

IT'S NOT YOUR
ORDINARY,
BUT IT'S OUR
PERFECT...



MERRIMACK MAVERICKS HOCKEY

STRANGE LOVE

STEFFANIE BLAIS

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STRANGE LOVE

STEFFANIE BLAIS

This book is for anyone who loves the 80s, hot hockey players
with mullets, and happily ever afters.

Trigger Warnings

Themes of kidnapping, drug use, and human trafficking are mentioned. There is a graphic telling of child kidnapping and life in captivity. No on-page assault related to human trafficking.

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Chapter 1

“I Wanna Go Back”

Ivy - Age 23, 1994

I take a deep breath, allowing my elbows to rest on the polished wood table. My blonde hair cascades down my back in loose waves, and I can feel it tickling my exposed skin as I gaze at my friends with a bittersweet smile. Tomorrow is my friend Sarah’s wedding day, a celebration we’ve all eagerly anticipated. But for me, it means coming face to face with *him* and confronting memories I have been trying to bury for years. A knot formed in my stomach two weeks ago, which has taken up residence ever since. There is no indication it will vacate anytime soon.

Sarah is busy with her family after the rehearsal dinner, so we girls decided to meet tonight for drinks. My best friend, Sascha, sits to my left, and my other friend, Kerri, sits across the table. They both left our small town for bigger and better things, so I’m officially the only one at the table who still lives here. That happens when you refuse to leave your hometown or are too scared to leave. That’s how *he* would word it.

The other ladies sitting with us seem pleasant enough, even though I’ve only recently met them through the experience of the wedding activities. Other than Sascha and Kerri, they are all friends of Sarah’s from college and her new job in a city

three hours from here, interested in hearing about our small town and the famous hockey players it has produced.

“Can you believe Sarah is getting married tomorrow?” Sascha asks, her voice tinged with longing.

Kerri’s curly strawberry-blonde hair bounces with every shake of her head, a few loose strands escaping from her messy ponytail.

“I can’t believe we’re adults now,” she sighs. “Remember when we spent our weekends just hanging out, no worries about paying rent or studying for exams?”

A nostalgic glint appears in Sascha’s eyes as she adds, “And the North End Mall...those were my teenage stomping grounds. From age twelve to eighteen, I practically lived there. It’s where I found all my favorite goth clothes.”

Kerri and I share a laugh because looking at her now with her soft, pale pink sweater and jeans, it’s hard to imagine her as a rebellious teenager dressed in black from head to toe. When I met her, she could’ve passed for a member of Siouxsie and the Banshees with her inky black hair and thick charcoal eyeliner. Now, she wears her naturally light brown hair in loose waves. It fits perfectly with her new position as an advertising executive, giving off a polished yet approachable vibe.

My eyes glisten as I listen to the ladies talk about old memories. “The mall closed last year,” I say sadly, taking a sip of my Chardonnay and savoring its oaky flavor.

Kerri’s face lights up excitedly, “What about Donnelly Ice Center?”

I almost choke on my wine at the mention of the ice rink. “That place will never shut down,” I reply incredulously.

Only those of us from here know the intimate details of my relationship with that ice rink or the man who helped make it famous when he left for Boston. He’s now on his way to becoming a star in the NHL, putting our little town on the map. *Just as it should be*, I remind myself for the millionth time.

“I do miss high school,” Michelle says wistfully, scanning the group for agreement.

“Because you were a huge slut,” Misty interjects with a playful smirk, and the group bursts out in a fit of laughter.

“It’s true,” Michelle says proudly, tossing her blonde hair over her shoulder. “Still kinda am,” she adds with a wink.

“Okay, enough about that. What else do you miss?” Amy prompts the group, trying to steer the conversation back on track.

Misty offers up her first thought, “I miss the music. I’m not sure about this new grunge stuff.”

We all nod in agreement, reminiscing about the songs we used to blast from our cassette players. It’s amazing how we have so many shared experiences with being raised in the 70s and 80s, even if we grew up in different places.

As we continue sharing our memories, more ideas are thrown out one after another.

“The clothes.”

“The big hair.” Laughter radiates throughout the room as we remember our questionable fashion choices and hairstyles.

“No World Wide Web,” Michelle chimes in.

“My parents didn’t know or care about where I was,” says Misty. We all nod in understanding, grateful for our freedom as teenagers.

“Bike rides.” The simplicity of cruising around on our bikes brings a smile to everyone’s face.

“The plastic Halloween masks we almost died wearing.” The memory of those suffocating masks brings both laughter and horror to our faces.

“The movies.” We all let out an audible groan at the mention of John Hughes’ name. His films were such a big part of my coming-of-age experience. Our nostalgia turns into a discussion about how no one can capture the essence of teenage angst like he did.

Glancing up at the sparkling chandelier, I try to push the difficult memories away, focusing on the present moment, but when others begin sharing stories and laughter fills the air, it's hard not to feel a pang of regret, a constant reminder of the choices that led me to where I am today. At one point, those choices were driven by courage and the need for independence, but now they feel more like chains holding me back from taking risks. Like mud oozing into my boots, this feeling weighs me down with every step I take.

But as I sit here, sipping on my wine and listening to the chatter around me, I consciously push these thoughts aside in an attempt to enjoy the evening. The crisp air fills my lungs as I take a deep breath, trying to let go and allow myself to believe that anything is possible.

Sascha leans her head onto my shoulder and whispers, "I know this is hard for you." I squeeze her hand and lean down to kiss the top of her head, grateful for her understanding. *Maybe he won't even be there?* I think to myself and then brush that ridiculous thought away. Of course, he will be there. He's Sarah's cousin and hasn't been home for five years. I'm sure his mom would kill him if he didn't make time in his busy hockey-playing, model-dating life to come to the wedding.

My God— has it been that long? Has it been five years? Five years since our strange relationship ended abruptly when he left for college in Boston to play hockey. At the same time, I stayed behind, paralyzed by the uncertainty of the future and haunted by memories of our time together. Most days, I'm an expert at compartmentalizing, but today, those memories bubble to the surface without warning.

"Remember when we used to play outside until it got dark?" Amy asks.

"Yeah, those were the days," Michelle chimes in wistfully.

"Even though we were always so scared of getting kidnapped," Amy says, and my heart rate spikes. Sascha shifts uncomfortably in her seat while Misty lets out a small laugh.

"That's right! We were all afraid of strangers and being snatched," Misty says with a hint of amusement.

“Don’t forget quicksand,” Michelle adds with a laugh.

“And the Bermuda Triangle,” Amy chimes in, swirling her glass of wine.

“And *Jaws*,” Michelle shudders.

“That doesn’t count,” Misty chuckles. “That’s still terrifying.”

“Cults,” I say casually, causing Sascha and Kerri to look at me with wide, questioning eyes.

Amy nods solemnly. “What was up with all the cults in the 70s and 80s? Like The Manson Family. And that one in California...”

Misty leans in, focusing her brow in thought.

“People’s Temple,” I say quietly. “Although, they left for Guyana and never returned.”

We all sip our drinks before Michelle breaks the silence, “Why would anyone join something like that? It’s crazy.”

I nod solemnly, my eyes flickering to the floor as I remember my experience. The group falls silent, their expressions shifting from curiosity to concern.

I take a deep breath, “There’s a lot of psychology behind it. A cult leader has a magnetic personality and preys on outcasts who desperately want to be part of something. They use mind control techniques to separate members from their family and friends, making them feel that even if they did want to leave, they would have nothing to go back to.”

“Creepy,” Amy shudders, her hand trembling slightly as she sips her wine.

“How can one person have so much control over others?” Michelle asks, her voice laced with disbelief. “Like Charles Manson. Why did people follow that freak?”

I explain calmly, “He’s a true psychopath with a grandiose sense of self and the ability to manipulate others.” *Not unlike someone else from my past.* “It’s a truly terrifying combination.”

The mood in the room lightens slightly as Michelle chimes in, “Remember when pre-Bobby Brown Whitney just wanted to dance with somebody?” She clinks her wine glass against Misty’s in agreement.

“Do you guys have any idea how excited I am about tomorrow? I can’t wait to meet Corey Delacour and Michael Tazman in person,” Michelle blurts out, once again turning the conversation in a direction I generally avoid. “I mean, they are both so fine. I can’t believe Sarah is related to a pro hockey player.”

“He’s not a pro yet.” Sascha scoffs next to me as I become immersed in a haze, lost in memories of a life that feels like a distant dream. Kerri breaks through my fog by leaning forward and placing her warm hand on my arm. I blink and focus on her concerned face.

“Are you okay?” she asks softly.

I take a deep breath and try to shake off my melancholy. My eyes dart around the restaurant before settling on Kerri’s kind gaze. A small smile forms on my lips as I lean toward her.

Can I say that I’m okay? I’m not entirely sure I am. With everyone here together again, it’s only a matter of time before the past resurfaces. My high school friend group, the girls and the guys, haven’t been together like this in years, and I can already feel the weight of unresolved issues hanging heavy in the air. It’s better to address them now than to pretend everything is fine and wait for things to blow up later. Maybe it’s the wine, or maybe it’s my intention to tell the story my own way, but the next words out of my mouth surprise even me.

“So,” I start, “Speaking of famous hockey players, I have a crazy story to tell you guys.”

Michelle, sitting across from us, leans forward eagerly. “Ooohh, tell us!” she urges.

I hesitantly agree, knowing that sharing this memory will dredge up more emotions. “It’s not exactly a happy one,” I warn them. “It’s about a girl who loses the love of her life to

his dreams of playing professional hockey, and she is about to run into him for the first time since he left. Sounds dramatic, but it gets even crazier.”

The group falls silent, their empathy palpable as they watch me carefully.

“The girl was kidnapped when she was twelve years old,” I say rapidly on an exhale. “She lived with a cult for years.”

Misty laughs before realizing the gravity of my words. Her mouth turns down momentarily before lifting back up into a gentle smile. She holds my hand and says quietly, “I’m so sorry. We didn’t know.” I peer around the group, my gaze lingering on each woman momentarily.

“How could you?” I say, the words tinged with amusement and love. “It was so long ago, but it’s part of who I am now. That and what happened in the years after returning home.”

Michelle snorts playfully, “Someone should have stopped me before I started bragging about my slutty years. It sounds shallow now, don’t you think?”

“No way,” I chuckle, “It’s awesome.”

The others nod encouragingly at my words. Amy speaks up first, her eyes twinkling with curiosity, “We would like to hear about it.”

Michelle jokingly joins in, grinning wildly as she looks at the empty wine bottle in the center of the table and makes a comical reference, “You’re gonna need a bigger boat.”

The comment breaks the tension, and we all laugh heartily. Misty quietly gets up for more wine while I take a deep breath and close my eyes for a beat. When they open again, the words come naturally. “When I was twelve years old...”

Chapter 2

“Time After Time”

Ivy - Age 12, 1982

“Pamela Taylor! COME ON DOWN! You’re the next contestant on *The Price is Right!*” The familiar cadence of Johnny Olson’s voice booms through the studio as the newest contestant makes her way down to contestants’ row. Her face is painted with a wide smile as she jumps and claps with unrestrained glee, only for her oversized orange nametag to nearly slide off her chest. The other contestants stand nervously beside her, eyes darting between each other as if searching for the magical answer of how to get up on that stage.

Bob Barker strolls across the platform, looking impossibly slick in his gray suit and royal blue tie. His chocolate brown hair sharpens his appearance, combed back effortlessly, along with his stark white teeth, which stand out in contrast to his golden tan skin.

He raises the microphone to his lips, beckoning the contestants with his kind intonation before turning to the side with a sweep of his arm as the curtains part to reveal a beautiful red-headed model dressed in a stunning coat.

“Here’s the first item up for bids. “IT’S A FUR COAT!” Johnny announces, and the contestants jump up and down,

eyes wide with wonder, as the model performs a graceful turn in the exotic and expensive-looking pelt.

“The one of you who bids the closest without going over wins,” Bob announces. Martha goes first with a bid of \$150. My mom purses her lips around her cigarette and rolls her eyes toward the television set. “That coat costs way more than that,” she mutters disapprovingly.

Madeline is next. She makes a bid of \$1000, which is met with an eruption of shock from the entire audience. Mom snubs out her cigarette in the giant ashtray I made in school that sits atop the coffee table and shakes her head. “That’s way too much,” she scolds.

Nancy leans into her microphone and confidently announces her bid of \$400. My mother watches with silent admiration at Nancy’s bid.

Finally, it’s Pamela’s turn to bid. She listens to the audience members shout out numbers and pauses for a few moments as if deep in thought before declaring her answer of \$401. Being the last contestant to bid is the best place to be, so you can evaluate your number based on what everyone else has done. Pamela is lucky she was called last.

Johnny’s voice cuts through the silence: “The actual retail price is \$595.”

Pamela freezes briefly before jumping in place as Bob declares her the winner. The other contestants feign excitement for her in the name of sportsmanship but are disappointed. Who wouldn’t be? *The coat is gorgeous.*

Pamela races across the stage, her tight jeans swishing around her ankles. Reaching Bob, she kisses his cheek before standing beside him on the stage, highlighted against the lime green and orange backdrop. *I don’t think I’ll kiss Bob when I’m on the show. It’s too creepy.*

Bob tells us it’s time for Pamela to see what she will be bidding on just before Johnny’s melodic voice echoes out, “IT’S A NEW CAR!” as the curtains split, revealing a shiny red Oldsmobile convertible gleaming off the fluorescent lights

in the center of the stage. A leggy brunette drapes herself over it. She, too, is wearing the fur coat from earlier over her shimmery, gold leotard. *A car! The holy grail of potential prizes!* Pamela is so lucky, I think, and then I wince as I try to swallow, my throat raw from coughing.

“Mom, can I have some cream of tomato soup?” I ask.

“Of course, Sweetie. Just wait until the commercial,” she replies, still glued to our television, which takes up most of the opposite wall with its substantial wooden frame.

Pamela’s hands tremble as Bob announces she will be playing Lucky Seven. That’s a challenging game. She’s given \$7 from Bob, and she has to guess the price of the car. Every time she is wrong, he takes money away. If he takes all \$7, she loses.

She selects her first number, and Bob’s eyes widen in anticipation. She chooses six, but the number is seven. The audience groans along with my mom from her spot on the couch.

Pamela peels a dollar bill and hands it to Bob, who quips, “Close but no cigar.”

With a deep breath, Pamela announces her second guess: four. But the correct answer is one. Bob snaps up three more dollars from Pamela’s diminishing stash. She only has three dollars left, her final chance to win the car slipping through her fingers like sand through an hourglass.

Bob cajoles Pamela playfully to wring every last ounce of drama out of the moment as she struggles to make her final guess. She can’t afford to make a lousy guess here. I may be staying home from school sick today, but my brain is still working well enough to do basic subtraction.

Her last guess is nine. The tile is turned over with a sharp ding to reveal the answer is two. She lost. Pamela cries as the sound of defeat—WOMP, WOMP, WOMP-WOMP, WOOOMMMP—fills the studio. With drooping shoulders, she slinks offstage as Bob smiles from ear to ear. My mom mutters another “I-told-you-so” from the couch.

“She was never going to win that car,” my mom says, her voice heavy with resignation. She takes a moment to place the back of her hand on my forehead, checking my temperature. “Cool as a cucumber,” she says, expressing relief and amusement.

“Want to watch *Scooby Doo*?” she asks, and I nod eagerly. Whenever I stay home sick, we have the same routine. *Price is Right*, *Scooby Doo*, and then *General Hospital*. My mother is obsessed with her soap opera and never misses it if she can avoid it.



My Cocoa Puffs are slowly turning my milk a velvety shade of brown as I stir my spoon around my bowl. My little sister, Natalie, sits beside me, taking vicious stabs at her toast with a fork. Ever since she turned six, she’s declared that only white food is acceptable. My parents keep scolding her, but it’s been two weeks, and her decision is unwavering. Apparently, the dollop of strawberry jam I put on her white toast makes it inedible.

Dad rushes into the kitchen, like he does every morning before work, searching through the stack of mail on the counter for his keys.

“Ivy, have you seen them?” he asks, expecting me to answer with a mouthful of sugary cereal.

“Nope!” I mumble after swallowing it down.

“Irene!” Dad yells for my mom, who shuffles into the room shortly after, rubbing her eyes, half awake yet thoroughly annoyed.

“Have you checked your coat pocket?” she suggests.

He frantically pats his pockets, searching for the keys, and breathes a sigh of relief when he finds them. He hugs Mom, closing his eyes and resting his chin on her head. “What would I do without you?” he asks.

“You’d be late for work every day!” she jokes with a wink before kissing his lips. Dad then moves to me and brushes my hair back from my face as I glance up at him with a subtle smile.

“How are you feeling, Pumpkin?” he asks softly.

“Better,” I reply, nodding my head assuredly. “My throat isn’t too sore anymore.”

“That’s good,” he says and moves to Natalie. She’s barely touched her toast other than to massacre it with the tines of her fork. “At least, drink your milk,” he says with a slight edge in his voice. She glances down at the white whole milk with its pasty fat ring around the top and nods happily, agreeing it suits her current diet. Dad rolls his eyes and pecks her on the nose, which earns him a giggle before he hurries out the door.

“Let’s go, girls,” Mom commands as she zips our lunches into our backpacks. I have a Scooby Doo lunchbox, and Natalie has a Holly Hobbie one. My thermos is my favorite part. Mom sometimes fills it with warm soup, and I hope she’s done that today. I squint through the window at the fresh snow that appeared overnight.

I lace up my boots and zip my jacket as high as it will go, tucking in my chin so only a sliver of my face is exposed. As we step outside, the sharp, cold air stings my lungs with every breath. The snow crunches under our feet like broken glass as we walk down the driveway.

“Hurry up, Nat,” I urge her as she dawdles behind me, admiring icicles hanging from tree branches. “We’re going to miss the bus.”

I reach for her mittened hand, and we continue toward the bus stop, but not before she rolls her eyes at me and says, “No, duh!” I’m going to need some extra patience today.

We’ve reached the end of the street and are about to turn onto the main road when we hear the sound of a big car behind us. The engine’s noise grows louder, and I glance over my shoulder to see a white van barreling down the street. I tug Natalie closer to me, pushing her toward the snowbank on our

right. She babbles excitedly about *Schoolhouse Rock!* as I try to listen for the van's approach.

It pulls up next to us with a screech of brakes, blocking our path. My heart pounds in my chest as two people, a man and a woman, spring out of the back doors. They don't say anything - just rush us. I push Natalie away from them with all my strength, but they're too quick. One grabs at her arms while the other attempts to take her legs.

Natalie screams and thrashes against me as I fight back with everything I have. I grab the woman's leg and throw her off balance so she drops my sister's lower body. Natalie continues to thrash around wildly and somehow gets free of the man who had her arms, her slippery jacket making it impossible for him to maintain a good grip.

"Go under the van!" I yell at Natalie. She does as I say and crawls on her hands and knees to the side of the van, slides her small body underneath, and pops out the other side. I can see her legs holding her in place, so I scream again. "RUN, NATALIE! RUN AS FAST AS YOU CAN!"

"Dammit! She got away," the woman says, wrapping her arms around me.

"Let's just take this one," the man says as I scream as loudly as possible. He cuts me off with a hand over my mouth. They heave me into the van, and the door slams shut as the van skids off.

"IVY!" I can hear my sister scream as I curl up into a ball in the back of the van. They have me, so there's no use fighting, but at least they didn't get my sister.

Chapter 3

“Young and Innocent”

Ivy - Age 12, 1982

I curl my body into the smallest ball possible, trying to escape the cold, corrugated metal that digs into my shoulder and hip each time we take a turn or hit a bump. There are no seats back here, only some rope, tools, and old food wrappers. It smells like sweat and dirty feet. My stomach churns as the people who took me argue in the front of the van. It takes every ounce of willpower I have not to vomit cocoa puffs all over myself as we jostle back and forth on the icy road.

The man’s voice is harsh and demanding. “You were supposed to grab the younger one,” he growls.

“I tried,” the woman stammers. “This one got in the way.”

“This is a big mistake,” the man says. “He’s going to be furious when he finds out.”

“What will he do with her?” the woman asks, her voice trembling.

The man sighs heavily. “Who knows? I guess it depends on if she cooperates.”

With each passing minute, the weight of fear and uncertainty crushes down on me. I’m desperately trying to become invisible, hoping that if I stay quiet, they’ll forget about me.

But how can I ignore the pounding of my heart and the racing thoughts in my mind? Every breath feels like a struggle as panic threatens to overtake me. *Why did they take me? What do they want from me? Am I going to die?* My mind flashes to memories of my family, and I nearly choke on a strangled sob that threatens to break free from my throat.

The van jolts and swerves, throwing me against the rigid metal walls. The impact rattles my bones and churns my stomach further. With each turn, I am reminded how vulnerable and helpless I am.

The bumpy dirt road seems endless. My mind tries to escape into memories of happier times with my family, but all I can see is my sister's face as we were torn apart.

Abruptly, the van jerks to a stop, bringing me back to the present. My heart races even faster as I wonder what horrors are awaiting me at this mysterious destination. Is it worse than being trapped in this van? A cold shiver runs down my spine as I realize that whatever these people have in store for me can't be good. I shut my eyes, hoping that when I open them, I will be back home, comfortable in my bed. Instead, the back doors fly open, and bright sunlight blinds me momentarily. As my eyes adjust, I see the couple staring at me impatiently.

