that I don't approve of sex in public places but hurry up will you. We have a party to get to.”

That's all it takes for me to erupt into a fit of giggles. Jenner rolls his eyes as he dries off getting dressed. “Yeah, we'll be right out.”

CHAPTER 27



Our house was overflowing with people. Everyone packed inside like sardines in a tin can. Most people had left the game and gone straight here, still dressed in their jerseys and NU sweatshirts. The bass from the sound system rattled with windows as I made my way out onto the back patio. Normally this would have been an easy task, but I was getting stopped every few seconds by someone wanting to congratulate me on yet another Devil's championship win.

Just walking through the back door, I got slapped on the shoulder and fist bumped at least twenty times. Not that I minded, but this win wasn't just mine. We all had played an integral part in tonight's game. Speaking of. I watched as Ronnie for a second as he stood by the pong table, excitedly recounting the winning goal to a group of students crowding around him. He looked up as I passed, a fire in his eyes I hadn't seen all season. *Good job, kid.*

At the far corner of the yard a crackling bonfire licked the sky, shooting sparks into the darkness every few seconds. Apparently, someone had gotten happy with the lighter fluid... again. We'd be lucky if none of the neighbors called the cops or fire department. Though I doubted they'd mind, since half of them were standing in my living room.

Kat was sitting at the edge of the fire, an empty seat waiting for me beside her. Still dressed in my jersey, I watched as the orange glow from the fire accented her features and my name stitched across her shoulders. The first night she'd worn that jersey I'd promised her that she would never wear another man's last name that wasn't mine, and one day I planned on making that official. I wasn't ever going to let her go again.

"Hi beautiful." Kissing her on the cheek, I placed her signature drink in

her hand before sitting down beside her.

Most people were focused on the party inside, letting a select few of us sit around the fire. I watched, one eyebrow raised in curiosity as Oliver took a sip from Fallon's drink without any objection from the tiger sitting beside him. She was lost in conversation with Trey. Fallon was filling my brother in on the best restaurants, shopping, and neighborhoods around town. It turns out my big brother had accepted a job offer at a fire station here in Seattle after his accident, fulfilling his dream of becoming a Captain.

"You never told me what you cashed in your scores for?" Kat asked. She had seen the chalkboard above the poker table earlier. The space next to my name, now completely empty.

"You." I responded. "I cashed them in for you. One for every text Oliver sent while we were apart, twenty for Fallon's help to come up with a plan, and fifty for Oliver visiting you this morning."

"What did they get in return?" She asked.

"I don't know yet, but I have a feeling Oliver will have a reason to cash them in soon enough." I nodded in my best friend's direction as he casually draped an arm behind Fallon's chair, successfully marking his territory.

Not that Trey had any time for romance. He devoted his entire life to his job and taking care of Charlie, whom I loved, that we would get to see more. That girl was growing like a weed, and if I blinked, she'd be old enough to drive soon, with me only having seen her once or twice a year.

"How long do you think it's going to take those two to realize they're perfect for each other?" Kat asked, laughing at her oblivious best friend.

"Let's hope it's not as long as it took you." I joke, poking her side as she pushes my hand away. I always knew we'd get to this place, and I wasn't about to let Kat forget it.

"I love you." She answers simply.

"I love you too, Kit Kat."

Epilogue



-Five Years Later-

A light summer breeze ruffled my hair as I buried my toes in the warm sand, a cool wave washing them clean a few seconds later. Tilting my face toward the afternoon sun, I thought about how far we'd come in the past few years.

We'd graduated from college. Moving in to our first apartment together soon after. Jenner had been drafted into the NHL and was in his third year playing for the Seattle Kraken with Oliver. I had gotten a job as a nurse in the oncology ward at the local children's hospital. Fallon was working at one of the top law firms in the state. Trey and Charlie lived close by. We had family dinners with the six of us once a week. *Life was just about perfect.*

We had flown down to California for the weekend for Jenner's father's retirement party/ceremony. The weekend had gone by quickly and I was soaking up every second of sunshine I could get. Surprisingly, I wasn't ready to leave.

I had made peace with my past. It no longer haunted me the way it once did. I would always miss my father. But I now I understood that I couldn't let my grief control my every thought and action. Love wasn't a weakness. If you let it, it could be your biggest strength. There were far too many beautiful moments I would have missed if I would have continued to hide away. Right on cue, Jenner walked up behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist

"Hi love."

"Hi." I answer, leaning back against his chest.

"I have a surprise for you."

Covering my eyes with his hand, Jenner walks us further down the beach. My mind flashing back to the last time we were on this beach, before I ran from the best thing that ever happened to me.

"Keep your eyes closed." He whispers, stepping away. Even after all these years, I instantly miss his touch. I wait patiently until he tells me I can open my eyes. Once I do, my knees feel like they'll buckle underneath me.

A small walkway is laid out before me, covered in rose petals and candles. It leads to a large heart-shaped bunch of petals with Jenner standing in the middle dressed in a nice grey suit. *That's why he wanted me to wear this dress.* I think my fingers brushing against the fabric of my white maxi dress. A large sign hangs behind his head with the words *four little words* written in neon.

Will You Marry Me?

I walk forward, my legs barely holding me upright, as Jenner takes my hand.

I'm already crying as he bends on one knee. A black velvet ring box out in his right hand. Inside is the most beautiful diamond ring I've ever seen. A 3-carat princess cut diamond is set in a simple silver band. *It's perfect.*

"Katherine Townsend, you drive me crazy. In the best possible way. I can't imagine my life without you in it. I have loved you for ten years and I plan on loving you for a million more. Will you marry me?" Jenner asks.

“Yes!” I yell happily. *Someone pinch me. This is real. It isn't fake and it's actually happening. Omg.*

He places the ring on my finger as I jump into his arms, kissing every inch of his face and smiling like an idiot. If you would have told me five years ago when we made that stupid fake dating pact, that this would be the result. I would have said pigs would fly first and ran in the opposite direction. Sometimes life has a funny way of surprising you.

“You know what this means, right?” Jenner asks as I shake my head clueless.

“I won. I got the final score.”

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

To my wonderful readers. I never expected you to champion this book the way that you have. From the daily messages of excitement to over a million views on TikTok. I hope you know how much your support means. Without you this book would just be words on a page. You make it special.

I hope you love Kat and Jenner's story as much as I do. It was a great one to write, but it's not over just yet. You'll see glimpses of them in the upcoming books in the Seattle Hearts series.

Which brings me to my surprise....

The next two books release date:

Book Two: July 1st, 2023

Book Three: December 1st, 2023

Happy reading! ;)

ABOUT THE

A stylized, cursive signature of the author, Taylor James, rendered in black ink with a subtle drop shadow effect.

Taylor James writes books that feel like an early 2000's rom-com with a little extra spice. Easily distracted by men in uniform, Taylor loves writing real life romance we all dream of having. A lover of animals, chocolate, and tacos. Taylor lives in the United States with her two dogs.

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