"Wake up!" He roars. The sound of his voice makes me shake with fear. His hulking figure stands at the van's entrance, and his dark eyes contemptuously glare at me. "Come on," he snaps, "crawl on out, ya hear? We have someone for you to meet."

The woman stands beside him with my backpack, worn and heavy with memories, slung over her shoulder. A jolt of emotion pulses through my chest at the sight of it. A piece of home is here with me, shining like the brightest star in the sky. *It's hope, and it's all I have.* As I reach for it, desperate for its comforting presence, she pulls back and delivers a fierce slap across my face. The force of the blow snaps my head to the side, pain rippling from my cheekbone down my jaw. My eyes sting with unshed tears, but I'm too terrified to let them fall. An instinctive sense, something from deep inside my gut, tells me that showing any weakness will only invite more abuse. So

I stand there, trying to hold myself together as the weight of fear settles around me like a suffocating blanket.

The man towers over me, filling the space with menace. His stomach protrudes from a tight, white undershirt, the fabric stretched taut as if it's fighting a losing battle against the circumference of his soft belly. His shoulders are defined and muscular, evidence of the strength that could easily snap me in two. His hands are calloused and stained, and his facial features twist into a cruel sneer, revealing tobacco-yellowed teeth when I gaze to meet his face. Thin wisps of graying hair escape his ponytail, and deep crevices line his weathered face. He maintains his composure, but a slight twitch in his jaw betrays his mounting frustration.

Meanwhile, the woman paces in the dirt with restless energy, kicking up dust and rocks in her wake. Her hands twist and pull at the hem of her threadbare blouse. Upon closer inspection, I notice that she's very skinny, and her clothes hang off her body. Her collarbones protrude prominently from under paper-thin skin. She appears older than she likely is, lines etched deeply around her eyes and mouth like scars from a long-fought battle. Her hair hangs limply down her back, and an unkempt braid struggles to contain it.

"Now listen up, Girlie," the man says gruffly. "You come with us and don't make a peep. Sit there and keep your mouth shut, and maybe we'll all walk away from this alive."

I nod, and my heart continues pounding as I scan the terrain. A seemingly endless expanse of dried-up grass and dirt is punctuated by a few withered trees that stand beyond a barbed wire fence. My gaze shifts, and I'm met with an imposing view of enormous snow-capped mountains reaching high into the sky.

There are several standing buildings within the confines of the fences, but my attention is drawn to the one we are walking toward. It's the most prominent building in the cluster, situated in the center. It's impossible to miss, with its vast windows and dome-shaped roof coated in reflective glass. It's giving off an eerie, almost extraterrestrial vibe.

We trudge up the front steps, and my throat tightens as we reach a giant door. The man pushes it open without hesitation, and I follow him tentatively. The woman walks close behind me, her acrid breath is hot and heavy on my neck.

The room is large and sparsely furnished; a single desk sits in the center, and a brown-haired girl sits behind it, wearing a baggy, plain beige dress that reminds me of oatmeal and her hair pulled back into a tight ponytail. She appears young, like my babysitter, Mandy. Mandy is sixteen, and this girl can't be much older than that. Her hands are folded atop the desk, but there is nothing else - no pen or paper to indicate that she works here.

"We need to see Auron," the man says, glancing at me.

"I'll let him know you're here," she replies, standing up and walking away. The sound of her hard-soled shoes clacking against the brown terrazzo floor fills my ears, reminding me of something my mom said recently about wanting this kind of flooring in our home. The thought of never seeing her again makes my chest squeeze so tightly I can't breathe. Everything I've been pushing down all day breaks free in one loud sob. Hot tears start to course down my cheeks, stinging the raw area where I was slapped earlier.

"Quit your crying," the man whispers in my ear. I do my best to adhere to his command, once again choking back tears and wiping the remnants with the sleeve of my jacket. Footsteps sound behind us, and I see the brown-haired girl from before walking toward us.

"He can see you now," she says. Her smile never falters as she leads us down the hallway, but there's a deadness in her eyes.

We follow her into a spacious office with a window to the left and a comfortable seating area to the right. Everything about this room is cold and uninviting. Behind the sleek desk stands a tall man with brown hair beginning to gray at the temples and a sharp, hawk-like nose. His skin is tan, and his face is clean-shaven. He could pass for one of my friend's dads, except for the coldness behind his eyes.

He strides over to us, his polished leather shoes clicking against the floor. His gaze is steady and confident like he's used to wielding power and control. His eyes flicker towards me before settling on the man standing beside him with his arms crossed and a scowl.

"Peter," he speaks in a smooth, even tone. "It appears we've encountered a small issue."

Peter clears his throat before responding. "Yes, Auron. It was going according to plan until she came along." The way he spits out the word "she" reveals his disdain and resentment.

Auron's eyes shift back to me as he asks, "By 'she,' I assume you mean this young girl?"

"Yes," he says with a nervous nod. "She helped the younger one escape."

The man, Auron, towers over me. His intensity is palpable, and it makes my body shake with fear. He takes a step closer, and I shrink back, trembling.

"Did you help the little girl escape?" he asks, his voice low but firm. I know I have to tread carefully with my answer. If I tell the truth, he may get angry and hurt me. But if I lie, the consequences could be even worse. My throat constricts, and I nod, too afraid to speak.

Suddenly, he crouches in front of me, his large frame looming over mine. The touch of his hand against my cheek is surprisingly gentle for someone so intimidating.

"Well, that was very brave," he remarks, his voice filled with unexpected admiration. "What is your name?" His tone has softened, and I struggle to form words in response.

I croak, "Ivy."

"That's a beautiful name," he says. "How old are you, Ivy?"

I shift uneasily and take a deep breath before answering.

"Twelve," I say, my voice trembling.

His thumb brushes against the red welt on my cheekbone, and for a moment, I flinch away. He notices, and his tone turns

critical.

“What happened here?” he asks softly.

My heart races as I debate whether or not to tell him the truth. Before I can decide, Peter speaks up.

“Sally did it,” he says, avoiding eye contact. “The girl tried to grab her backpack—“

Auron cuts him off with a firm tone, “Enough!”

His angry voice echoes through the room, causing me to jump in surprise. Auron suddenly becomes calm and calls Sally over, my backpack still slung over her shoulder. His eyes narrow as they scan her frail frame.

“Who gave you permission to touch this girl?” he demands, his anger flaring.

Sally shuffles from foot to foot, avoiding Auron’s intense gaze.

“No one,” she mumbles. “But she’s been a nuisance since we tried to grab the sister.”

Auron grabs her face roughly, moving it from side to side to examine her closely.

“Have you been using drugs today?” he growls, his hand slipping down to grip her thin neck tightly in a vice grip.

His grip on Sally’s throat tightens, her face turning a shade of purple as she gasps for air. Her pleading eyes meet his with terror, and her tongue protrudes from between her lips. With one final, forceful push, he releases her, and she crumples to the ground in a heap. Auron turns to Peter, his knuckles still white from the exertion.

“Take her away,” he commands. “If this happens again, you know what must be done.”

Tears well up in Peter’s eyes as he gazes down at her.

“But she’s my wife,” he tries to reason.

“She is also a risk to our mission,” Auron replies coldly, showing no sympathy for Peter’s heartache. “Do you serve

your wife, or do you serve the Voice of the Sky?” Auron asks.

“The Voice, of course,” he answers contritely.

“Take her to the woods to dry out and leave the backpack,” Auron barks. Sweat beads on Peter’s forehead, but he nods and carefully lifts Sally’s limp body into his arms. They reach the wooden door, but Auron’s voice stops them. “Do not disappoint me again, Peter,” he growls.

Auron grabs my backpack and sets it on his desk, “What do you have in this backpack that is so important, Ivy?”

Everything in that backpack means the world to me right now. “Some things from home,” I stutter.

With precise movements, he carefully removes each item from my backpack. He places them on his desk with delicate care: a well-loved pencil pouch filled to the brim with vibrant markers, a neat stack of Peechee folders, each bearing a subject title written in meticulous handwriting, my cherished Scooby Doo lunch box, a gift from last Christmas, and my tattered but beloved Strawberry Shortcake doll who has been by my side for over two years. My pulse quickens as he thoroughly scrutinizes each possession before him. I’m terrified that he will throw everything away or toss it in the large fireplace.

“Ivy,” he says sternly, “We don’t allow any distracting material items here at The Station.” *Please don’t throw my life away.*

“The Station?” I manage to squeak out.

“Yes,” he says with a nod of his head. “This is where you live now.” *No, no, no, no, no, no, no. This can’t be happening. This can’t be real.*

As the hot tears stream down my face, they blur my vision, consuming me with the overwhelming emotions bubbling inside me. My chest feels heavy and tight as I fight to control the urge to break down completely. Every fiber of my being longs for home, a familiar place where I can find comfort and solace from this unbearable pain. But for now, I am trapped in this moment, unable to escape the rawness of my emotions.

Auron stands across from me, his expression stoic and unfeeling.

I try to swallow past the lump in my throat as he speaks.

“I’ll allow you to keep one item,” he says, unaffected by my turmoil. “Only one because this is all new to you.”

My vision blurs again, and I hastily rub my eyes, trying to hold back the flood. I feel a sense of betrayal at his coldness, as if he doesn’t understand the gravity of this momentous decision. I approach the desk with trembling hands and gaze down at the objects before me. On one side sits my trusty lunchbox, its faded colors and dented corners holding a year of memories - packed lunches lovingly made by my mom and sweet notes scribbled in her handwriting. On the other side rests my beloved doll, her once-bright pink hair now slightly matted but still carrying the familiar scent of strawberries, her ever-smiling face offering comfort in times of need.

In that pivotal moment, all uncertainty vanishes and my course of action becomes clear. Clutching my doll tightly to my chest, I’m engulfed in her sweet, fruity aroma. A sense of peace washes over me, transporting me back home.

Turning to face Auron with renewed determination, I declare, “I want to keep her.” The doll’s soft fabric and delicate features become tangible reminders of comfort and love in the midst of chaos and uncertainty. He nods before tossing the other items into the trash by the desk, and my heart right along with them. Everything in my body hurts, but nothing more than the ache in my chest.

“Fine. But I do not see it,” he says. “If I see it, it’s gone.”

I nod, and my breath hitches as I struggle to hold back my emotions, not wanting to let her go even for a moment. My knuckles turn white from the intensity of my grip.

“You need to tell me you understand, Ivy,” he says.

“I do,” the words slip out of my mouth, even though they are a complete lie. In truth, I don’t understand any of this. Just hours ago, I was walking to school like any other day. And now, after being told that I live here, I’m left with more

questions than answers. I don't know what awaits me in this new place, and the uncertainty gnaws at me from within. As the night looms, I wonder if I will make it through to see tomorrow.

Auron beams at me, a broad smile spreading across his face. "Welcome home," he exclaims, wrapping an arm around my shoulder. As he speaks, I notice the glint of a silver pendant around his neck. "The Voice of the Sky has chosen you," he continues. His words make no sense, but there's a sense of awe and reverence in his tone. "You are here for a reason. It's remarkable."

I'm too exhausted to ask questions right now, so I follow him, wanting to curl up in a ball and escape into a deep sleep.

Chapter 4

“Cruel Summer”

Corey - Age 12, 1982

As I push open the creaky door of our old trailer and let it shut behind me, I brace myself for my mom’s usual reprimand for allowing the door to slam. But instead, the only sound is the thud of my backpack hitting the small kitchen table. A quick search of the cramped space confirms what I suspected, she’s not here. Ever since my dad walked out on us when I was seven years old, coming home to an empty house has become normal. It’s not so bad, really. Everyone knows everyone in this trailer park and watches out for one another. Well, mostly. We avoid a few trailers on the back end of the park, the ones with cars resting on cinder blocks and bedsheets hung over the windows as curtains. Everyone else here is pretty cool, though.

Mrs. Lyone, the neighbor next door, is always outside on her porch, puffing away on a cigarette and sipping coffee. She has the look of a woman who’s lived a hard life. Her slight frame is too thin, and her face is covered with premature spots and wrinkles. She wears the same baggy sweatshirt almost daily, and her eyes are warm but constantly tired. Yet, she always greets me with a smile and asks how my day was before offering any help if I need it. And I know she means it; she’s helped me out before. One time, I cut myself with a

kitchen knife trying to cut some cheddar cheese, and it was Mrs. Lyone who took me to the emergency room in her beat-up old station wagon.

I open the refrigerator to find it nearly empty, just a carton of milk, some condiments, and a leftover hamburger helper. My stomach grumbles, demanding something to fill the ache. I ate lunch at school, but I'm always hungry these days. I always eat everything they offer at lunch and anything anyone else will give me. Today, I scored a Twinkie, some Doritos, two Capri Suns, and some fruit from my friends. Mom jokes that my appetite is the reason she has to pick up extra shifts at the restaurant.

I spot a loaf of bread on the counter and make a few peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. With my snack in hand, I plop down on our worn couch in the small living space. It's too quiet here, so I get up, turn on the television, and start fiddling with the rabbit ears on top to get a clear picture. I tune into the new MTV station that everyone at school has been talking about. The music videos are rad, unlike anything I've ever seen before. Despite what my teachers say about it being bad for us, I'm captivated. It's a short movie set to music, which is seriously awesome. Now, I can picture the accompanying music videos whenever I hear certain songs on the radio.

I sit back down and start munching on my sandwich when a familiar song comes on, and I play air guitar through bites of my afternoon snack. Looking around the trailer, I'm reminded that we may not have much, but at least we have cable television, thanks to my hard-working mom. She does her best to provide for us, and I'm grateful for everything she does. Now that I'm getting older, I know I need to help as much as possible.

Jerry, the owner of the local gas station, offered me a job for the summer. He said he'd pay me \$3.00 an hour under the table to work in the shop. I'll have to clean the restrooms, stock the food area, and sweep and mop, but it's a decent deal. I think I can still skate at night, but I might miss some practices. If hockey interferes, I'll have to quit, which makes me sick. Playing hockey is my favorite thing to do in the

world, and my dream is to play professionally, but I've been the man of the house since my dad left. That's the way it goes.

Hopefully, my mom won't work another shift tonight so that we can watch her favorite TV show, *Dallas*. It's become our way of bonding lately. I don't care about the storylines, but my mom loves it, so I pretend to be excited with her. I think deep down, she wishes she was rich like the women in the soap opera. Maybe if I ever make it big playing hockey, I can make her dream a reality.

Just as I'm considering making myself another sandwich, the phone rings. I slowly reach the kitchen, where the receiver is mounted on the wall, and pick up the avocado-green phone.

"Hello?" I answer.

"Corey, it's Mom," her voice sounds distant, and I can hear music playing and the sound of dishes and utensils clinking in the background, suggesting she's still at work.

"Hey, Mom," I reply.

"How was school today, Sweetie?"

"It was okay," I answer.

"Well, there's something important I want to talk to you about when I get home around 6:00."

My eyebrows furrow in concern, "Is everything okay?"

"Yes, it's great. I have to go now, Sweetheart. See you soon!" And with that, she hangs up.

I can't help but wonder what she wants to tell me later tonight. My mind starts racing with possibilities as I finish making another sandwich and retreat to my bedroom, waiting for her to get home.



A couple of hours later, the loud creak of the front door jars me awake. I groan, knowing I need to fix it with some WD40. Through the thin walls, I can hear my mom's voice and the

deep chuckle of a man's voice. She calls my name, and I scramble out of bed.

Mom has gone out several times with this guy who frequents the restaurant, but I have yet to meet him. Honestly, I don't care to. Most guys don't stick around once they learn about Maggie's teenage son and her overwhelming debt.

As I open my door, my mom is about to knock on it, and it startles her when she sees me. She laughs as she covers her heart with her hand.

"Corey, come into the living room. There's someone I want you to meet," she says with a smile.

Sitting on the couch is a man observing our small mobile home. *Yep, it's a real shithole, Dude. Take it all in.* He stands up to greet me and extends his arm for a handshake. He's not much taller than me, thin, with an unnatural tan for this time of year and blindingly white teeth. His light brown hair is neatly styled tightly against his head, and his eyes are fixed on mine as we shake hands firmly. I can't help but wonder if he goes to one of those indoor tanning places, and I have to hold back a laugh.

"Hi, Corey, I'm Alan," he says, grinning wider than before.

"Nice to meet you," I reply politely because my mom would be upset if I were anything other than cordial to this stranger in our home.

"Let's all sit down," my mom interjects beside us. They both sit on the couch while I opt for the small rocking chair opposite them, leaning forward and resting my forearms on my legs.

"So, I have some exciting news," my mom announces with a smile. My eyebrows raise in anticipation, but I remain quiet.

"Alan and I have been dating for some time now," she reveals, which is news to me, "and he just proposed!" She blurts out eagerly.

My jaw falls open in shock and my eyes widen as her words sink in. I glance from her to him, smiling like they've won the stupid lottery, but it doesn't feel that way. As I look at the

smiles painted on their faces, I can smell the faint scent of Alan's expensive cologne, mixed with the stale cigarette smoke that clings to him and makes me nauseous.

My mom and Alan stand up, her hand resting on his chest as if trying to keep him at arm's length for my benefit. I stand in return, squaring off with them.

"So you're going to marry this guy without even talking to me?" I manage to say through gritted teeth, my fists clenching at my sides.

Alan steps back further at my hostility but continues to observe our conversation in silence.

My mom steps closer and lowers her voice to a near whisper.

"Corey, Alan is a good man. He owns a car dealership and can provide for us," she pleads, her voice tinged with desperation.

I scoff and roll my eyes, "We don't need some rich car salesman to take care of us. That's been my job since Dad left."

"Come on, you're a kid," Alan interjects, causing me to bristle even more.

But my mom is unfazed by my outburst.

"We can leave this rundown trailer and start living a better life. I can't keep working at that restaurant forever. And what about your dreams? You want to keep playing hockey and maybe attend college, right?"

I ignore her attempts at reason.

"I'm fine with how things are now. This is my home, where all my friends are," I argue back, feeling frustrated and trapped.

Mom's expression turns stern. I bite my tongue to avoid saying something hurtful, but my hands remain clenched at my sides.

“You’re fine with living in this dump? Eating leftovers from the restaurant every night? Using old hockey gear donated by kids who get new things every year?” My mom continues to try to convince me.

“Yes!” I shout, unable to contain my anger any longer. “This is where I belong. We don’t need some stranger coming into our lives and trying to change everything.”

My mom takes a deep breath and steps closer to me, her heels sinking into the dingy, orange-carpeted floor. She gazes up at me with tear-filled eyes, her hands trembling as she reaches for my shoulders. Her petite frame shakes against my larger one.

“Corey,” she pleads, “I know this is hard for you, but please trust me. He loves me, I love him, and we all finally have a chance at a better life. Don’t you want that for us?”

She says “us,” but she really means “me.” *Don’t you want a better life for me?* As she speaks, her voice cracks and tears flow down her cheeks. Her grip on my shoulders tightens, and I can see the desperation in her eyes. Reluctantly, I nod, knowing it’s what she wants to hear. Once she sees my resignation, she visibly relaxes.

“We’re only moving a few towns over,” she says. “It’s only an hour away. Alan has a car dealership there, and he’s in the process of buying another one. It’s going to be wonderful. He has a nice home, and the ice rink is bigger and better than here. Just wait. You’re going to love it,” she says with a smile, her words coming out faster, revealing her excitement.

I manage a tight-lipped smile back, but my heart is heavy inside. I don’t want to leave our home and move in with fake-tanned Alan, but I want my mom to be happy more than anything else. So, I’ll have to sacrifice my happiness for hers. It’s not as if I have a choice.

Chapter 5

“Welcome To The Jungle”

Ivy - Age 18, 1988

Here I sit on the toilet lid, awkwardly contorting my face in an attempt to follow my sister’s instructions on makeup application. *Look up and make an ‘O’ with your mouth, Ivy. Blot your lips on this toilet paper.* I feel anxious and silly as my twelve-year-old sister attempts to prepare me for my first day of high school. Her words of reassurance ring out with the confidence only a middle school-aged girl wielding a wand of electric blue mascara could possess.

She examines my face, and then her attention turns to my hair as her brows furrow in concentration.

“It’s not quite right,” she announces, her arms crossing over her chest with authority. “Your hair needs more volume.” Before I can protest, the Aqua Net is aimed directly at me, and we are both surrounded by its sticky, perfumed fog.

Once the chemical haze disappears, I stand up to get a better look at myself in the mirror, and my eyes widen in shock — *I look like a clown.* Natalie steps back to assess the situation, and I can almost see the gears turning in her head.

“Your bangs need to be fluffier,” she declares, like a seasoned pro.

I brush off her suggestion, looking away and into the mirror.

“I don’t know, Nat. I like it this way. And besides, I’m not trying to draw any attention to myself.”

A mischievous glint sparks in my sister’s eyes as she exclaims, “But you’re a total babe!”

With a heavy sigh, I slump down onto the toilet seat.

“I don’t want to be a babe,” I say, frustrated. “I don’t want to be anything except invisible.”

Natalie smiles sweetly at me, parroting the words our parents have told me countless times over the past year. “You need to get back into the swing of life. Relax and be a teenager.” I can’t be upset with her. I doubt she even understands what she’s asking of me.

I nod sharply, trying to convince myself more than her.

“Yeah, you’re right,” I tell her, but I want to crawl back into bed and hide from the world.

My mom’s voice interrupts our conversation, calling for my sister. It’s time for my mom to take her to school. Natalie hasn’t gone anywhere alone in six years.

Not since that day.

She gives me a quick hug before darting out of the bathroom, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

“Have a great first day of senior year!” she calls over her shoulder before disappearing.

Turning to face the mirror again, I study my reflection critically. This isn’t me. It’s all “too much.” I prefer a simple look, more natural. With a washcloth and facial cleanser, I wipe off the extra pink on my cheeks and then carefully remove the thick layers of blue around my eyes.

After all traces of makeup have vanished, I opt for something more comfortable. A swipe of black mascara and a shiny, kissable gloss in bubblegum flavor is all I need.

Next comes my hair, long blonde waves shellacked into place and made impenetrable to the wind. Fighting through the stiff locks with a brush, I finally restore some movement and life to my hair. Though I lose a significant amount of tresses in the process, it's a small price for not having a head of helmet hair.

I smooth out my pink dress and ensure my belts are securely placed around my waist and hips. My new Converse high tops complete the outfit, though Natalie tried to convince me to wear black fishnet stockings and black flats instead. That was vetoed immediately.

Realizing this is as ready as I'll ever be, I grab my backpack and jean jacket before heading outside to meet my dad. He graciously offered to drive me to school since I don't have a car. I recently got my driver's license, but navigating the high school parking lot on my own still makes me uneasy. I'm behind compared to others my age, getting my license late, starting high school in my senior year, and not having any friends when I get there.

Dad gives me an understanding smile as I slide into the front seat beside him. He knows how anxious I am today but doesn't want me to worry too much. *After all, it's one day, right? How bad can it be?*

Xenophobia, my counselor calls it. The fear of the unknown. After everything I've been through, it's a natural response to feel uneasy when I can't control my surroundings, but I know I can't stay locked away forever. That wouldn't be healthy. So, I made the decision to attend my last year of high school. It won't be easy, but I'm going to try. In preparation, I've watched every John Hughes movie at least twenty times and know all the classic stereotypes—the superficial, rich, popular kids; the sex-crazed jock boys; the bitchy, pretty girls; the uber-smart, bumbling nerds; the dark, angry, artsy outcasts; and the ever-present, judgmental, ordinary peers who base their worth on material possessions and trendy fashion choices.

As we pull up to the imposing brick building of the high school, my confidence wavers. The parking lot is a chaotic sea

of cars and students, all excited to see one another. Cliques have already been cemented, with jocks sporting their letterman's jackets, pretty girls huddled together like a protective shield, and a group of laid-back students tossing a hacky sack back and forth on the grass. I'm an outsider, not fitting in anywhere among any of them, but I remind myself that none of them can hurt me unless I allow them to.

I take a quick, deep breath and put on a false bravado for my dad, flashing a confident smile before stepping out of the car. As I walk towards the front doors, I offer him a small wave over my shoulder. I have my class schedule and a general idea of where I'm going, but I decided to arrive early just in case. To my dismay, the doors are still locked, and my plan has backfired.

I take a few steps away from the door, obviously anxious, shifting from foot to foot as I try to blend into the bustling atmosphere. My body starts to shake with nerves, and tears threaten with a familiar burning sensation in the corners of my eyes as laughter surrounds me. No, I refuse to cry and ruin another round of fresh mascara.

Instead, I grab a cherry PopTart and pick at its pastry corners, momentarily distracting myself. I can do this. Sure, I have no friends and haven't sat in a classroom since I was my sister's age, but I've been through more than most people, and I can do this.

I think.

Chapter 6

“You Dropped a Bomb on Me”

Corey - Age 18, 1988

As we gather in the school parking lot on the first day of our last year of high school, Landry’s eyes narrow on a group of girls huddled together, but my attention is drawn to the girl standing alone, her eyes darting from one group to the next. Landry elbows me and gestures towards her.

“Who’s that?” he asks.

Garrison chimes in, his voice oozing with confidence and swagger. “She’s fresh.”

I shrug. “She must be new.”

She surveys the area cautiously, not making eye contact with anyone.

“She seems lonely,” Landry says with a grin. “I should go introduce myself.” We all laugh because he is by far the most shy among us. Maybe he’s trying to start the school year with a bang, but I don’t see it going well.

All of my hockey friends do well with the girls around here, but something tells me this particular girl isn’t going to fall for his blue eyes and charm.

“Sure,” I reply. “Let me know how that works out for you.”

We stand back and observe as he approaches the blonde girl in the pink dress. I can tell by looking at her that she's nervous. She shifts her weight from side to side and covers her midsection with her arms, almost as if she's hugging herself. She's looking down as Landry approaches but glances up and shoves her PopTart in her backpack when he greets her.

"Oh my God," Tiffany's voice rings out. I didn't hear her walk up, but now that she's here, I'm surrounded by the stench of her Electric Youth perfume, which rolls my stomach. The stupidest mistake I've ever made was making out with her once this past summer. She's been even more annoying ever since.

"Why is Landry talking to that freak?" Her voice is like nails on a chalkboard as she speaks again.

"Who? The blonde with the banging body over there?" Garrison teases. "Are you jealous, Tiff?"

"As if," she responds, rolling her eyes and jutting her hip. "I'd hardly be jealous of that weirdo." *Tiffany is both a drama queen and a snob, just more reasons to keep her at arm's length.*

She looks normal to me. I glance at her and then back to Tiffany.

"Who is she?" I ask, intrigued.

Her mouth forms an 'O' shape as a realization dawns on her, and she punches me in the shoulder.

"That's right, Corey. You moved here after the kidnapping."

"What kidnapping?" I ask with genuine curiosity as I step back to put distance between us.

"Ugh," Tiffany starts. "*That's Ivy Owens,*" she says with emphasis, looking at Taz and Garrison as if they are supposed to know what she's talking about. She continues with an exacerbated sigh when all she encounters are confused faces.

"I can't believe you guys don't remember her. She was kidnapped when we were like thirteen, on the way to school. It wasn't far from her house."

“Oh shit,” Garrison exclaims. “I remember that now. Didn’t she save her sister or something?”

“Who knows?” Tiffany sneers and rolls her eyes. “What is she thinking, coming back here?”

I shrug, “Maybe she’s trying to move on with her life.”

Tiffany scoffs again. “Yeah, right, like that’s even possible for someone like her.” She leans in, her expression turning sour. “I heard that she joined some bizarre cult while she was abducted, and when she came back, her parents had split up, and her younger sister transformed into a complete recluse.”

None of her accounts of what happened make sense. Since she started her sentence with “I heard,” I’m not inclined to believe much of it anyway.

“According to you, she was kidnapped. If that’s true, then I doubt she *joined* anything voluntarily,” I add.

“Whatever.” Tiffany sighs. “She’s still weird. She was, like, homeschooled for a long time or something because when she got back, she was a total mental case.”

I’ve tuned out Tiffany’s ramblings when Landry returns to the group.

“How’d it go, Loverboy?” I tease.

He releases a sigh and shakes his head back and forth, “Crashed and burned. She was nice about it, though.”

“It’s probably for the best,” Tiffany offers. “Going anywhere near that girl is social suicide.”

“Maybe I’ll give it a shot,” Garrison declares. “That girl is smokin’. Plus, I could use a challenge.”

“You’re disgusting,” Tiffany adds with a sneer. “She’s not even that cute.”

“Yeah, whatever,” I say, brushing off her comments. “Let’s get to class.”

My morning classes fly by with the same teachers and group of students I’ve known for the past five years. I work out with the team in the weight room during first period, then head to

biology, algebra, and Spanish before getting a break for lunch. The strange thing is how often the girl in the pink dress creeps into my thoughts throughout the first part of the day. Having been the star of many rumors and gossip myself, I hardly believe Tiffany's account of the past, but it's obvious this girl has been through something. I'm genuinely curious about Ivy Owens. *What exactly happened to her?*



We can't leave campus for lunch for the first two weeks of school. Something about getting into the rhythm of the school day and assuring we won't return from lunch late. It happens anyway after the first two weeks, so it's not a practical rule. Still, that's why the entire high school is currently stuck on campus.

As we enter the cafeteria, I notice that nothing has changed from last year, not that I expected it to. The lunchroom is divided into the same distinct groups. The jocks from the various sports teams congregate in one section. The guys from the hockey team always sit together. Nearby, other athletes from various teams huddle together.

In the back corner of the room, the goths sit in their usual spot. Their all-black attire, dark hair, and heavy black eyeliner set them apart from the rest of the students. Most of them spend their days with permanent scowls on their faces as if high school is the most hellish place on the planet. *They aren't entirely wrong.*

Across the room, a few nerds sneak into the computer lab to eat their lunch despite the rule expressing the opposite. They will most likely play some games on the school's new system.

The brains prefer to sit outside during lunch, where they can soak up some sunlight and convert it to Vitamin D. I'm pretty sure they're reciting poetry and working on equations or some shit. I admire their dedication to academics; I have that same dedication to hockey.

By the windows sits a group of stoners who've already gotten high before lunch. They howl at their ridiculous jokes and munch on snacks from brown paper bags. Every once in a while, they get a decent game of hacky sack going, but it's usually short-lived.

And then there is the new girl: Ivy Owens. She sits near the stoners at the end of the table, but she isn't part of their group. She doesn't appear to be part of any group. In fact, no one notices her at all. She keeps to herself as if trying to become as small as possible. Even though we've never spoken, I would guess she'd vanish completely if she could.

I observe her actions as she pulls a sandwich and an apple from her lunch box and places them on the table before her. She takes small, precise bites, never looking up from her food once. She's very deliberate in her movements as if it's simply another task to be completed before moving on to the next. She glances up as someone moves in her direction.

A goth girl confidently approaches and sits down across from her. Most girls I know would scoff and ignore someone like the dark stranger, but Ivy greets the girl with a warm smile, relief evident on her face to have some company. They start to chat animatedly, their voices carrying over to me.

"Corey!" My friend's voice jars me back to reality. "Earth to Delacour," Taz says. "You got a little thing for goths now?"

I shrug my shoulders, "Maybe. Is that a problem?" I ask, looking him in the eye.

He chuckles and shakes his head, a sly smile spreading across his face.

"Nah, man, no problem at all. But be aware, people remember where you stick your dick."

I let out a sarcastic laugh. "When have I ever cared about what anyone at this school thinks? The only opinions that matter to me are those of college recruiters and NHL scouts."

He holds his hands up defensively, "Hey man, I'm not judging. But why complicate things with some random chick when you could pick any girl here?" He makes a sweeping

motion with his arm, indicating he means any girl in our general area.

Maybe that's the problem. Every girl here is a carbon copy of the one next to her. "Variety is the spice of life," I reply sarcastically. Taz chuckles and nods in agreement.

Our group starts to gather our things and head out, but I can't resist turning back to look at Ivy. She's sitting with her new friend, her blonde hair falling perfectly over her shoulders as she throws her head back and lets out a contagious laugh. Hearing the melodic laughter unexpectedly affects me, and I find myself smiling at the sight before leaving to join my friends.

Chapter 7

“Don’t Stop Believin’”

Ivy - Age 18, 1988

A girl with straight, pitch-black hair sits down next to me, her leather jacket creaking as she adjusts in the seat.

“Hi. I’m Sascha,” she says, popping a french fry in her mouth. I can’t help but notice how striking she is. Her skin is pale compared to her inky hair, and straight bangs fall just above her emerald eyes.

I glance around to see if she’s talking to someone else before replying, “I’m, um, Ivy?”

She arches an eyebrow and smirks, “Are you sure? Because that sounded like a question.”

My cheeks flush in embarrassment, and I attempt to regain my composure. *Am I really this awkward talking to new people?* Apparently so. “I’m sure,” I say quietly.

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, Ivy,” she says with a friendly smile. “Why are you sitting here all alone?”

“I’m new,” I admit, drawing an invisible pattern on the table with my finger. “And I’m not exactly outgoing.”

“That’s okay,” Sascha says reassuringly. “I am.”

As she catches me eyeing her all-black ensemble, she grins knowingly. “I prefer alternative stuff,” she explains, taking another bite of her fries. “But don’t worry, I won’t bite.” She pauses briefly before adding, “Unless you disrespect Depeche Mode.”

I laugh and shake my head. “I would never.” Pausing, I add, “Will your friends be alright with you sitting with me?”

She lets out a hearty laugh, “I have all kinds of different friends. If you’re cool and respect who I am, then I do the same.”

“I like that,” I reply, comforted by her energy.

“Good,” Sascha affirms with a nod. “We can be friends then.” She pushes her plate of fries towards me in a tacit display of our new friendship. “So, don’t look now, but you have caught the eye of this school’s hockey god,” she says teasingly.

“Not possible,” I reply automatically, tucking a strand of hair behind my ear.

Sascha chuckles and tilts her head towards a group of guys across the room. My eyes follow her gesture and I recognize one of them as the big guy who approached me before school. He introduced himself and asked me if I needed any help with anything. I politely declined. As my eyes continue past him, they land firmly on one particular guy with deep brown eyes staring directly at me. An intensity to his gaze causes heat to spread throughout my body, and I quickly look away, which only makes Sascha laugh harder.

“Who is that?” I ask, trying to play it cool.

“Oh, just the best hockey player in the entire area and resident heartthrob,” Sascha replies with a roll of her eyes. “He’s a little too pretty for me, but if you’re into that kind of thing—“

“I’m not,” I say hastily, but even as I say the words, my eyes automatically gravitate in his direction. I generally don’t seek out engagement with new people, so my actions are a surprise, even to me.

“His name is Corey Delacour,” Sascha says with a shrug. “He has a reputation for being really good with his hands.”

“Good with his hands?” I repeat in confusion.

“On the ice and in the bedroom,” she says with an arched brow.

Finally catching her meaning, I giggle, trying to hide my embarrassment, “I don’t know anything about hockey.”

“Maybe if you ask him nicely, he’ll show you his stick?”

My hand flies to my mouth as my eyes widen, and a deep laugh escapes me. At that moment, I realize I haven’t laughed like this in a long time, and it feels really good.

Sascha throws her head back and laughs as well, and by the time I’ve recovered, Corey Delacour, with the dreamy brown eyes, intense stare, and pillowy full lips, is walking out of the cafeteria. Still, I don’t miss the moment he peers over his shoulder, and those lips part in a slight smile in my direction.

Sascha’s eyes dart between the popular hockey player and myself. She giggles softly and leans in closer.

“Let me know what his stick is like,” she says with a sly smile.

“That’s so not going to happen,” I respond. “I’m not the kind of person who draws the attention of someone like that.”

She leans back in her chair and laughs incredulously, “You’re kidding, right? Corey Delacour looked at you like you were the most desirable present under the Christmas tree. Everyone will want to get to know you with him interested in you.”

My heart sinks as I realize what she’s saying. “No,” I say, shaking my head. “That’s the last thing anyone wants.”



Ivy, Age 13 - 1983

I wake up every morning to the sound of a loud bell ringing, signaling the start of another day in this underground bunker where we sleep. It's a large room with eight bunk beds for girls of all ages. The youngest is six, and the oldest is fifteen. I think my birthday has passed, so I'm pretty sure I'm the second oldest.

The girls appear sometimes, and I can't help but wonder if they were taken the same way I was. We don't talk about it. We rarely talk at all. There's always a woman with us, and we're forced to call her "Mother," which I hate because she's nothing like my mother. I think about my mom every night as I cry myself to sleep. I force myself to remember everything about my home and family because I'm afraid I'll forget if I don't.

This woman is here to keep us in place, and that's it. There is absolutely nothing "motherly" about her with her stern expression and monotone daily commands. *How long have I been here?* I wouldn't know if it weren't for the daily rituals. By my count, it's been several months. I have a small notebook that I took from the main building one day. I keep it under my mattress and make a mark at the end of every day. Or at least I try to. I've forgotten sometimes, so I may be a little off. Most days feel like an eternity.

We have a strict routine, starting with reflection time every morning. Before sunrise, we gather in the common area and sit on hard metal benches. Our leader, Auron stands at the front of the room with his arms crossed over his chest, waiting for us to settle down. He's tall and imposing, with his intense dark eyes.

Auron is the chosen messenger who speaks to an alien race called The Divine Ones. They have inhabited Earth for centuries. He tells us about The Voice of the Sky, the leader of The Divine Ones, who has chosen him to guide our group through the world's end. He warns us about The Voice and its supreme power over our survival. According to Auron, Ronald Reagan and Yuri Andropov are extraterrestrial beings disguised as world leaders, trying to provoke a nuclear war that will lead to the end of humanity.

It sounds unbelievable, but all the adults here believe it. I still don't buy it, and I think most of these people are plain nuts, but a small part of me can't help but wonder. I'm young and know little about politics and world affairs, so dismissing their claims entirely is hard. I've heard my parents and teachers talk about the Cold War, and it's very scary. In any event, this structured schedule keeps me distracted from missing my old life and family too much. Until I'm alone with my thoughts at night. Nighttime is always the worst.

At night, among the soft breaths, occasional cough, and fretful creak of cots, I lie in the dark, listening to the sounds of the other girls. I steal these moments to think about my parents and Natalie, pretending the sound of rustling sheets is the sound of Natalie opening Christmas presents. I can close my eyes to the dark and remember every detail of our living room, from the brown plaid shades that cover the east-facing windows to the tan carpet and cream eggshell-painted walls.

Our Christmas tree is lit with colored bulbs like the Northern Lights during gloaming; the scent of dried pine and sweet, warm sugar cookies wafts through the air. My dad sits on the couch in his bathrobe with a cup of coffee, and my mom, bright with cheer, wears her red heart flannel Lanz nightgown scouring the base of the tree for gifts to pass out. Natalie hands me a small box wrapped in Holly Hobbie paper. I notice the bumps and abundance of tape on my gift in contrast to the neatly folded corners and lush bows of my mom's wrapping.

"I wrapped it myself!" Natalie grins through a jack o'lantern smile, one of her two front teeth recently falling out.

"Thanks, Nat," I grin back and pull her into a hug. I can feel her soft warmth, smell her tangled, cherry-scented Vidal Sassoon rinsed hair. I hold this memory. We are warm. We are safe. We are happy. We are all together. I feel a choke in my throat, like my heart is about to come out of my mouth. I cling to the Strawberry Shortcake doll Natalie gave me that Christmas morning.

"You always smell mine, so you should have one too," she coos and holds her doll up too. "Look! They are twins! With

two Strawberry Shortcakes, we will defeat the Purple Pie Man!” Natalie uses her doll to knock the evil chef doll off the coffee table.

But the Purple Pie Man is not defeated. He steals away one girl, leaving the other impossibly alone on that frozen sidewalk, shrieking and sobbing as she runs toward the closest house. My thoughts linger on her crying. I can still hear her after the van’s cargo doors slam, and I am back in the bunker.

After our morning lessons and meditations, we all have assigned tasks to help maintain the commune. The men and boys head out to hunt for game and work around the property, while the women and girls tend to do chores like laundry, harvesting vegetables from the greenhouse, and cooking meals for everyone. I’ve noticed that some of us also have jobs outside the commune, returning at night to contribute in other ways. It’s said that some members used to have personal wealth, but they donated it to The Station as instructed by Auron through The Voice.

Our daily routine also consists of physical exercise, generally stretching and running. We never play games or do anything fun. Our clothing is standard, the beige dresses that remind me of lumpy oatmeal, and our hair is always braided away from our faces. Music and dancing are forbidden, as we must stay focused on preparing for the ascension by following Auron’s teachings.

Twice a week, the familiar white food truck pulls up to The Station, its loud engine echoing off the tall brick walls of the grand building. I rush outside to greet the driver, a middle-aged man with kind eyes and calloused hands. Sometimes he leaves the radio on a low volume so I can hear the latest music being played on the radio. He unloads crates of fresh dairy products - milk, cheese, yogurt - and always saves me a special treat from the back of his truck: an ice cream sandwich. Even though he never speaks to me, I can tell he cares in his quiet way. His brief visits are my favorite part of the week at The Station.

I don’t attend school like normal kids do. Auron insists that learning about Earth is pointless, as it will all be changed once

The Divine Ones take over. He also says we must cut ties with our families and friends from our previous lives, although I'm confined to this place, so I am left without a choice.

Auron constantly reminds us that The Voice is always watching, and any attempt by our loved ones to save us will result in their torture and death. It's a terrifying thought, and I've spent countless hours crying at the idea that it could be true. If this is my destiny, I can accept it, but the idea of my family suffering because of me is too much to bear.

At night, I cling to my Strawberry Shortcake doll that, during the day, stays hidden under my mattress and inhales her scent. It brings me back to reality, which I still believe is the real world, and strengthens me. I try not to cry into her hair or smell too much, afraid that once the aroma disappears, I'll have nothing to hold onto from my old life with my family.

One night, as I'm getting ready for bed, I notice that one of the older girls in our room, Lucy, has been absent all day. Curious, I quietly ask one of the younger girls named Melissa where she is. After looking around to ensure no one is listening, Melissa reveals that Lucy is getting married.

"Married?" I whisper too loudly before realizing someone may have heard me. When no one enters the room, I continue in a quieter tone, "But she's only sixteen!"

Melissa tells me that Lucy is now of age to be a wife, per Auron's teachings. She said Lucy went into a tent on the outskirts of the compound with Auron and several other men earlier that day to partake in a "medicinal cleansing." From past experiences, I suspect this involves drugs that cause people to act strangely upon leaving the tent. Auron claims it elevates your consciousness to a higher level. I realize this must be how they convinced Lucy to agree to an early marriage.

The shepherd's pie we had for dinner threatens to reappear, so I hurry up the stairs and fling open the bunker door before reaching the bushes just in time. Melissa follows me and regards me with concern.

"Are you okay?"

I wipe my face with my hand and meet her kind gaze, “I think so.”

“Do you have your period yet, Ivy?” she asks with wide eyes and a concerned look.

Remembering last month when I saw bloodstains in my underwear while doing laundry, I lie and say no.

“Okay, good,” Melissa replies. “Because they will start looking for a husband as soon as you do. It will be your turn.”



The next weeks passed in a blur of confusion. I wasn't stupid, even though I didn't completely comprehend what was happening. It was clear that the older girls were being “married” off to powerful men from beyond The Station's walls. And then they would bring in new girls to replace them. It made sense why they wanted my sister; she was young enough not to question or remember where she came from. The younger children were more accessible to indoctrinate.

I started jotting down notes whenever possible, keeping track of Auron and the other men who left the compound. Auron rarely sleeps here despite having a big quiet room in the main building. I suspect he chooses the comfort of the outside world, just as any sane person would do.

There had to be a weakness in their security somewhere. Sure, the men patrolled the perimeter with guns, and there were adult members of The Station all around, but someone had to slip up eventually. And when they did, I'd make my escape and never look back. Now that I'm beginning to understand what kinds of things happen here, I'd rather die than live like this.

Chapter 8

“Every Little Step”

Ivy - Age 18, 1988

This day has been a rollercoaster of emotions. As I walked up to the school this morning, my heart raced with fear and nerves. Eyes gravitated in my direction, judging me without knowing anything about me. But then, as Sascha greeted me with a warm smile and joined me at lunch, I felt a flicker of excitement.

Maybe things would be different than I imagined.

That hope was quickly dashed when her words cut through my thoughts like a knife. *People would be interested in getting to know me.* My past would always follow me; no matter how hard I tried, I would never fit in. Everything about me was just too different from what anyone else had ever known. The possibility of being rejected and isolated again caused my previously optimistic mindset to plummet like a plane crashing down from the sky.

By the time I wander into fifth-period English class, I'm desperate for this day to end, and then I spot him, Mr. Hockey God himself, surrounded by a group of adoring fans. They all sit in the back of the classroom, and everyone in the vicinity is focused on him.

He sits in the group's center, leaning back in his desk with his tan arms folded across his chest and his long legs stretching into the aisle. He doesn't bother to move them when people walk by. Everyone steps over them, careful not to cause him any minor inconvenience.

I'm awed at how he exudes effortless attractiveness, his mere presence commanding the attention of everyone around him. Maybe it's that he's tall, a hockey player, or just plain beautiful to look at, but everyone, including me, is drawn to him.

I can't stop myself from stealing glances at him as I slide into my desk on the side of the front row. The behavior is unlike me, yet I don't dare take my eyes off him. It's as if I can't stop myself.

As the others laugh and chat around him, he turns towards me, and our eyes meet briefly but intensely. He leans forward in his desk, almost like he's studying me back with the same intensity. A current passes between us, or maybe I imagine it. My heart skips a beat as my cheeks heat and flush. I swivel my body to face the front of the room to break the invisible chord pulling me toward him. I look around the room, anywhere but at him. It's littered with inspirational posters and one large poster reminding us to "**JUST SAY NO.**"

Moments later, our English teacher strides in and takes his place at the front of the class. Mr. Payton introduces himself and begins taking roll, his pen tapping on his clipboard impatiently. As soon as my name is called, I hear snickers and whispering from some girls in the back of the room. I take a deep breath as my cheeks sting with embarrassment. It's bad enough that I don't know how to fit in here, but to have strangers laugh at me hurts more than I care to admit. It's exactly what I was afraid would happen.

"Ivy Owens," Mr. Payton repeats, and I struggle to find my voice.

Finally, just as he's about to call my name for a third time, I say, "Here." He gives me an exasperated look and continues with roll call. I try not to turn around, but knowing Corey

Delacour is sitting in the back of the classroom is too tempting, and I can't help but look over my shoulder casually to catch a glimpse of him. When I do, his piercing brown eyes are trained on me, regarding me with similar curiosity.

A boy with spiky blonde hair leans close to Corey, a mischievous glint in his eyes as he whispers something. Corey erupts in laughter and nudges him with his elbow. The teacher's voice breaks through their conversation.

"Mr. Tazman and Mr. Delacour," he states, "is there something you'd like to share with the class?" Both boys shake their heads but don't appear embarrassed to have been called out. "Good. Let's continue then, shall we?"

Mr. Payton has been going over this syllabus for approximately a decade with no end in sight. The classroom is stuffy with the weight of heavy perfumes and sweat from the people who've been to gym class, and the clock ticks slower with each passing minute. I'm not accustomed to classroom-type lectures, and I find my mind wandering again to the boy in the back of the room. I'm starting to fidget in my seat when Mr. Payton gets through his first-day spiel and begins explaining our first project— a group project. Just when I thought today couldn't get any worse. My heart sinks as I think about working with a group of strangers. I would much rather complete the entire thing on my own.

We're given a mandatory reading list, and I take a sigh of relief when I see I've read most of the books on the list already. We are supposed to pick one and write our names down on a sheet of paper that's being passed around. There are seven spots next to each book. The choices are *Catcher in the Rye*, *Animal Farm*, *The Metamorphosis*, *Bram Stoker's Dracula*, and *Catch 22*. Of the five, I've read all but *The Metamorphosis*, and the whole "turning into a giant insect thing" really gives me the creeps, so that's not even an option. I bite my pen mindlessly, pondering which book I should choose. Holden Caulfield and I are kindred spirits, both wandering around disillusioned in a world where nothing is quite real, so when the paper gets passed to me, I write my name next to *Catcher in the Rye* and pass the paper on.

Mr. Payton scans the list of names once the paper is returned to him, and tells us we will work in groups based on the book we chose. He writes the names of each book on the chalkboard and below each book lists the students who will be working on a composition paper together.

I hold my breath as his chalk clicks against the board with every word he writes. When he starts the *Catcher in the Rye* list, I lean forward in anticipation. He writes the name Owens, two names my eyes scan directly over, and then the name Delacour. The signup sheet went to Corey after me, so there's a small, illogical part of my brain that wants to think he chose this group based on the fact that I did it first and not because Holden Caulfield says "fuck" so many times.

Chapter 9

“P.Y.T. (Pretty Young Thing)”

Corey - Age 18, 1988

I scan the book titles list and am drawn to *Catcher in the Rye*. My decision is solidified when I see Ivy’s name scribbled a few spots above mine, and I am excited to work with her. That eagerness is short-lived when I pass the paper on, and Taz and two annoying, giggling girls sitting next to us also sign up for the book.

I glance over at Taz and try to hide my disappointment. While I usually wouldn’t mind working with him, I hoped for some space to talk to Ivy on this. The way she carries herself makes it evident that she’s shy and guarded. Between Taz’s loud personality and the girls’ tendency to be unfriendly to anyone outside their immediate circle, there’s no way I can use this group as a chance to get to know her.

“You will be expected to read the book of your choice on your own time, and you will work on your paper during group time in and outside of class if necessary. I suggest you gather your fellow student’s phone numbers in case you need to organize work times apart from school,” Mr. Payton instructs.

The students’ collective groans fill the room, but Mr. Payton continues, undeterred. “Seniors, listen up. This is preparing you for the real world. You will have to collaborate with

people you may not like, and your boss won't care about your excuses. They want the job done." He scans the classroom, meeting each student's eyes with a deliberate gaze.

His words are nothing new to me. I've been playing hockey since I was six, through countless teams and changing rosters. Some of the guys were loud-mouthed jokers, constantly messing around but showing up when it mattered. Others were quiet and determined, focused only on their game. And then there were the obnoxious ones who didn't understand the concept of teamwork. They would hog the puck, ignore our plays, and cause tension in the locker room. But when it comes down to it, we put our differences aside because that's what being a part of a team is all about, overcoming personal conflicts for a common goal.

I watch Ivy's eyes scan the chalkboard, taking in every name written. I don't miss her reaction as her gaze lands on my name. She nibbles on her lower lip, and a faint blush spreads across her rosy cheeks. Despite trying to hide it, it's clear that she's not immune to the situation at hand - working closely with me.

"Ugh," grunts the girl beside me, who I think is named Amber. She's one of those annoying girls who always hangs around the hockey team. I think Taz has hooked up with her once or twice. I find her too obnoxious to stomach. "We have to work with *Poison Ivy*," she complains.

"What's the problem?" I ask, trying to hide my annoyance.

"She's such a wannabe," Amber sneers.

"What do you mean by that?" I question. When she doesn't respond, I press further. "What does she want to be?"

"Human," Amber jokes as her friend joins the laughter. I sigh in exasperation.

"Have you ever even talked to her?" I ask, raising an eyebrow.

Amber shrugs, trying to hide her embarrassment at being called out. "No, I haven't," she admits snidely, "And I don't plan on it."

“That’s not very ‘human’ of you,” I retort, giving in to my annoyance. It isn’t lost on me that popularity in this school, *or any high school* for that matter, comes down to three things: looks, money, and the incessant need to conform. Of those three, I only have one thing going for me: attractiveness. My stepdad makes a good living, but I don’t have money. It wasn’t long ago that I lived in a trailer park and ate six peanut butter and jelly sandwiches daily. As for fitting in, I honestly couldn’t care less about it. So, all I have is my looks and my talent as a hockey player. It’s a sobering realization. What matters to most of these people is that I’m wrapped in a nice package destined for the NHL.

As I glance over at Ivy, I can’t help but notice her striking features. Her blonde waves cascade down her back, framing her icy blue eyes and accentuating her high cheekbones. Her shapely legs peek out from her pink dress. No one here can argue that the girl is not attractive. Her school bag is nice, and everything about her says that her family isn’t struggling financially. Yet, she’s shunned and labeled an outcast because she doesn’t meet the third and possibly most important condition: her past doesn’t align with everyone else’s. None of it makes sense, at least not to me.

The bell rings, marking the end of this class, and Ivy quietly packs up her things, gets up, and makes her way out the door. Her eyes scan the hallway for any signs of trouble, and I can’t help but wonder about her. *What secrets does she hold? What traumas has she overcome? And most importantly, what are her dreams and desires for the future?* Unlike the other shallow girls I know, there’s a depth to Ivy that intrigues me. I want to know more about her, to unravel the layers beneath her beautiful exterior.

I study her until she disappears into the sea of students moving through the hallways, like fish weaving and swimming against the tide. I may not know much about her yet, but I look forward to finding out.

Chapter 10

“Juke Box Hero”

Corey - Age 18, 1988

As I step onto the ice, my mind quiets and engages. Everything about the rink is familiar, from the smell of the rubber mats that border it to the sounds of blades slicing across the ice and sticks slapping against it. I have a sense of control on the ice that I don't experience anywhere else. A rush of adrenaline courses through my body, making my muscles tense in anticipation. My head is never more clear than when I'm playing. I've always been able to focus on the moment at hand, immersed in my goal of not only winning but leading my team. This is where I'm undeniably myself and completely at home.

The scoreboard reads 3-2, and our team is in the lead with only a few minutes left in the third period. Sliding across the slick ice, sweat drips down my face and falls in droplets onto the ice.

I stop and face Eckhardt, an opponent I'm familiar with. He glares at me as we wait for the puck to drop. Our sticks clash against each other, creating a sharp clacking sound. Eckhardt is good, but I'm better.

The referee drops the puck, and I swiftly gain control and push it towards Taz, my right wing. He deftly scoops it up and

races toward the goal. The opposing defensemen close in on us, eager for a steal, but Taz passes it back to me just in time. I glide gracefully across the ice, my stick expertly guiding the puck between my skates. Taz darts behind a defenseman, and I seize the opportunity to split the defenders with a quick pass. He speeds towards the goal, but the goalie is ready for him. As he passes by, Taz shifts his body to the left and takes a powerful swing at the net, only for the goalie to bat it away with his glove, but Taz doesn't give up. He slaps the puck back towards the net, this time aiming to the side of the goalie, and it sails into the net with a satisfying swish.

The crowd erupts in cheers as the final buzzer sounds, and we all rush to the center of the ice, hugging and shouting in celebration. The other team slowly skates off, heads down in defeat. I catch Eckhardt's gaze from across the rink, knowing this won't be the last time we face each other on the ice. Our rivalry is just beginning.

After the coach's post-game talk in the locker room, we hastily shower and towel off before getting dressed. Taz catches my eye, and I can tell he wants to say something.

"What?" I ask, pulling on my shirt.

"So, what was up with you in class the other day?" he asks, tying his shoes.

"What do you mean?" I ask in return, though I have a pretty good idea of what he's asking about.

"You really went after Amber when she started talking shit about the new girl," he says with a raised eyebrow.

"The new girl's name is Ivy," I say, snatching a swig from my water bottle. "And Amber deserved it," I add. "She was being bitchy for no reason."

"I mean, she always is," Taz agrees with a shrug, "But you never go off on someone like that."

"I know, I just...I can't stand how they're all talking about her. It's not right. She seems like she's been through a lot."

Taz furrows his brow in confusion, "What do you mean?"

I hesitate before answering because I don't know the details; even when I do, it won't be my business to tell. Before I can respond, Taz interrupts my thoughts.

"I think you're into this girl," he teases, giving me a pointed look. "Better tell Garrison and the guys to lay off."

I roll my eyes at his suggestion, but there's a small twinge of truth behind it. "I wouldn't go that far," I protest weakly. "I'm curious about her." But even as I say the words, I know Taz doesn't believe me. And he probably shouldn't because ever since she first caught my eye on the first day of school, she hasn't left my mind for a second unless I'm on the ice.



After getting cleaned up after the game, I decided to blow off the post-game celebration, grab some food, and head to the dealership to see if Mom is working. After my quick stop, the scent of greasy fried chicken from the fast food drive-thru fills the air of my car, making my mouth water.

The familiar sight of Finley's Ford comes into view as I pull into the lot. Brightly colored inflatables sway in the breeze, advertising sale prices and exceptional deals. I cringe at how cheesy they look, but I have to admit they seem to attract customers.

I park my used Ford Escort, a gift from my mom and Alan, in the designated customer spot. It may not be flashy, but it gets me where I need to go and has enough space for all my hockey gear. Despite my guilt about them buying me a car, I'm grateful because it would have been impossible to afford one alone while juggling school and hockey.

I maneuver through the swarm of slick-haired salesmen, their pearly white smiles and witty jokes trying to sell dreams wrapped in shiny car bodies. Each one has been trained by Alan himself, able to convince customers that every problem in life can be solved with one of his cars. *Feeling inadequate? Just buy this car. Wife being unfaithful? She'll come back if you drive up in this car. Stuck in a dead-end job? Imagine how*

much better it will feel cruising there and back in your brand-new car.

As I walk through the bustling showroom, I catch a glimpse of Alan expertly selling to a couple. His charismatic smile and smooth gestures are in full force. And then I spot her, the girl who has been consuming my thoughts lately. She wanders among the shiny display models, her eyes roving over each one before widening in disbelief at the steep prices. She nervously tugs on a strand of hair, tucking it behind her ear as she joins her parents' side.

I gingerly set the greasy, brown paper bag of takeout on an unoccupied desk and weave through the maze of cubicles to reach the small gathering by Alan's office. As soon as he spots me, his face lights up with recognition and relief.

"Corey!" he exclaims, standing up from his chair with a broad smile, "What brings you here?"

"Just finished my hockey game and thought I'd stop by," I reply casually, noticing Ivy's anxious glances.

"Fantastic," Alan replies before turning to the group of three strangers and introducing me. "This is my son, Corey. We run a family business here at Finley Ford." I bite my tongue to keep from correcting him, but Ivy and her parents are all watching, so I take a deep breath and push away my irritation with him referring to me as his son.

"Ivy, here, is looking for a new car," he tells me, "She goes to your school." He watches us expectantly. "Do you know each other?"

"Not yet," I reply, feeling Ivy's gaze on me. "I mean, we haven't officially met," I add. "I'm Corey," I introduce myself, offering a handshake.

"Ivy," she says quietly. Her voice is soft and trembling as she introduces herself, her small hand disappearing in my calloused palm. Her hand is soft and cooler than mine, and I have to fight the urge to let her pull away, which she does almost immediately.

“It’s nice to meet you, especially since we will be partners on our English assignment,” I say with a knowing smirk.

“Well, isn’t that wonderful?” Alan interjects. “Why don’t you two chat, and I’ll show Ivy’s parents some of our inventory?”

“Okay,” she says quietly as her parents wander off with Alan.

I step back, my hands landing on the edge of an empty desk. My feet cross at the ankles as I lean against it, a small smile on my lips. “So, how’s school been treating you?” I ask, genuinely curious.

“It’s one thrill after another,” she responds sarcastically, causing me to chuckle at her dry humor. “It’s difficult for me; some people seem to delight in that.” I’m surprised at her candor.

“It sucks being the new kid. I moved here when I was thirteen,” I offer, trying to relate.

“And let me guess, everyone stared and talked behind your back?”

“Actually, yeah,” I reply, “They did.”

“Probably not for the same reasons as me,” she replies.

“Probably not,” I admit. “Look, people can be assholes,” I state bluntly, “But don’t let it get to you.”

“Easier said than done,” she answers, frustration evident in her voice.

“Is it really that bad?”

“It’s what I expected it to be,” she says.

“Can I give you some advice?”

“Sure, why not?” she says with a shrug, seeming open to anything.

“Be yourself. Don’t worry about what other people think,” I say earnestly.

“Not everyone is as sure of themselves as you are. At least I’m not,” she admits with a hint of vulnerability. When I stay silent, she continues, “A perfect example— my sister had to tell me what to wear for the first day of school because apparently, I have no idea what’s ‘cool,’ and even then, she said my hair wasn’t big enough or something.” She lets out a deep sigh and shakes her head.

I can see the frustration in her eyes as she recounts this story. “That’s sweet of her to try and help you out,” I say sympathetically.

“She’s twelve,” she retorts, causing me to chuckle.

“Still. It seems like she’s trying to help in any way she can.”

Ivy nods.

“Look, it’s all bullshit anyway.”

“Doesn’t make it any less real,” she says sharply, her eyes fixed on me. “Corey Delacour,” she begins, using my full name. The way she says it makes me feel like I’m in trouble, like when my mom does it. “Do you even know anything about me?” Her sudden question catches me off guard.

“Not very much, Ivy Owens,” I admit, full-naming her right back. “Just what I’ve heard around school.”

She hums in response, her head nodding. And then, in an instant, her entire demeanor changes. She is no longer timid or unsure. She’s angry.

“So you don’t know anything,” she states coldly before turning and storming off, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

As she approaches her parents, her shoulders stiffen, and the muscles in her jaw tense. She stands tall and confident, but there’s a hint of something else in her stance, a readiness as if preparing for a battle. Her hands are fisted at her sides. No one perceives the change in her but me. Her parents talk excitedly about the new car Alan is showing them, and I can’t help but note that it’s a newer, nicer version of my car, ironically.

I did that, I think to myself. I was trying to be charming and glib - hell, I was trying to *flirt* with her, and all I managed to do was upset her. I'm so unaccustomed to having to work for girls' attention that I must be off my game, or maybe Ivy Owens is different.

Chapter 11

“Video Killed The Radio Star”

Ivy - Age 18, 1988

I've successfully survived my first week of school. It wasn't ideal, but at least it was bearable. After that initial day, I didn't get as many stares or snickers behind my back, which was as much as I could hope for. I found a bit of a groove and a routine, making me feel much more comfortable.

Sascha and I had lunch together daily, and we've deepened our friendship, although I haven't shared anything about my past. I'm sure she's heard the rumors, but to her credit, she doesn't want to delve into my past or judge me by it.

As for Corey Delacour, he seemed a bit weary of me after I snapped at him. Our eyes occasionally met across the cafeteria or in class, and I always looked away first, but not before. I registered the remorse in his gaze, and I know I should probably apologize for my outburst at some point.

Nat's lying on her stomach on my pale pink bedspread, her feet kicking behind her. Madonna is singing in the background as she flips through her *Tiger Beat* magazine aimlessly, pausing occasionally to point out hairstyles she likes.

“Have you ever thought about getting a spiral perm?” she asks, pointing to a picture of Nancy Wilson from the popular band Heart.

I wrinkle my nose in disgust, “No way. I don’t want to end up looking like a poodle.”

She giggles softly as she continues flipping through the magazine, her eyes lingering on photos of heartthrobs and hairdos. “A girl at school got a perm, and it looks amazing on her,” she says.

“I’m sure it cost her parents a fortune,” I reply.

Nat shrugs, understanding the unspoken answer. “I have to save some money from my new job for the car and other expenses,” I tell her, “like taking you to the mall.”

Nat’s eyes light up excitedly, “It’s so cool that you got a job at Blockbuster Video!”

I agree, “I know, right? It’s perfect for my love of movies.”

“Remember when you first came home, and all you did was watch movies for like a month?” Her smile drops as she thinks she’s said something wrong.

“It’s okay to talk about it,” I reassure her, briefly placing my hand over hers. “And yes, I do remember.”

Her enthusiasm returns as she asks, “What’s your absolute favorite movie?”

I think for a moment. “Of all time?” I ask.

Nat nods eagerly.

“That’s such a difficult question,” I whine. “But it has to be a John Hughes movie.”

Nat rolls her eyes playfully and agrees, “Obviously.”

“Well, there’s *so many* choices, but I’d have to answer with...*The Breakfast Club*.”

“I knew it,” she says with a sly smile.

Something about that movie speaks to my soul; it is a story about the complexity of a group of teenagers, all different yet very much the same.

“Who would you kiss from that movie if you had to?” she asks.

I play along, teasing back, “What do you know about kissing?”

She giggles and shrugs. “Nothing! But you’re, like, an adult now,” she says dramatically.

“That doesn’t mean I want to kiss anyone,” I reply jokingly.

But she won’t relent. “Okay, but if you had to pick one...the nerd, the athlete, or the bad boy?”

My mind flashes to deep brown eyes and full lips before I even have a chance to form a conscious thought. But I push those thoughts away and answer confidently, “Definitely the nerd.”



My new boss is a year younger than me. Josh has been working here at Blockbuster Video for over a year, working his way up to a shift manager. He’s also an avid *Dungeons and Dragons* fan. I know this because he’s mentioned it no less than three times in the past two hours. He appears friendly enough, and I don’t anticipate any major challenges at my first job. The most annoying things I’ve encountered so far are the itchy blue polo shirt with the yellow Blockbuster insignia across my right boob and the unflattering khaki pants.

As I restock the shelves, I listen to the movie that plays on the mounted televisions around the store. The familiar sound of lightsabers clashing and Darth Vader’s baritone voice fills the air, making me smile. Uniform aside, this is a cool job.

I’m bent over putting a copy of *The Goonies* back on the shelf when I hear a female voice interrupting my blissful moment behind me.

“Excuse me,” she whines, “but do you have any movies about a girl who is a total outcast and should quietly disappear from society?”

I turn my head and take a deep breath before standing to face the three girls looking down on me— literally and physically. It’s not surprising that the ever-present trio of

Tiffany, Amber, and Stacy have decided they have nothing better to do than pick on me at my place of work.

“I can’t think of anything off the top of my head,” I say through gritted teeth.

Stacy rolls her eyes and gives her two clones a knowing look.

“Maybe it’s a documentary,” she says snidely, tapping her finger against her chin as if pondering something deeply. “The Ivy Owens Story,” she announces with a smirk.

My heart sinks, and I want so badly to return her vile words, but before I can say anything, she continues.

“Never mind. We’ll stick with *The Karate Kid*,” she says as she flicks her overly processed hair over her shoulder.

“Great choice,” I say with fake enthusiasm. “A movie about someone who does nothing wrong but still gets bullied endlessly until he finally stands up for himself and puts them in their place,” I emphasize the last part, hoping my commentary makes the intended impact.

“What did you say, you mutant?” Stacy hisses.

I shrug. “I’m doing my job, recommending movies. Besides, I think it’s a pretty accurate portrayal of high school.”

Stacy’s jaw tightens like she’s ready to continue our confrontation when she gets distracted by a rowdy group of guys entering the video store. I look up to see it’s Corey Delacour and some of his hockey buddies. His eyes widen in shock when he spots me.

“Take a chill pill, Poison Ivy,” Amber hisses at me over her shoulder before they flock toward the group, but I don’t miss how Corey breaks away from them.

He casually walks over to browse the shelves by the front desk, pretending to be interested in movies. Still, every few seconds, he sneaks a glance in my direction, and every time he does, my stomach breaks free with butterflies.

Unable to take the tension any longer, I approach him.

Do you need help with anything," I ask politely. His smile widens as he turns to face me.

"Hey, Ivy," he says as his voice glides over my skin, warming every cell. "I didn't know you worked here," he adds with just the right amount of smolder.

With its pointed aim, his smirk hits me like an electric jolt. It's a look I'm sure has gotten him both in and out of trouble. I fumble with my words, trying to maintain composure.

"It's my first day," I reply.

"That's cool," he responds, looking around. "So you must like movies."

"I love them," I say, becoming more comfortable. "I guess you like them too," I add awkwardly, realizing how obvious that statement is.

His deep voice rumbles as he chuckles, his eyes crinkling at the corners. He leans against the wall and crosses his arms over his broad chest.

"Hockey and movies are my favorite things," he says with a grin before adding, "I'm sorry about the other day," his expression sincere. I furrow my brows in confusion, prompting him to explain further. "At the car dealership," he begins. "I know I said some insensitive things, and I apologize."

I nod, grateful for his apology. "It's all right," I offer. "You were trying to help. I shouldn't have snapped at you."

"So we're good?" he asks, flashing me a megawatt smile. I nod.

"I'm glad," he says. "Because I would like to be friends."

My eyebrows shoot up in disbelief. I want to believe he's being honest, but it's hard to trust people after what I've been through, coupled with the way I've been thoroughly unwelcomed at school. Before I can say anything in return, his friend finishes renting his movies with Josh and saunters over to us.

“You ready to head out, Delzy?” he asks, flashing a charming smile at me. I pause, taking in his black and blue hockey jersey and the adrenaline-fueled energy radiating from him. He’s the guy that’s always with Corey, his best friend, if I had to guess.

“Delzy?” I repeat, trying out the unfamiliar nickname.

“Yeah, it’s a hockey thing,” he shrugs. “Once you agree to be my friend, you have to come to watch me play.” His friend nudges him with a knowing smirk.

Before I can respond, they turn and leave the store, the jingle of their car keys fading as they walk away, but Corey pauses at the doorway, returning to give me one last look before disappearing outside.

Stacy and her friends stand near the checkout counter, their arms crossed and scowls etched on their faces as they shoot sharp glances in my direction. Despite having already paid for their movies, they lingered in the store, unable to look away from Corey and me standing by the comedy section. Their murmurs of disbelief are barely audible over the movie from the speakers above. Finally, with a final disdainful glare, they turn, utter a “Lame!” and storm out of the store, allowing the glass door to shut with such force its rattle echoes throughout the entire building.

Chapter 12

“Nothing Else Matters”

Corey - Age 18, 1988

I walk through the front door, exhausted from a long day of practice and school. My mom is curled up on the couch, watching *The Love Boat* and devouring a bowl of mint chocolate chip ice cream. She greets me with a warm smile as I drop my keys in the bowl on the table.

“Hey, Mom,” I say, sitting beside her. “Where’s Alan?”

“He had to work late,” she replies. “Want some ice cream?”

Normally, I would decline, but I miss spending time with my mom. She hurries into the kitchen and returns with a bowl for me. As she settles back onto the couch, we begin catching up on each other’s lives.

“It’s been forever since we’ve had a chance to talk,” she says

“I know,” I agree, shoving a big spoonful of ice cream into my mouth.

“How was the game this week?”

“It was good,” I reply. “Stromberg’s line is working well together. Coach is happy with the way things are going.”

“I hate that I can’t make it to all of your games,” my mother laments, her expression filled with regret.

“You know I understand, Mom. I have a lot of hockey games,” I reassure her.

“But I still hate it,” she insists, her voice heavy with emotion. “You’ve worked so hard to get where you are, Corey. I’m so proud of you.”

“Thanks, Mom,” I smile.

“I know you didn’t want to move here at first, but it’s turned out to be the right decision,” she says with conviction.

“Yeah, definitely,” I agree. “I was being stubborn.”

Tears well up in my mother’s eyes as she leans in and rests her head on my shoulder. “You’re so grown up now,” she whispers with pride.



Corey, Age 14 - 1984

My Mom may have been right about a few things. I’ve gotten used to this new town, although it’s not much different from the one we left. The biggest difference is the year-round NHL-sized ice rink and the new home of a Division 1 junior hockey program. That was worth the move here, and I take full advantage by spending most of my free time at the rink. I spend five days a week there, before and after school, skating and practicing like my life depends on it.

Coach Dupree has taken notice of my dedication and skills. I aim to be recruited for the tier-one program as soon as I’m eligible. I have time to make myself impossible for him to ignore, and I plan to do that. Only a select few high school players make it to college hockey, let alone the NHL, but I’m determined to be one of them.

Thankfully, I already have the height advantage at 5’11.“ Who knows how tall I’ll be, but it’s a good sign for now. My speed on the ice is unmatched, and my passing and

stickhandling skills constantly improve. Coach has challenged me to work on checking, and I gladly accept the challenge. I often channel my frustration and aggression into controlled hits on the ice. It feels natural and helps me play with an edge.

As I walked through the halls of my new school on the first day, heads turned to stare at me. My hockey gear was still slung over my shoulder from an early morning practice, and whispers of “new kid!” and “hockey hottie!” followed me. None of it fazed me; I was used to being the center of attention on the ice. And now, at this new school, it was no different.

Even though we’re still underclassmen, there’s been no shortage of girls hovering around us at every turn, giggling and flirting whenever we’re around. Our coach had warned us about getting too close to any of them, reminding us that “passion is for the ice.”

I’m indifferent to everything like I’ve always been, and ironically, that seems to make people even more interested in me. I keep my head down and focus on hockey as much as possible, doing whatever is asked of me on the ice and in school.

My grades are fine since we are expected to maintain a 3.4 grade point average, but they could be better if I applied myself more. The way I see it, a few Bs or Cs won’t stop me from pursuing my dream of playing hockey professionally. I simply have to do well enough to stay under the radar and remain eligible to play. My English teacher remarked at my last parent-teacher conference that if I spent as much time studying as I did *trying to get out of studying*, I’d have straight A’s. I’d say that’s accurate.

I know that no matter what my future holds, I never want to work at any of Alan’s car dealerships. My mom works at the dealership in town part-time as a secretary. She prefers it to waiting tables, so I’m happy for her. I like that she’s home earlier in the evenings now, and there’s always an abundance of snacks and food in the kitchen. We eat dinner together every evening. It’s still something I’m trying to get used to since this whole “family dynamic” thing is foreign to me.

As we sit at the table every evening, Alan wearing a crisp button-up shirt with the dealership's logo embroidered on it and me in my old Gretzky jersey, my most prized possession, it's obvious how different we are. He talks nonstop about his latest sales tactics and the newest models on the lot. Mom listens intently, but I find myself zoning out most of the time out of sheer boredom. I wish Alan shared my love for hockey or even a passion for anything other than selling cars.

It would be nice to have something in common with him, considering he and my mom got married shortly after moving here. The wedding was hella boring, and I sat there, dressed in a stupid suit and tie, listening to Metallica on my Walkman every chance I got. Occasionally, my mom would glare at me with a tight scowl, reminding me that I needed to be gracious and grateful.

Alan's brother, Ron, and his family live in the same neighborhood, so I technically have some "relatives" nearby. Ron has a daughter named Sarah, who is in the same grade as me, but we don't talk much, so it's weird having her as a "cousin" by association. We mostly nod when we pass one another in the halls. It's a good reminder that sometimes family is just a word—nothing that means anything. My mom is my family, and even though I don't dislike Alan, that hasn't changed.

Yet, even I can't deny that Alan has provided us with a better life, like my mom said. I don't need to get a job now and can focus solely on hockey, and the cost of new equipment is no longer a burden to my mom. I appreciate it; I do. However, I can't shake the feeling of being indebted to Alan; it never sits right with me.

Chapter 13

“Don’t You (Forget About Me)”

Ivy - Age 18, 1988

Another Monday morning and the second week of school. Today, Nat has opted to dress me in a pair of Guess acid-wash jeans and a sweater that hangs off one shoulder. My hair is pulled back into a high ponytail, and as I scan myself in the mirror, I’m happy with my outfit.

Natalie is still trying to turn me into her human-sized Barbie doll, but she’s given up on the blush and blue mascara, at least for now. I’m grateful to her for trying to help me however she can. My outlook is slightly different after my short conversation with Corey Delacour at work the other night, and I can’t help but feel mildly optimistic about the day ahead and the possibility of seeing him at school. My new (used) car is sitting in the driveway, but I’m not yet verified on my parent’s car insurance, so I can’t drive to school. I don’t walk anywhere alone or take the bus, so Dad is driving me again.

He drops me off right on time this week, and I can’t help but scan the parking lot, hoping to catch a glimpse of Corey and his friends. *Just like the rest of the groupies*, I think to myself. My heart races as I spot some hockey guys, but no sign of Corey or his trusty sidekick, Taz.

During lunch, Sascha walks towards me with another girl in tow. The girl sets an instrument case against her chair as they sit down.

“Hey,” Sascha says, “this is my friend Sarah. She plays the clarinet in our school band.”

Sarah smiles shyly and adjusts her glasses. We break into easy conversation about what it’s like playing at football games on Friday nights, and I find out that Sarah and Sascha have been friends since middle school. Added to this, my new alternative-music-loving friend is also in the band. She neglected to mention it last week and when I give her a wide-eyed look of surprise, she threatens to throw a ketchup-covered french fry at me if I laugh, which I would never do. I think it’s amazing. I wish I could’ve learned to play an instrument when I was younger.

“Oh yeah,” she teases, “Sarah here happens to be related to your hockey boyfriend.”

I almost choke on the Cheeto I’ve popped into my mouth. Once my coughing subsides, I clear my throat and respond to her, “You’re ridiculous.”

“I’m not technically related to him, but Corey is sort of like my cousin through marriage,” Sarah explains with a shrug. “His mom married my uncle.”

Curiosity gets the best of me. “Where is he today?” I ask.

“I knew it!” Sascha exclaims. “You liiiiikkkkeee him.”

I roll my eyes and toss a small carrot at her. “Shut up.”

Sarah easily answers my question, “He has a hockey game in a different city.”

“I thought he played for the school team?” I inquire.

“No,” she clarifies. “He and Taz play on a junior league team. It’s the step right before getting recruited to college or maybe even the NHL,” she says as if it’s no big deal. “So they travel sometimes for games.”

“How does he keep up with school?” I ask, impressed by his dedication.

“They do independent study,” Sarah replies matter-of-factly.

I had no idea about any of this. I knew Corey was a talented hockey player, but his aspirations far exceeded what I had imagined. “He must have been playing for a really long time,” I remark.

“Since he was like six years old,” Sarah confirms, “But he got really serious about it when he moved here.”

I think back to where I was at that age, and I realize that we have led such different lives. He’s been planning his future since he was a young teenager. When I was that age, I was simply trying to make it from day to day without losing my mind.



Ivy, Age 14, 1984

This is taking a lot more time than I anticipated. I’ve spent so much time trying to gain insight into how to get out of this place. Luckily, no one has shown any amount of interest in marrying me off to some pervert. I’m still too young, even for these people. That has become my new focus since it doesn’t seem that they intend to kill me. Still, every night as I lay in bed, I pray that tomorrow will be the day I can escape. I still don’t have a plan yet, but as I lay in bed and breathe into the faint strawberry scent of my doll, I think about my parents, my sister, and my home. I cry myself to sleep most nights, but so do a lot of the girls in here, so the sound of my weeping is drowned out amongst the others.

It’s nearly impossible to sneak around in this place with our strict schedule, but I’ve managed to snag some shifts as Auron’s receptionist. My tasks involve tidying up the big building and checking if he’s available for visitors. His office is the only one with a phone, and as I’ve discovered during my sneaky attempts, it’s not connected to any outside lines. There must be some code I need to enter before making a call. The frustration of being so close to a way out but still trapped here consumes me daily.

As I walked into Auron's office earlier today, my eyes fell on the new addition to his desk, a big computer with a place for a floppy disc. I had never seen one before and had no clue how to use it, but I couldn't help but wonder if there's information on one of those discs that can help me. I made a mental note to keep my eye out for one. I've searched frantically for a calendar that can tell me what month it is, but I haven't found anything yet. Another way Auron likes to control everyone here is by keeping us in the dark about what is happening in the real world and what day or even month it is.

I've made it a habit to take brisk walks every chance I get. At first, I strolled as if admiring the scenery. But now, I stride purposefully, making eye contact and flashing a friendly smile at anyone I pass. They probably assume I'm just trying to get more exercise, and no one has questioned me yet. From my observations, the guards shift out every eight hours like clockwork, just like any normal job. I also noticed that there are no guards on the mountain behind us; the terrain acts as a natural barrier against potential intruders. I stay clear of the area with the "medicinal cleansing" tent. I never want to go there. Something tells me the less I know about that, the better.

Nothing I've seen can act as any weapon or means to threaten my way out of here. There are sticks and rocks, but what will I do? Throw a rock at a guy with a rifle? That's a surefire way to get myself killed. I've searched for potential poisonous plants or herbs to put in the food, but honestly, I can't tell a poisonous berry or mushroom from a safe one. I chastise myself for not paying more attention in Girl Scouts.

Despite the constant surveillance and sharing a room with others, I've managed to jot down notes in my small notebook by sneaking outside at night and writing in the moonlight or tearing out pages and sneaking them into the bathroom.

Auron's visitors arrive in sleek cars and wearing expensive suits every few days. They always wear sunglasses until they enter the building, adding an air of mystery and danger to their

presence. It's always men who come, and they are well-protected by their attire and demeanor.

The dairy truck continues to arrive twice per week. I'm not sure of the days, but they are still my favorite days of the week. Two days ago, when the truck pulled up, there was a song on the radio with catchy lyrics. I've been walking around singing it to myself ever since. It's about waking up before you go and something about a yo-yo.

That's the only part I remember, so I keep singing or humming it over and over whenever I'm alone.

Later that same afternoon, a sleek black sedan pulled up to The Station, and three sharply dressed men stepped out. Their tailored suits hugged their frames, and they carried expensive-looking briefcases. I watched them approach the reception desk where I was working, feeling their assessing stares as they glanced over my body. I crossed my arms tightly in front of me in response.

"Hello, Gentlemen," I greeted them with a forced smile.

"Tell Auron he has visitors," the largest man on the left said. His commanding presence made me wonder if he was a bodyguard or some security detail.

I knocked on Auron's solid oak door twice, the sound echoing through the empty hallway. A muffled voice called out from inside, and I slowly pushed open the heavy door. Auron sat on a plush couch in the center of the room, his dark hair slightly tousled. When he saw me enter, he stood up, smoothing out his tailored suit.

"Ah, Ivy," he greeted, motioning for me to come closer. I hesitantly approached him, small in comparison to his imposing figure. His blue eyes studied me briefly before he asked, "How are you?" It caught me off guard; generally, he only spoke to me when he needed something done.

"Um, I'm good," I stuttered, unsure how to answer his question.

"Do you find that you're happy?" he asked, cocking his head to the side and studying me. As he scrutinized me, I

shifted from foot to foot. His piercing gaze made me feel like he could see right through me.

I forced a smile onto my face and replied, “Yes, of course I am.”

His tone changed as he continued, “What about that little doll I allowed you to keep when you arrived? Do you still have it?”

My heart begins to race as I try to devise a convincing lie. *Why was he asking about the doll? Did he know about my notes hidden under the mattress?*

Desperate to deflect, I responded, “No, I got rid of it a while ago.” But I knew he didn’t believe me. The tension between us grew as we both knew I was lying.

He nodded slowly, his eyes dark and unapologetic. “That’s good,” he said, flicking a stray piece of lint off his tailored suit. “Such items are trivial. You don’t need to be thinking about your life from before, Ivy. I assure you no one is thinking about you.” His words cut like a dull knife. The pain sears through my chest as I swallow thickly to stifle the tears that threaten to break through. “You may allow visitors now,” he added with a self-satisfied grin.

Later that night, I cried myself to sleep, but for different reasons. What if Auron was right? What if life has gone on without me? What if everyone has forgotten about me? Are they better off with me gone?

I didn’t hum or sing “Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go” the next day or the days after. I felt defeated and as if I should give up and surrender to my new reality.

Chapter 14

“Heartbreaker”

Corey - Age 18, 1988

We had a decent game this week, only a four-hour trip away, so I was back on campus by midweek, which is normal for us. My body is sore and moving slower than usual after taking a hard hit on the boards during the game. My shoulder popped out of place, but thankfully the trainer was able to manipulate it back in. It's still swollen and stiff today, so I've been icing and taking medication to reduce inflammation. I could've taken the day off, but I felt extra motivated to get to my English class.

I open the heavy classroom door and scan the room for my friends. My eyes land on Ivy, sitting in her usual spot with her legs crossed, flipping through a notebook. I make my way over to her, playfully kicking her shoe as I pass by. She peeks up at me, and a small smile plays across her lips.

Taz, who is already deep into a story about our latest hockey game, gives me a nod as I approach.

“So we're up 5-1 and cruising,” he says, gesturing wildly. “But then Delzy decides to show off, so he chases down their winger and steals the puck right off his stick. Next thing you know, this guy slams into Delzy and dislocates his shoulder.”

I wince at the memory as Taz continues his animated retelling. “And what does this psycho do? He tells the trainer to pop his shoulder back in place so he can keep playing!”

As I sit down and drop my backpack onto the ground with a loud thud, I can see Ivy subtly turning her head to eavesdrop on our conversation from her spot in front of us.

Sometimes, my instincts take over during a game, and I make risky plays, much to Coach’s dismay. After ensuring I was okay, he lectured me for thirty minutes on how taking unnecessary risks hurts the whole team.

“You’re a fucking maniac, Dude,” Taz laughs, his booming voice echoing through the classroom as he nudges my shoulder. A sharp pain shoots through me, and I wince, causing Taz to apologize.

“Shit, sorry,” he says, patting my back in a comforting gesture.

Amber slides in behind me, her hands landing on my tense shoulders. “Poor baby,” she coos, “Let me take care of those knots for you.”

My body tenses at her touch, and I jerk away from her. The movement may have been quicker than any move I’ve made on the ice. “Don’t,” I warn her firmly.

Amber’s mouth drops open in surprise, and pouts, “Oh, I’m sorry. Did that hurt?”

The irritation in my tone is evident as I reply flatly, “No. I don’t want you touching me.”

Amber’s expression changes from shock to hurt as she sits down silently. I glance at Ivy, who is trying unsuccessfully to stifle a laugh. I didn’t do it for her benefit. I don’t want Amber or any girl thinking they can put their hands on me whenever they want. When I hang out with a girl, it’s a mutual decision, and I make it clear that it’s short-lived. Sometimes, I’ll spend as much as a couple of weeks with someone, but that’s the farthest it’s ever gone. No one meets any parents, and no labels are assigned. Anyone who knows me knows that hockey is my top priority, and I prefer discretion in my personal life.



Corey, Age 16 - 1986

The phone ringing pulls me out of my thoughts, and I scurry to answer it on the second ring. “Hello.”

“Hey, Delzy,” Taz greets me with his usual enthusiasm. “What’s up, Man?”

Taz is known as the Tasmanian Devil on the ice, with his wild and relentless style of play. If anyone other than me makes it to the pros, it will be Taz. That is if his wild streak doesn’t get him into trouble.

“What’s the plan for tonight?” he continues.

Even though he can’t see me through the phone, I shrug. “No plans. Why?”

“My Dad’s out of town, and my brother is throwing a party at our place. You should come.”

“Wait, your brother’s okay with us crashing his party?”

Taz laughs, “I didn’t really ask, but who cares?”

“Yeah, OK. Sounds cool,” I tell him. Taz only lives a few blocks from me, so I can walk over later. “I’ll come over in an hour or so.”

A little bit later, I walk through the front door, greeted by the smell of sweat, alcohol, and marijuana. Van Halen’s “Jump” blasts from the massive stereo system. Drunk and stoned upperclassmen from school stumble around, their voices loud and wild.

In the corner by the stereo, a group of girls are dancing, wearing only bikini tops and jean skirts, their limbs flailing wildly to the music. I find it hard to tear my attention away when Taz calls out my name from the kitchen. I push through the throng of people and join him in the kitchen as he hands me a clear plastic cup filled with a red liquid.

Holding the cup up to the dim light, watching the liquid slosh around inside, I ask, “What’s this?”

“Jungle juice,” he grins mischievously. “My brother’s famous recipe.”

“What’s in it?” I inquire, curious but somewhat apprehensive.

“Just some juice and Everclear,” he answers with a shrug.

“What the hell is Everclear?” I question further, not wanting to appear naive but far less willing to drink something I’ve never heard of.

“It’s basically straight alcohol,” he explains with a smirk. “Might as well be drinking gasoline. It’s gnarly, but you’ll get a hard-core buzz.”

I take a hesitant sip, expecting it to taste disgusting based on his description, but instead, it’s surprisingly sweet and goes down easily. I turn back to the girls dancing in the living room, hoping to catch another glimpse, but they’ve already dispersed into the crowd.

A few of my teammates are scattered throughout the house, and we congregate in the kitchen. A short brunette approaches me, her tight dress showing off her curves. I’ve seen her around school before but don’t know her name.

“Hey there, Cutie,” she says with a flirtatious smile when she reaches me.

I lean casually against the counter. “Hey,” I reply with a grin.

“You’re a Sophomore, right?” she asks, twirling a strand of hair around her finger.

My first instinct is to lie. If she finds out my age, she might bolt. But my friends are standing here watching this interaction and will call me out if I try it. “Yeah,” I confirm with a nod. “How’d you know?”

“I’ve been keeping my eye out for new faces,” she says, leaning closer to me, her dark, curly hair bouncing around her shoulders as she speaks. “I’m a Senior. My name is Nicole.”

My friends make crude jokes and smirk behind me, but she either doesn't notice or doesn't care. "Do you wanna get out of here and chat somewhere?" she asks, her brown eyes sparkling mischievously.

Grinning back at her, I flip off my friends before taking her hand and following her upstairs to Taz's bedroom.

Her lips are soft and taste like cherry Chapstick as she presses them against mine. I feel a surge of excitement and nervousness since this is the furthest I've gone with a girl. But between kissing and hands roaming, she won't stop talking about stuff I couldn't care less about. The chatter about materialistic things drains me as she rambles on about the new car she wants, the latest sweater from the mall, and girls she doesn't get along with on the cheer squad.

The final straw is when she brings up her ex-boyfriend, his name dripping from her lips like venom as they kiss my own. Talk about a mood killer. I'd rather be at home instead, lost in fantasies, as I stare at the poster of Heather Locklear on my wall.

I'm about to get up and leave when she descends my body with a purpose, her mouth finding something to do other than talk incessantly. The only sounds now are wet, sucking noises, and suddenly there's nowhere else I'd rather be.

My friends pestered me for details about that night for weeks, but I refused to give them anything. I preferred to keep what happened behind closed doors, but Nicole had other plans. She took every opportunity to share her version of events with whoever would listen, and my popularity shot through the roof.

As a hockey player, it wasn't hard for me to attract attention from girls, but after that night, they seemed even more enamored. It boosted my ego and social status, and I shamelessly basked in the attention and admiration from all angles for a while.

Chapter 15

“Walk This Way”

Ivy - Age 18, 1988

“So I’m assuming by now we’ve all read the book we will be working on?” Mr. Payton says with an expectant look on his face. As his words hang in the air, I glance around the classroom and notice that most of my classmates are avoiding eye contact with our teacher. I can feel a sense of unspoken panic growing in the room as he reminds us about the upcoming project deadline. My own thoughts drift to my notes, where I’ve meticulously planned out my portion of the project, only to realize that the lack of communication from my group members hinders my progress.

“This project is due in less than three weeks. I suggest you all figure out how to budget your time to complete it.”

I look down again at my notes, realizing that I could have completed this project already without the group assignment. I haven’t spoken to anyone in my group except Corey Delacour, and that wasn’t school-related.

My hand shoots up, propelled by a surge of annoyance and defiance. The teacher’s gaze lands on me, pausing to acknowledge my question before continuing his lecture. I chew on my bottom lip but eventually push aside doubts and speak up.

“Do we have to do this project as a group?” I ask, voice trembling.

“Well, seeing as that is the assignment given, yes,” he replies with a hint of mockery.

I press on, determined to make my point. “But what if I could turn it in myself and get an A? The final result won’t accurately reflect my capabilities if it’s a group effort.”

The room falls silent as all eyes turn to watch our verbal sparring.

“Did you miss the part where I mentioned the importance of teamwork in the real world?” he retorts.

“I’ve been in the real world, Mr. Payton. And trust me, it’s every man for himself,” I counter sharply. The room is eerily silent as we lock eyes.

A vein dances rapidly in his forehead, signaling his growing frustration with me. “You haven’t experienced the working world-”

I interrupt him. “The world I know is far more real than this sheltered bubble,” I begin, “and from my experience, relying on others only leads to disappointment. In the real world, you have to take on tasks yourself and carry them to completion.”

As our argument reaches its tense climax, I see the teacher’s face turning red with anger. But I stand my ground, determined not to back down or be dismissed. This is my reality, a harsher and unforgiving one than he could ever imagine.

As the last words of my sentence hang in the air, a heavy silence descends upon the classroom. I can feel all eyes on me, their weight like hot coals burning into my skin. A few snickers come from the back of the room, but most students stare wide-eyed in shock.

Mr. Payton’s face is beyond red now; it’s morphed into a reddish/purplish hue, and beads of sweat have begun forming on his upper lip as he struggles to maintain control. “Is that so, Ms. Owens?” he says through gritted teeth.

I swallow hard and clear my throat before attempting to respond, “I think that maybe our time could be better spent-”

But before I can finish, Mr. Payton holds up a hand to stop me. “You’ve said enough,” he interrupts sharply. “The way I run my class is not open for discussion. Your outburst is disrespectful to me and your classmates.”

I shift uncomfortably in my seat, feeling the heat of everyone’s stares at me.

“So here’s what we’re going to do,” Mr. Payton continues with a sneer. “Since you seem to enjoy working alone, you can spend your after-school detention today writing an essay explaining why your time is more important than everyone else’s.”

“That’s not what I said,” I protest.

“I think we all understood your implication loud and clear,” Mr. Payton retorts.

“Excuse me, Mr. Payton,” comes a husky voice from the back of the room. I turn and find Corey Delacour has raised his hand.

Our teacher reluctantly calls on him, “Yes?”

“She’s right. This assignment is bullshit,” Corey declares boldly.

The entire room gasps in unison and glances from Corey back to our teacher, who is now so flustered that he’s loosening the knot on his necktie.

“I’ll be expecting that same essay from you, Mr. Delacour,” Mr. Payton says with barely contained anger.

“Detention for expressing free thought? What is this? Russia?” Corey retorts, causing the entire classroom to draw out “Oooooooooohhh.”

The mention of our Cold War opponent is the last straw for our teacher. “Get out,” he spits, motioning to Corey and me. I start to protest, but Corey shrugs and grabs his backpack, so instead, I gather my things and exit the room as our fellow students clap loudly at our rebellion.



Sitting on opposite sides of the dimly lit office, our chairs squeak as we shift uncomfortably. My palms are sweaty, and I'm wracked with anxiety as I wait to call my parents and tell them about detention. Across from me, Corey fidgets in his seat, as restless as I am. Every so often, our eyes meet, and we exchange a knowing look, trying to make the best of the situation.

They allowed me to use the phone after what felt like hours but was more like thirty minutes. Thankfully, it rings until our new answering machine picks it up. My father's voice rings out across the line.

"Hi. You've reached the Owens family. Leave a message, and we will get back to you." I take a deep breath and leave a brief message asking for a ride at 5 o'clock but not disclosing any other details. That's a problem I will deal with later.

Soon enough, we're escorted to an empty classroom where Coach Jensen, the wrestling coach and health teacher, is our designated detention supervisor. *Poor guy must have lost a bet.*

Corey sits at his desk, his pencil tapping rhythmically against the wooden surface. Though he appears nonchalant, I can sense his irritation at being forced to spend his afternoon here.

"Thanks," I mutter weakly as I sit in front of him, trying to keep my voice steady despite the sinking feeling in my stomach.

He gives me a confused look as the dark brown strands of hair fall over his forehead.

"You don't have to thank me," he says. "You were right."

"This whole thing is ridiculous," I say through gritted teeth.

The scent of his cologne fills my senses as he leans closer to me. It smells warm and masculine as it draws me in. "I like your feisty side," he says, and my heart rate skyrockets at his

proximity. But then, his tone turns more serious. “I like your shy side too.”

I try to maintain my composure, but he surprises me with his observations. “You act like you know me,” I say, trying to brush off his insight into my thoughts.

“I know you think the grass is greener anywhere but where you are,” he continues. “You think things would be easier if you were someone else. Maybe someone with a different past?”

His words strike a chord within me, and I can’t help but feel exposed in front of him. But before I can respond, he gestures around us at the mostly empty room. “But none of this will matter in the long run,” he says assuredly. “What these people think of you will be irrelevant.”

I shift in my seat. “It may not matter to you, but it matters to me right now,” I admit. “Every day feels like fighting not to be pulled under quicksand. I’m barely keeping my head above it. It’s like I can barely breathe. I’m so tired of it. I want things to be easier.”

His warm brown eyes meet mine sympathetically, “Do you really think your life would change if suddenly everyone adored you?”

I push a few strands of hair behind my ear and consider his question carefully. “I don’t know if my life would change, but it might be bearable if I wasn’t constantly gawked at like a circus freak,” I admit. “I hear all the whispers and stifled laughs.” Sighing, I decide to share more of my thoughts on the subject. “I thought I could just blend in, you know? Maybe people would just accept me and leave me alone. But that’s not happening. So maybe if I somehow changed their perception of me, I could finish high school in peace. It’s not about popularity. It’s about being *normal*.”

He sighs and turns to face me fully, leaning against his desk with a mischievous glint in his eyes. “Let’s test it out,” he says, a grin spreading across his face.

Confusion clouds my mind as I furrow my brow, “Test out what?”

“If being popular, or ‘normal,’ as you put it, makes you happier,” he replies slyly. “Let’s see if it makes things easier for you. Makes things more bearable.”

My heart starts racing at thinking about what he could have in mind. “How?”

“Simple,” he says, “You and I go out.”

My jaw drops in shock and disbelief. “What? Why?”

“Because appearances matter, right?” he responds with a shrug. “We’ll see if having me by your side changes anything.”

I shake my head, trying to dismiss the idea. “That’s a horrible idea, Corey Delacour,” I mutter while being met with a rush of excitement mixed with fear.

Corey’s deep laughter echoes through the room, making me feel both comforted and nervous. “Why do you use my full name?” he asks, his eyes sparkling with amusement as the corners crinkle from his broad smile.

“I don’t,” I protest, but then laugh as I realize that I always call him by both his names. He eyes me expectantly, his perfectly arched eyebrow raising in question. I feel myself blushing and cover my face with my hands. “Okay, fine, I do.” I giggle. “I don’t know why.”

Leaning closer to me, Corey whispers, “Come on, let’s do it.”

“Why would you want to put yourself in a position to be ridiculed?” I protest.

Corey shrugs. “I could care less. That’s what I’m telling you. It won’t matter, and it won’t make your life magically better,” he explains calmly, “but maybe you need to see that for yourself.”

Raising an eyebrow, I remain skeptical, “Are you bored? Is that it?”

With another casual shrug, he answers, “Just bidding my time until I can get out of here and play hockey. Why not run a little experiment?”

My stomach churns at the thought of him using me as some test subject. “Don’t you avoid girlfriends?” I blurt out without thinking.

An exasperated sigh escapes Corey’s lips. “Checking up on me, Ivy Owens?” he asks teasingly.

Rolling my eyes, I defensively cross my arms over my chest. “Hardly. It’s common knowledge around here.”

There is a brief moment of hesitation before Corey responds, “No, I generally don’t have girlfriends. I focus on hockey, but with you as my ‘girlfriend,’” he says, using air quotes, “some of the other girls around here might back off.” He pauses momentarily before adding, “Besides, you’re not expecting me to act like a real, devoted boyfriend. I don’t have to divert any focus. It’s for show.”

“How do we sell it?” I ask.

“By acting like a couple,” he answers, his eyes flickering towards mine.

“I am not having sex with you, Corey Delacour!” I whisper-shout, my cheeks flushing at the thought.

He lets out a hearty chuckle and holds up his hands in defense. “Woah, Ivy Owens. I didn’t say anything about that,” he smirks. “But we will have to spend some time together. Hold hands, maybe,” he suggests with a shrug. “And you have to come to my home games.”

“Maybe,” I reply skeptically. “I can’t believe I’m even contemplating this idea. It has disaster written all over it.”

“We’ll also have to kiss,” he adds, his mischievous glint returning.

“What? Kiss? Nope. No deal,” I argue firmly.

“You think it’s going to be that bad?” he jokes, feigning insult.

“No,” I say shyly with a shake of my head. “That’s not it.”

“Wait, have you ever been kissed before?” he teases, leaning closer.

I glare at him as my face grows warmer by the second.

“Well, well, well,” he says with a grin. “Looks like someone’s blushing.”

I resist the urge to roll my eyes again, “I’m not answering that.”

“But you just did,” he points out with a playful wink. “This is going to be fun.”

“My answer is no. I won’t fake date you. Let’s just drop it,” I say firmly, crossing my arms in front of me.

Coach Jensen hushes us, so I turn around to face the front. My intention is to begin the essay I’m supposed to write, but I can feel Corey’s eyes burning into the back of my head.

Soon, a crumpled piece of paper lands on the desk by my hand. I quickly hide it underneath my desk without looking and make a horrible attempt at a fake cough to disguise the sound of opening the note, earning me a chuckle from Corey behind me.

Unfolding the paper, I read the messy handwriting scrawled on it.

“Ivy Owens,

Will you fake date me?

Check here for yes and here for no.

P.S. Check yes. You won’t regret it.”

Damn, this charming bastard. I bite my lower lip while I consider his preposterous proposal. I mean, no good can come of this, right? Why would I ever entertain this idea? *You know why, Ivy. Over 6 feet of gorgeous, fabulous-smelling hockey player. And the chance to do something **normal** in your life.* Without allowing myself to overthink the situation, which is so unlike me, I check a box, fold the note, and drop it behind my back, over my shoulder.

Seconds later, I hear the paper rustle as Corey laughs, the confident chuckle of a man used to getting what he wants.

As 5 o'clock nears, I begin packing my things when Corey tugs on my hair to get my attention.

“What?” I asked, turning to face him.

“Just wanted to remind you to enjoy your last night of being single,” He laughs.

“So what do I call you? As your girlfriend?”

“Well, my teammates call me Delzy. My mom calls me Corey,” he replies smoothly.

I look at him expectantly, waiting for him to answer my question.

“But if I have my way,” he says with a mischievous grin, “you’ll call me Baby.”

Chapter 16

“Life In A Northern Town”

Corey - Age 18, 1988

I'm skating suicides tonight for being late to practice. Coach wasn't too happy that I missed the first thirty minutes due to detention.

“We gonna have an attitude problem, Delacour?” he yells as I skate from line to line, my legs threatening to give out at any moment. The rest of the team continues to practice without me, laughing and shaking their heads occasionally.

“No, Coach,” I answer breathlessly.

“You're this close to being picked up by a big program,” he yells, holding his fingers an inch apart. “I'll be damned if a sudden rebellious streak is going to ruin it. I better not hear about you mouthing off to any more teachers,” he says.

The sweat drips from my head in sheets, making it impossible to see clearly. “You won't, Coach,” I respond confidently. Hockey is more than just a game— it's my entire future, and I approach it with unwavering dedication. Most of the time. Today was a blip. One that I'm not sorry about, even though I'm about to throw up and then pass out. I can't let it happen again.

“Alright, get back to practice,” he says.

As we work on edge work drills, Taz takes advantage of the brief breaks to pry into my personal life. “So, what’s the deal with the new girl, seriously?” he asks with a smirk.

“She’s cool,” I reply, unwilling to divulge any details as I focus on weaving through the cones with agility.

Taz leans in, his voice low and mischievous. “So are you gonna boink her?” he asks, a devilish grin on his face.

“Why do you care so much about my sex life, Taz?” I shoot back without breaking my concentration.

“Just trying to crack the code of your smooth moves, Master Yoda,” he retorts with a playful laugh.

“You’ll never master my moves, Taz.”

“So if you’re after *Ivy*,” he says, emphasizing her name, “that means her little goth friend is fair game, right?”

“I suppose so.” I shrug. “But I don’t think she’s your type.”

Taz scoffs and makes a dramatic gesture towards himself. “All women are my type. Besides, have you seen that curvy little body?”

“Honestly, I should probably warn you away from this plan,” I say, “but I’m morbidly curious to see how it turns out.”

“Thanks for the support, Buddy,” he says.



Hot water cascades over my aching muscles as I stand in the shower, trying to wash away the exhaustion from the intense practice. My legs tremble with each step as I make my way to my locker, towel wrapped tightly around my waist.

As I approach, I see Doug Cruz standing at his locker, getting out of his gear. He had been talking to our coach after practice about something, no doubt trying to score some special treatment. I can’t stand the guy. He’s always been a cocky asshole, more focused on his success than the team’s.

He's the kind of guy who would gladly stab one of his players in the back if he thought it would get him ahead.

"So, I hear you've got your eye on the new girl at your school," Cruz says with a smirk, not even bothering to glimpse at me. Cruz goes to a different school, some fancy private school that fits his tight-ass personality perfectly.

"Is that what everyone's saying?" I respond, keeping my voice neutral.

"Yeah," he confirms, still avoiding eye contact, "Rumor has it she's a total whacko."

I clench my fists and try to keep my cool. *How does he know anything about her? And why is he so interested?*

"How would you even know that?" I question, struggling to contain my anger.

"You're not the only one who fucks girls at your school. Some of them like to talk," he says, and I can see him shrug his shoulders out of the corner of his eye.

Before I can respond, he continues, "Does she know you're nothing but white trash?" he taunts. The urge to punch him in the face is overwhelming. I can feel the blood rushing to my face. My palms start to sweat, and my breathing quickens.

"You think you're better than me because of where I'm from?" I spit out, my fists clenched at my sides.

He smirks, knowing he's struck a nerve. "Come on, Delacour," he taunts. "Everyone knows you're trailer trash. If it weren't for your mom spreading her legs for some glorified grease monkey, you'd still be living in that dump."

That's it. That's all it takes for me to lose control. In one swift motion, I launch across the locker room bench and tackle him into the lockers. He yells out in surprise as we crash against the metal, his body unprepared for my sudden attack.

"What the fuck is wrong with you?" he yells, trying to push me off.

"You want to fight? I'll shut your fucking mouth for good!" I yell back, pushing him against the lockers again. Cruz loses

his balance and slides down the lockers, his ass hitting the concrete floor of the locker room with a thud. The adrenaline in my veins is fueling my rage, and I don't care about anything else except making him swallow his words.

Before I can react, Taz is there. He grabs me and pulls me off Cruz, who's bleeding from a cut on the side of his eye. My heart is racing, and my hands are shaking as Taz holds me back.

Cruz stands up, his face red with anger.

"You're finished, Delacour," he screams "Coach will kick you off this team. Say goodbye to your dreams."

"Why would Coach kick him off the team when you're the one that attacked him?" Taz asks with a hint of humor in his voice.

"He attacked me!" he yells. "You saw it."

Taz shakes his head, "I didn't see anything except you mouthing off and then attacking our team captain."

Cruz's face drops as reality settles in. It's our word against his.

"Why don't you go cry to Daddy?" Taz says. "Maybe he'll buy you a yacht or something."

In a rage, he slams his locker shut and storms out of the locker room.

I collapse onto a nearby bench, trying to catch my breath and calm down. Taz joins me, placing a reassuring hand on my shoulder.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, I think so."

"That wasn't cool what Cruz said," Taz says. "But you can't let it get to you."

I let out a frustrated sigh. "I know."

"You've worked hard to get where you are on this team," Taz reminds me. "Don't let a douchebag like him ruin it for

you.”

He’s right, and I feel both resentful and determined.

“Try to get some rest tonight,” Taz advises before leaving the locker room. “Tomorrow’s a new day.”

As he walks away, I call out to him. “Hey, Taz. Thanks for having my back.”

“Always.”



Corey, Age 16 -1986

I’ve anxiously awaited my potential acceptance into the US Hockey League for the past few weeks. It’s the top-tier junior hockey program in the country, and it would be a dream come true to be a part of it. Countless hours of training and sacrificing blood, sweat, and tears have led to this moment.

The benefit of being where I currently live is that if I do make it onto the local league team, I won’t have to uproot my life and move away from home. I can continue at my high school and even complete independent study while traveling for games. The program is growing, but there are only ten teams in the country right now, so it’s amazing that I might be able to stay here. However, it also means leaving behind my high school team. It’s a harsh reality, but at this level, we prioritize playing at a higher level and can’t risk getting injured by also playing for the high school team.

This is just the beginning. If I get drafted into college or even the pros, I’ll have to adapt to new teams and leave behind the bonds I’ve formed with my teammates. That’s the world of professional sports, but it’s all worth it for the chance to play at the highest level possible.

Coach Dupree motions for me to come over as the team finishes practice. I skate towards him, trying to hide my excitement and nerves. He always stands with his whistle around his neck and his clipboard in hand.

“Hey, Coach,” I say, panting from the intense workout. “What’s up?”

“Just wanted to check in on how you’re feeling these days,” he asks, giving me a small smile.

I take a deep breath and offer him a confident nod, “Feeling great, Coach. Ready for whatever comes next.”

“I’ve had my eye on you since you started working out here,” he begins, making my heart race. “You came to us with plenty of natural talent, that’s for sure.”

My body tenses as I wait for the “but” to come, unsure of what he’s getting at.

“But what really impresses me is your hard work and determination,” he continues. “You’ve been improving and becoming a natural leader on the ice. And not just physically but mentally too. Kid, you have unlimited potential.”

As his words sink in, I can feel a rush of emotions wash over me. This could be it— my dreams coming true or a crushing disappointment.

My grip tightens on my hockey stick, and I can feel my hand beginning to go numb inside my glove as my heart beats like a jackhammer in my chest.

“I want you to join the Mavericks, Corey. You’ll be playing for me in the junior hockey league.”

My legs wobble beneath me, but whether it’s from adrenaline or exhaustion, I can’t tell. I stare at him in disbelief, trying to process his words.

“Coach, are you serious?” My voice cracks, and I can feel tears forming in my eyes. “You mean it?”

He beams at me, a proud grin stretching across his weathered face. He pulls me into a strong embrace, patting my back with one hand while holding onto my shoulder with the other.

“You’ve earned this, Delzy,” he says, voice choked with emotion. “You’ll receive a letter from the association soon, but tell your teammates the good news for now.”

I skate away from him, feeling dazed and overwhelmed. I can't stop grinning as I approach my teammates, even as my eyes continue to mist. All those years of hard work and dedication have finally paid off. I'm going to be playing for the Merrimack Mavericks.

Chapter 17

“Ain’t Nobody”

Ivy - Age 18, 1988

The next day at school, I can’t shake off the surreal feeling of my conversation with Corey in detention yesterday. Did I imagine it, or did we agree to act like a couple? No, there’s no way. He probably wasn’t even serious.

Walking through the crowded halls, I spot Corey and his hockey buddies by the entrance to my first-period class. My heart sinks as I try to avoid eye contact and walk past them, but then his voice cuts through the noise, calling out my name. I stop in my tracks, unsure of what to do next.

“Ivy,” he repeats. “Wait up.” I try to turn and book it in the direction I came from, but get bumped back and forth like a ball in a pinball machine against other students. It doesn’t matter anyway, he’s too fast for me. His long legs effortlessly catch up to mine in one stride, and he steps beside me. “Hey,” he says with a smile. “How’s it going?”

“Fine,” I reply curtly, trying to speed up, but he matches my pace easily.

“Slow down,” he chuckles. “No one’s going to believe we’re going out if you run from me every time you see me.”

I stop abruptly and turn to face him, his beautiful face framed by unruly brown hair falling into his eyes.

“No one will ever believe it anyway,” I say with a hint of bitterness.

He cocks his head to the side, offering a small smile. “Why not?” he asks genuinely. “Just relax and go with it.” With that, he takes my books from my hand.

“What are you doing?” I ask, taken aback.

“Carrying your books,” he replies as if it’s the most normal thing in the world. “Come on, I’ll walk you to class.”

In stunned silence, I walk next to him through the crowded halls. People stop and stare, but Corey seems unfazed by the attention. My guess is he’s used to it.

As we approach my classroom, he stops and turns to face me, a soft smile on his lips. He hands me my textbooks, which I grab, flustered under his gaze. But then, as I turn away, he reaches out and gently tucks a loose strand of hair behind my ear, his eyes flicking down to linger on my lips for a moment before returning to meet mine. My heart races and I offer him a grateful smile before darting into the classroom, feeling overwhelmed by the lingering touch of his fingers on my skin.

“What the hell *was that?*” Sascha asks me as I slide into my seat. Today’s t-shirt is black, screen printed with Robert Smith’s face stretching across her chest and ‘The Cure’ printed above his inky, wild black hair. Even though the photo is black and white, you can make out his dark lipstick and eyeliner.

“What was what?” I ask, knowing she’s going to press the issue.

“Don’t act like the fucking captain of the Merrimack hockey team didn’t just walk you to class.”

“He was walking this way.”

“He was carrying your books.” When I offer no explanation she presses further. “He touched your hair and looked into your eyes all longingly and shit.”

“What? No, he didn’t,” I scoff.

“Dude, you know I will march my ass straight over to the hockey table at lunch and ask him myself if you don’t start

talking.”

“Alright, alright,” I whisper. “Just keep your voice down.”

“Spill,” she says quietly, leaning forward on her desk.

“We had detention yesterday, and we just kind of—“

“Boned?” she interjects.

“WHAT? NO!” I say a little too loudly, causing her to laugh.

“We just *talked*, and we have some things in common.”

“You?” Sascha pauses. “And Corey Delacour.” She pauses again. “What could you possibly have in common with that man other than you both think he’s hella fine.”

I can’t help but chuckle at her commentary, mostly because she’s right.

“I know you’re holding something back,” she says, “and I will find out.”

“You’re making a big deal out of nothing,” I tell her as I turn around to face the front of the class. But internally, I’m panicking because this plan will never work.

The halls are bustling with students rushing to their next classes. Somehow, I can avoid Corey by skillfully weaving through the crowd like a downhill skier fluidly working through a slalom between the next few classes, but lunchtime is different. I’m panicked at the thought of seeing him. I don’t know how to act around him, not that I ever have. I can only hope he and his friends left campus for lunch today.

Entering the cafeteria, I scan the tables and let out a sigh of relief when I don’t see their group anywhere. I settle into my seat and wait for my friends to join me. Suddenly, I hear the loud chatter and boisterous laughter of a group of guys entering the small space. I keep my head down, staring at the floor before me, hoping they won’t notice me. No such luck. With my eyes trained down, I see a large pair of men’s Adidas sneakers stop by my feet. *Crap.*

Corey stands there with his friends, gesturing towards the nearby tables.

“We’re sitting over there,” he says casually. His friends gape at him like he’s grown two heads, clearly confused.

“This is my spot,” I tell him. There’s no way I’m going to his table. “I’m just waiting for my friends to join me.”

He looks around the crowded cafeteria and then back at me. “Okay. That’s cool. I’ll sit with you,” he says, just as Sascha and Sarah make their way over to our normally quiet table, which loud hockey players have now taken over.

As they approach, their faces register shock.

“Ivy,” Sascha says, setting her tray on the table. “Why am I in an episode of the Twilight Zone?”

“Hey, Sarah,” Corey says to his cousin, who returns his greeting with a smile and a little wave. Then he stands up and extends his hand towards Sascha. “Hi, I’m Corey.”

Sascha eyes him skeptically but shakes his hand. Taz appears at her side, grinning from ear to ear. “And I’m Taz!” he announces with the enthusiasm of a newly adopted Golden Retriever.

“I know who you are,” she says flatly. “We’ve gone to school together since elementary school, Michael.”

One of the guys, who I think they call Garrison, smirks and chimes in. “Oh, shit. I forgot your name is Michael.”

“Listen up,” Taz says. “*Sascha* is the only person who can call me that. Anyone else tries it, and they’ll get an automatic ass beating.” He turns to Sascha, flashing her a playful smile, which she returns with narrow and skeptical eyes.

Leaning in closer to me, Corey whispers, “Can I get you anything?” His hand lightly rests on my lower back, and I can feel the warmth radiating through my body.

“No, I’m fine,” I answer quietly, fighting the instinct to pull away from his touch.

“I’m gonna go grab a sandwich or something,” he says. “I’ll be back.” I watch him walk away and then turn to see the incredulous look on Sascha’s face and the bemused grin on Sarah’s.

“Okay, spill it,” Sascha says.

I take a deep breath and decide to rip off the band-aid. “Corey and I are trying to get to know each other,” I admit, not daring to peer up from my lunchbox.

Sascha surprises me by responding with a nonchalant shrug. “That’s cool.”

I finally glance up, only to see a soft smile on Sascha’s face.

“It is?” I ask, feeling relieved.

“Sure, why not?” she shrugs. “I told you when we met that as long as someone respects me, then I can respect them.”

“You don’t think it’s weird?” I question.

“Not really,” she replies. “You guys would make a cute couple. Just be careful.”

Sarah chimes in with her own opinion. “I think it’s cute, too.”

“But just so you know,” Sascha adds before taking a bite of her salad, “if Michael Tazman ever shows up at any social gatherings, count me out.”

Chapter 18

“Take On Me”

Corey - Age 18, 1988

This is going as I expected it would. My friends act like nothing's different as we sit at Ivy's usual table. They're cracking jokes and teasing each other like normal, but I know they'll ask me about sitting with Ivy later. I won't give them much information, but since I never do, no one will ever guess this arrangement is fake.

I still don't have the answer to Ivy's question yesterday. *Why am I doing this?* All I know for sure is that almost every time I see her, she seems sad, and for some reason, that bothers me, and last night I could barely sleep because I was thinking about our arrangement, and not much besides hockey excites me.

The girls from our usual group are gawking at us from their table, some sneering in our direction. They appear dumbfounded by our change in lunchtime routine. It's worth it for that reason alone.

Ivy's quiet, her food untouched in front of her. She looks shocked by the action taking place around us. Garrison and Landry practically shout at one another over a video game while Sascha shoots Taz angry stares from across the table. I make a mental note to ask him about that later.

“Are you not hungry?” I ask, trying to break the tension.

She shakes her head, her long honey-blonde hair swishing from side to side. “Not really,” she says with a small smile.

“What do we have here?” I ask, leaning over her lunch spread on the table. A neatly made turkey sandwich sits next to sliced apples and baby carrots, a bag of chips propped up against them. A red and silver Capri Sun pouch peeks out from under the sandwich. My eyes fall on a stainless steel thermos, its contents unknown.

“And what’s in the thermos?”

“Probably soup,” she answers.

I raise an eyebrow, playfully teasing her. “And you’re not going to eat it? Can I have it?” My grin widens as I lean in closer.

“You want my soup?” she questions, blinking her eyes and looking adorably innocent.

“Ivy, I’m a growing boy,” I joke. “Plus, couples share food.” I give her a mocking smile as I unscrew the lid and smell the chicken noodle delight that invades my nostrils. “Now, this is what I’m talking about,” I tell her before finishing most of her lunch.

As the lunch period ends, I lean in close to whisper in her ear, “Thanks for lunch.” Before she can react, I lightly brush my lips against her cheek, causing her to let out an adorable little surprised squeak. As she starts to pull away, I pull her closer, determined to make this public display of affection work. After all, we’re both new to this whole couple-thing. Might as well go all in.

“I have to hit my locker before English,” I inform her with a smile. “See you in class.” Turning to my friends, I add, “Come on, boys.”

Ivy is already seated in her usual spot up front when I enter the classroom a few minutes later. I walk over to her desk and ask if she wants to sit with us in the back today. She hesitates momentarily, glancing back at the group of popular girls who usually occupy those seats. Finally, she shakes her head. I

understand her hesitation - it's not easy being around those girls, but if Ivy wants a taste of popularity, she'll have to learn how to deal with them.

Class begins, and we're all settled in when an elderly woman enters the room, looking flustered and confused. It's obvious - we have a substitute teacher today. Having a sub means a free period to goof around and do anything we want. This particular sub is wearing white pants that are a bit too snug and a red sweater with shoulder pads that make her look more like one of my teammates than a teacher. Her pink lipstick is slightly smudged as she calls the attendance roll. The class takes advantage of the situation, becoming louder and rowdier than normal.

Mrs. Simmons writes her name on the chalkboard and then turns to address us, speaking loudly to be heard over the racket.

"Class, please listen," she says. "Mr. Payton would like you to work on your project during this class. Please break into your assigned groups and get started."

I waste no time grabbing my notebook and moving to the desk next to Ivy's.

"What about the rest of the group?" she asks.

"If they want to join us, they can. We're the best in the group, anyway," I joke, causing her to chuckle. It's not long before Taz and the others also move closer to us.

"So, who besides me hasn't even read the book yet?" Taz says.

When no one else offers any support, I chime in. "Looks like you're the only loser, Taz."

He shrugs. "I'll get *Cliff's Notes*."

"Why do we have to do it when Ivy said she can do better than us anyway?" Amber chimes in with a mocking tone.

"That's not what I said," Ivy responds defensively.

"Ivy could easily handle this assignment independently, but it's a group project, and we all need to contribute," I interject.

“I wrote a few things down,” Ivy starts, but as she reaches into her backpack to grab some notes, a small doll tumbles onto the floor. Her face flushes with panic, and she frantically tries to shove it back into her bag, but not before Amber and her friends take notice.

“Is that a Strawberry Shortcake doll?” Amber hisses, laughing with her friends. “Aren’t you, like, eighteen?” she mocks.

Ivy jumps up, fumbling with her backpack, and rushes toward the front door. “I don’t feel well,” she says to our substitute teacher, who is too busy reading *Ladies Home Journal* to notice what’s happening.

“Stop it, Amber,” I say.

“Come on, Corey,” she laughs. “She totally wiggled out. Even you have to admit that’s pathetic.”

“You could have just ignored it,” I reprimand, throwing my backpack over my shoulder. “But you couldn’t resist being ugly. Again.”

I’m right behind Ivy as we leave the room, not giving anyone a chance to stop me. I catch a glimpse of her backpack disappearing into the women’s restroom.

“Ivy,” I say firmly, knocking on the door with three sharp taps. “Come out so we can talk.”

“Just leave me alone,” she snuffles from inside.

“If you don’t come out in three seconds, I’m coming in. I’m serious.”

“I don’t need a fake boyfriend right now, Corey,” she snaps back.

“Three,” I start counting down.

Silence.

“Two.”

Silence again.

“One.” I push on the door, but Ivy opens it before I can enter. Her eyes are red, and tears glisten on her cheeks. She tries to push past me in embarrassment, but I grab her elbow and turn her to face me.

“I’m not here as your fake boyfriend,” I state. “I’m here as your friend.”

“I can’t go back in there,” she says weakly.

“Then let’s not go back,” I reply. “I know the perfect place we can go.”

She lets out a sigh and tilts her head, trying to decide whether or not to trust me.

“Please,” I plead, giving her my best puppy dog eyes.

“Fine,” she gives in. “As long as we don’t have to stay here. Let’s go.”

The drive takes about ten minutes, spent mostly in silence except for when Bon Jovi is “Livin’ on a Prayer.” Finally, we reach our destination when I see the big sign that reads “Donnelly Ice Center.”

As we approach the large building, she takes in its imposing structure. “Is this where you play hockey?” she asks, her voice tinged with curiosity.

“It is,” I reply, shifting the car into the park. I hurry around to open her door and she slides out apprehensively. “There’s the ice we practice and play on in the arena area, and there’s a separate rink for young kids and open ice time for people to skate.”

“What are we doing here?” she asks, scanning the surroundings.

“This is my sanctuary,” I explain, gesturing towards the building. “A place where I can clear my mind and be completely present. I thought I’d loan my sanctuary out to you for the afternoon.”

“That’s very sweet, but I don’t skate,” she confesses.

“That’s alright. I’ll teach you,” I say, nudging her with my hip. “Trust me.” She looks skeptical but follows me anyway.

Entering through a side door, we enter a quiet, peaceful atmosphere. This is my favorite time to be here before it’s open for practices, and the ice has just resurfaced. The stillness allows me to focus solely on the ice below. My senses are heightened as I take in the cool bite of the air on my face, the scent of rubber-coated flooring mixed with a hint of musk from the locker rooms. This place is home to me.

“I can’t go out there, Corey,” she protests. “I don’t even have skates.”

“Extra pairs are lying around somewhere,” I assure her with a smile.

“I can’t,” she snaps suddenly, surprising me with her sudden change in demeanor.

Confusion etches across my brow. “Why not?”

“Nevermind. It’s stupid,” she mutters, shaking her head rapidly.

I take her hands in mine, urging her to open up. “Please tell me.”

Ivy hesitates for a moment before speaking. “It’s just...it’s like I’m *always* walking on thin ice. My footing is never steady and could give out at any moment. I don’t like not feeling in control.”

Her small hands quiver as I take them in mine, the cold rink air biting at our skin. Her blue eyes are wide and unsure as she looks up at me. “Instead of fighting against the ice or fearing it,” I say, my voice steady and reassuring, “I’m going to teach you not just how to maneuver on it but how to dance on it.”

“I can’t do that,” she says, shaking her head.

“You can. I have more control on the ice than anywhere else in my life. You can learn to do this. I promise.”

Ivy releases a sigh, but I spot a glimmer of hope and excitement in her eyes, and after a brief moment of hesitation, she nods in agreement. I rush to my locker, my skates clacking

against each other, echoing through the quiet rink as I locate a suitable set for Ivy among the neatly organized rental skates.

As Ivy kicks off her shoes and unlaces the skates, I watch her struggle to get her feet in them. Without hesitation, I put my skates aside and kneel before her. “Let me help,” I offer, looking into her eyes. The bright lights above reflect off the slick surface of the ice, casting an angelic glow on her face. Despite the chilly temperature, there is warmth between us as I gently guide her feet into the skates and secure them snugly around her ankles. With a grateful smile, Ivy stands up and waits for me to get my skates laced.

Once we’re ready to go, Ivy takes a few hesitant steps onto the ice, wobbling slightly before finding the wall. She takes a few steps, holding on to the wall, then tentatively pushes away from the wall testing her balance. When she falters, her eyes register fear, and she flails her hands, seeking back to the safety of the wall.

“It’s okay to hold on to the wall while you are just beginning,” I can’t help but show off, idling circles around her as she monkey-walks the rink’s perimeter. Little by little, she pulls away more and more from the wall. Her brow furrowed in concentration, she walks rather than glides on the ice, but this is progress. Seeing her determination and trust in me fills me with pride and excitement. This girl is so much stronger than she gives herself credit for.

With a confident smile, I skate a quick arc around the rink. When I reach her, I extend my hand, and she takes it with a hint of hesitation.

“Ready to dance?” I ask as we move to the center of the ice. Her body tenses initially, but I guide her gently as she gets used to the slippery surface.

“Relax,” I whisper, and she closes her eyes. My fingers lace with hers, locked around her waist, and we begin to move. As she gains confidence, I turn so we face each other and skate backward, still holding her close. She opens her eyes, and a wide smile spreads across her face as we glide on the ice.

The only sound in the rink is our breathing and the rhythmic scraping of our skates on the smooth ice. Ivy breaks the silence by asking, “Don’t you want to ask me about the doll?”

I pause our motion and meet her hesitant gaze. “Not unless you want to talk about it,” I assure her. When she doesn’t respond immediately, I add, “I’m here for whatever you need, but I’ll never pressure you to reveal anything before you’re ready.”

“But don’t you think you have a right to know who you’ve decided to ‘fake date’?” Ivy retorts.

“What I know,” I reply, “is that you’ve had a tough day. A tough week. Maybe even several tough years.” Ivy lets out a sigh of agreement. “So let’s just enjoy this moment, okay?”

Chapter 19

“How Will I Know”

Ivy - Age 18, 1988

I groggily roll out of bed too early on a Saturday morning, with the sun peeking through my curtains, and memories of yesterday flood my mind. Corey and I spent the afternoon together, and it felt like a dream I didn't want to wake up from. I can't believe how kind and understanding he was, especially knowing his reputation as a self-absorbed hockey player. Spending time with him showed me a different side that made me better understand why he suggested this fake relationship in the first place. He's more intelligent, more caring, and deeper than people give him credit for. He's more than just some good-looking hockey player.

The morning shift at work is missing the bustle and excitement of the evenings, and this slow pace is making it difficult to remain focused on the task at hand - checking all of the returned movies to ensure they're properly rewind.

“Be kind. Rewind,” I say to myself as I work with a smile on myself. At least Josh let me choose the movie today, so Ferris Bueller is enjoying his day off on the three screens around the store.

I promised Nat yesterday that we would go to the mall after I finished work, and five hours later, as we walk through the

familiar glass doors, I could sense the energy and buzz of people around us. The smell of freshly baked cinnamon rolls from the food court fills my nostrils. We head towards Contempo Casual, where Sascha's waiting for us.

Even though I've been home for two years, going anywhere alone with my sister is scary for both of us. What happened to me was not my fault, and as much as I understand it on a rational level, my heart hurts thinking about what it did to nearly four years of my life and my family's life as well. We know this is all part of getting back into life, and it's important that we do things independently, as any other sisters would do.

As we pass by the various storefronts and kiosks, I can't help but notice a sense of nostalgia for this place. When I first returned home, I spent my days between home and here, watching movies and observing the hustle and bustle of shoppers. My mom would bring me here, and I would eat a corn dog and drink a lemonade, and people would watch.

The mall is a microcosm of society, with people from all walks of life coming together in one place, and I think about that as I walk across the polished floors, determined to figure out where I belong in this new chapter of my life.

Sascha and I trail behind my sister as she flits from store to store, trying on clothes with reckless abandon. She finally stops in the music store, where Sascha breaks the silence.

"Are you okay?" she inquires.

I grimace, knowing the story about how 'Strawberry Shortcake went to school' has made its way through the rumor mill. "I'm fine. Just embarrassed," I admit with a sigh.

"Don't be," Sascha declares confidently. "Those people don't know anything about you. They don't matter."

"You sound like Corey," I comment with a small smile.

"Speaking of tall, dark, and handsome," Sascha teases, "I heard he stood up for you and lit into Amber yesterday."

"Those girls are so horrible."

“Vipers,” she responds, and I chuckle at the perfect description.

“Corey and I had a great afternoon,” I confess, a blush heating my cheeks. “He took me skating.”

Sascha’s eyebrows shoot up with interest, her eyes lingering on the record I hold. “I didn’t realize you skated,” she states.

“I don’t,” I tell her with a nervous laugh. “He’s teaching me.”

“Perks of dating a hockey player,” she teases.

“I have no idea what I’m doing, Sascha,” I admit with a shake of my head.

“You’re going out with Corey Delacour,” Sascha says, emphasizing his name with a sly smile. “What’s he like?”

“He’s sweet.”

“Oh, so sweet and dreamy,” she mocks, batting her eyelashes dramatically.

“Shut up,” I say playfully, pushing her shoulder. “Speaking of dreamy, what’s the deal with you and Taz?”

Sascha wrinkles her nose in disgust. “Ugh, Michael Tazman is the biggest jerk I’ve ever met. He’s the furthest thing there is to dreamy.”

“I sense a story there,” I prompt.

She shrugs nonchalantly, “Not really. He is a dickwad. End of story.”

I want to press her for more details, but as someone who values privacy, I know when to drop a subject.

After an hour of shopping with Sascha, we say goodbye to head home for dinner. My mom and I are setting the table when the phone rings. When Dad answers it, his brows furrow before he turns and stares at me, a look of confusion and amusement on his face.

“Ivy, the phone is for you,” he announces, setting the receiver on the table.

I approach the phone like it's a snake, coiled and ready to strike. "Hello?" I say cautiously.

"It's Corey," the masculine voice replies, causing my cheeks to flush with embarrassment. I gave him my number yesterday, but I didn't expect him to call.

"Um, hi," I reply nervously.

"What are you doing tonight?"

"Nothing," I respond because I never have plans.

"One of the guys on the team is having a party. Wanna go?" he asks, his voice filled with excitement.

My heart flutters at the thought of seeing him, but then he adds, "It'll be a good way to sell our relationship to people." Suddenly, the air is sucked out of the room as reality sets back in.

"I don't know about going to a party. It's not my thing," I tell him honestly.

"Me neither. We don't have to stay long," he reassures me. After mulling it over for a minute, I decide it's better if we meet somewhere. If he comes here to get me, my parents will have questions, and I don't want to deal with that.

"I'll meet you at the mall," I tell him.

"Are you sure? I can pick you up?" he offers.

"Positive," I answer before making the plans and hanging up. As I turn around, I'm met with three eager faces staring back at me. My sister can't contain her giggles as she teases, "a boy called Ivy."

"Relax, Owens family," I tell them with a small smile. "It's for a group project for school. Nothing more."

They visibly deflate in front of me. *Geez. No pressure, people.*

"Okay, Sweetheart," Mom responds with understanding.

I stand in front of the full-length mirror and run my hands over the fabric of my dress, trying to calm my nerves. It's a

delicate balance I haven't yet mastered— how to look cool without trying too hard. I hesitate and consider calling Corey back to cancel, but I know this was what I signed up for. This is part of the ruse I had agreed to to fit in. I take a deep breath and remind myself that it's only one night, and I need to see it through.



Corey's car pulls up beside mine, its dull blue paint job chipped and worn. He opens the passenger door for me, and a wave of familiar scents fills my nostrils - a mix of cologne, leather, and something uniquely Corey. He grins as I climb in, dressed in jeans and a well-worn baseball cap turned backward. This may be the most attractive he's ever looked, and I have to remind myself not to stare as I buckle my seat belt.

"The party's at Landry's place," he offers, revving the engine and pulling out onto the road, his voice laced with excitement.

My heart races with anticipation and nerves as we approach the house. It's a quiet neighborhood with cars parked on both sides of the street. Corey finds a spot, and as we get out of the car, I take in the unfamiliar scene as if it's one of my favorite movies.

I notice as we enter the house there are more people here than I imagined. It makes me feel better sticking close to Corey, knowing I'm out of place among the unfamiliar faces.

Everyone turns and gapes at us, probably wondering why we're together. Corey nods and greets people as we make our way through the crowd. The music is loud and pulsing, making it impossible to have a conversation without shouting, and I find myself winding my fingers with Corey's and squeezing until my fingers feel numb.

We go to the kitchen, where some of Corey's hockey teammates are gathered. They welcome us with smiles and I feel a bit more at ease in their familiar company. Corey offers

to get me a beer, but I decline. He grabs us both glasses of water, and I begin to relax, listening to the guy's banter.

Corey tenses next to me when a guy with black, cropped hair enters the room. He strides into the kitchen, making his way towards our group. He wears a cocky smirk on his lips. He holds a beer in one hand while the other is occupied with a can of chewing tobacco. His presence sets off warning bells in my head, and beside him, walking like she owns the place, is Amber, the kind of girl who would be drawn to someone like him.

"What's up, Fuckers?" he greets the group. *Charming*. Most of the guys give him a lukewarm welcome, but Corey and Taz stand shoulder to shoulder like a wall between me and him.

"You've got to be kidding me?" Amber sneers when she sees me standing behind Corey. "This has got to be some kind of joke."

"Your choice of date is the only joke here, Amber," Taz smirks.

"Fuck you, Taz!" she snaps back, but he doesn't appear bothered at all.

"Did you bring your little doll to the party, Ivy?" she jeers.

"You should leave," Corey interrupts, his arms crossed tightly over his chest. His jaw clenches as anger radiates off him. That's all it takes for the guy she's with to jump into the conversation.

"She's eighteen years old, bringing a doll to school," he sneers, sizing up Corey as they face off. "The girl is a mental case."

"I don't care if she brings a fucking Cabbage Patch Doll and wears it as a backpack," Corey snaps back, his fists clenching at his sides. "You won't ever talk about her like that again."

"Chill out, Delacour," the guy chuckles. "It's cool that you've taken on a charity case."

"What the fuck did you just say?" Corey explodes, shoving the guy in the chest.

“You have a hard-on for toxic waste,” he replies with a smirk.

“You know what I have a hard-on for, Cruz? Taking that doll and beating your ass with it,” Corey retorts with venom. “Yeah, that gets me nice and hard.”

“Alright, I’ve had enough of this shit, Cruz,” Landry interjects, stepping between the two guys. He’s a big guy, and everything gets quiet when his voice gets loud. “Get the fuck out of my house. You don’t belong here.”

Cruz holds his hands up defensively, trying to play innocent.

“It’s cool, man,” he claims. “You two make a cute couple. Weirdo and White Trash. You’re like a crime-fighting duo,” he mocks. “Catch you on the ice, Delacour.” He drops his beer can on the ground and walks out the door.

“Well, isn’t he a breath of fresh air?” I joke, and all of the guys laugh in response. The tension that had been present thirty seconds ago begins to dissipate.

“I think we’re gonna take off,” Corey tells his friends. They say their goodbyes, and we make our way to the door, but not before we hear the shriek of a drunk Viper in our vicinity.

“I’m so over this little act. She’s mental! There is no way you two are a couple!”

Stacy’s piercing voice cuts through the crowded party, making me freeze in place. She stands before me, her arms crossed and her face twisted with disgust. I step back, not wanting to be involved in this drama. Corey instinctively steps in front of me, his broad shoulders shielding me from her venom.

“Yeah, we’re a couple,” Corey affirms, narrowing his dark eyes in her direction.

“I don’t buy it,” she sneers.

Corey sighs and shakes his head, “That’s not our problem.”

Stacy’s eyes narrow as she issues her challenge. “If you’re really a couple, then prove it. Kiss each other.”

Corey rolls his eyes, exasperated by her behavior, “See, here’s the thing, Sissy-”

“It’s Stacy!” she snaps, correcting him.

“Whatever,” Corey says dismissively. “We don’t need to appease you or anyone else. Your opinion of me or Ivy doesn’t matter.”

She looks into the group surrounding us with a smug smile and contends, “I knew it. They’re not even a real couple. Maybe he’s joined that weird cult of hers.” She flips her long, brown hair over her shoulder and juts out her hip confidently.

I’ve quickly become accustomed to people talking about me and making lame assumptions, but the moment she brings Corey into it, my anger ignites. I find myself stepping out from behind him and facing her, a mere inch from her face.

“Is that what you need to see?” I ask, my voice trembling with anger.

She raises an eyebrow mockingly, “Yes, that’s exactly what *we all* need to see.”

I turn toward Corey, and our eyes meet. I shiver at the intensity of his gaze as he looks into my eyes. My determination is evident. We briefly discussed kissing but as more of a joke than anything else. Corey has allowed me to set the rules for our fake relationship, and now, I want to change them. I study his deep brown eyes, like melted dark chocolate, and nervously bite my lip.

“Ivy, you don’t have to do this,” Corey whispers.

“But I want to,” I reply, stepping closer to him. I wait for him to take the lead, knowing I don’t know what I’m doing.

I exhale, and my gaze drops to his mouth, perfectly shaped and full. My heart pounds with anticipation, longing to feel his lips against mine.

Corey’s hands slide onto my hips, pulling me closer. I rest my hands on his chest, molding my hands to the hard muscles beneath his shirt. I tip my toes as he leans toward me, his warm breath tinged with the scent of cinnamon gum and boy.

The anticipation of this moment sends tremors of excitement and nerves through my body. I inhale and hold my breath as our lips finally meet.

At first, his lips press against mine lightly, causing me to melt into the sensation. The sound of the party, the gasps, and the ever-present judgment fall away as we become lost in one another. Corey shifts his head slightly, deepening the kiss as he presses more firmly. There's a warmth and softness to his lips as he parts mine with a swipe of his tongue.

Butterflies explode in my stomach, and heat courses through my body as our tongues tangle together slowly. I instinctively open my mouth wider to deepen the kiss, enjoying the gentle and soft pressure of his lips against mine. When his tongue enters my mouth, I tentatively meet it with my own.

He continues to explore my mouth for several seconds before pulling back, sucking gently on my lower lip as he does, and ending the kiss the way it started, with soft closed lips pressing against mine softly.

I can't help the smile that breaks across my lips as we pull away. Behind me, Stacy utters, "Barf me out," as she stomps off, and the crowd that has witnessed the moment begins to disperse.

Taz drums Corey on the back, laughing wildly.

"Righteous! You showed them," he professes before he walks away, announcing that he needs another drink.

Corey reaches for my hand and tugs me after him, his long legs setting the pace as we weave through the backyard and around the side of the house. My heart races as I struggle to match his strides, wondering where he's taking me. When we stop behind a large tree, he turns to face me, his expression filled with regret and sadness. "I'm sorry," he mutters, running a hand through his messy brown hair. "That wasn't supposed to happen."

My cheeks flush at the memory of our first kiss in front of his friends and some mean girls from school. "I asked you to kiss me," I murmur, looking down to hide my embarrassment.

Corey lifts my chin with his hand, forcing me to meet his gaze. His eyes are softer now.

“I know. You’ve already lost so many choices in your life, and your first kiss shouldn’t have been another one taken from you.”

“It’s okay,” I say, feeling a mix of gratitude and nervousness at his words, “It was...nice.”

A small smile tugs at Corey’s lips as he leans against the side of the tree.

“It was nice,” he agrees. “But next time I kiss you, it will be just us, and it will be better than nice.”

Chapter 20

“Let It Whip”

Corey - Age 18, 1988

The ride to Ivy's car at the mall was filled with heavy silence, each of us lost in our thoughts. My hands gripped the steering wheel tightly, my knuckles turning white from the intense pressure. My mind replayed the events of the party repeatedly, unable to shake off the lingering unease that settled in my gut. Tonight had been a disaster, not remotely close to how I had planned it. I had hoped for a simple gathering where Ivy could get to know some of the guys, and we could grab a bite to eat afterward. But as usual, Cruz managed to ruin everything. He had no business being at that party, let alone saying what he did about Ivy.

I pulled up beside Ivy's car and stepped out, feeling a pang of guilt weighing heavily on my chest. She hopped out of the passenger seat, her long hair tousled from playing with it nervously. A small smile graced her lips, but I could see a hint of sadness in her eyes. We walked towards her car, and I couldn't shake off the unsettling thought that I had crossed a line tonight.

The way she looked at me with those piercing blue eyes, her tongue darting out to wet her lips, made me lose all self-control. At that moment, it was just me and Ivy in the crowded room, our connection overpowering any disapproving stares

from our friends. And as our lips met for an electrifying kiss, I knew deep down that I couldn't regret it even if I tried because it felt so irresistibly right. Our bodies were molded together perfectly.

I wish it had been under different circumstances. I meant what I said when I told her I took something away from her. The next time will be different, I'll make sure of it.

So much has already happened tonight that I didn't want to complicate things any further, so I gave her a quick kiss on the cheek before she got in her car. I mentioned that we have an open practice tomorrow and invited her to come. Hopefully, she won't become a witness to me stabbing Cruz with my skate, but something tells me if I did, she wouldn't mind so much.



Our skates scrape against the ice as we start our warm-up drills, the sound echoing through the mostly empty arena. Now and then, a few people trickle in to watch our practice.

Coach likes to have open practices occasionally to keep us on our toes and prevent any slacking off. Today there are a couple of other coaches watching from the stands, along with friends and family members. I've only ever invited my mom before, so it's strange to see Ivy and her friend Sascha enter the arena. Sascha looks less than thrilled to be here - she's bundled up in a black coat, clutching a steaming styrofoam cup of coffee with both hands.

I'm not surprised, but Cruz was a no-show for practice today. I'm willing to bet he's nursing a hangover from last night. What a pathetic excuse for a teammate. It infuriates me that someone like him gets to be on this team while countless others would do anything for the chance.

I glide past Ivy on the ice, flashing a grin as I pass. Her eyes light up with both excitement and curiosity. She mentioned that this is her first time watching hockey, so I can only imagine the thrill she must be feeling. The energy of the sport

is palpable - from the vibrations that pulsate through the ice to the crowd's roaring cheers. As we go through our drills, I can see Ivy's gaze darting back and forth, taking in every exhilarating moment.

I'm especially confident and focused today because I want to impress the cute spectator in the stands. Taz shares my energy since he's skating with noticeably more intensity than usual. He glides past the girls, and Ivy gives him a friendly wave and smile while Sascha flips him off, and he laughs, returning the hand signal. I still have to get to the bottom of the bad blood between those two.

We start our session with passing lane drills, the sound of skates scraping against the ice filling the air. The tension builds as we move on to short one v two games, each player fiercely determined to come out on top. As the intensity rises, I'm excited by a sense of anticipation for Ivy to witness this side of the game. I suspect she'll appreciate the raw physicality and strategy behind every play, and I'm eager to showcase my playing style to her. The ice soon becomes a battleground as we transition into contact drills, bodies colliding and muscles straining as we fight for possession of the puck. This sets us apart from other sports, and I can't wait for Ivy to experience it firsthand.

Next are some basic checking drills. Each movement is deliberate, focused on harnessing the power of our lower bodies and legs to displace our opponent from a held space. Taz and I are matched up for this drill, facing off in a determined stance. We collide, and I'm met with the strength and determination of his movements, but I'm able to use my explosiveness to win all three rounds.

Coach's whistle echoes through the rink, signaling the start of board-checking drills. Learning to take a hit against the boards without getting injured is crucial in hockey. In the heat of the moment, it's easy to get caught up in the adrenaline and not align your body correctly, so practicing this drill is important for muscle memory.

I'm up first, my heart racing with nerves and anticipation. I position myself tight against the boards, the cold glass against

my back. My inside foot, knee, and hip press against the hard surface. I focus on keeping my knees bent and my back straight, knowing this will protect me from injury. Coach signals for Slawson to initiate the check, and I brace myself for impact. As he charges me, I turn my shoulder and hip towards him, ensuring those areas would take most of the force. I keep my chest, stomach, and ribs protected, holding my breath and tightening my muscles as he slams into me. I carefully avoid ducking, knowing that could leave my head vulnerable to being crushed between his body and the unforgiving boards. He makes contact, and I shift my weight off my inside leg to lessen the blow. Per usual, it sounds worse than it is, and I glide away no worse for the wear.

We run through the drills for several minutes, sweat beading on our foreheads and muscles burning with each movement. When I pause to catch my breath, I look over at Ivy. Her cheeks are flushed, and her eyes are shining with excitement. Clearly, she isn't intimidated by the game; if anything, the challenge invigorates her. A surge of admiration and attraction washes over me as I watch her. I like this look on her. A lot.

We finish up practice with a series of shots at the net. Exhausted from the intense workout, my legs are like lead weights as I take my turn. Coach, known for his flashy displays during open practices, put on a show today. Not that I'm complaining since Ivy was watching from the sidelines.

I skate over to where she's sitting and ask her to wait so we can chat after. The anticipation builds in me as I can't wait to hear her thoughts. Since this is such a huge part of my life, if it's something she hates, it will be a problem. I sensed that it's not an issue because of how her eyes lit up as she paid attention to everything we were doing for an hour and a half.

After showering quickly and changing, I meet her at the front of the building, where she stands, waiting and shifting from foot to foot. Sascha is with her, looking amused and yet annoyed as normal.

"Hey, Ivy Girl," I exclaim as I approach her.

“That was amazing, Corey!” she gushes without saying hello. I chuckle and sweep her into a hug, lifting her off her feet. Her little gasps and giggles never fail to make me smile. Those little surprised noises whenever I do something that catches her off guard are quickly becoming one of my favorite things about her.

“Do you want to grab something to eat?” I offer.

“I’d love to, but I have to go to work,” she says with a small pout.

“What movie are you planning on watching at work today?” I ask.

She tilts her head and taps her finger against her lips in thought. “Something with hockey in it,” she replies with a mischievous grin.

“Good choice,” I say, matching her grin. “Can I call you later?”

“I’d like that,” she says with a sweet smile. As we part ways, I feel light and happy, more than I have in a long time.

Chapter 21

“Alive And Kicking”

Ivy - Age 18, 1988

School is different as I walk through the hallways today; the shift in the atmosphere is palpable. Instead of receiving stares of disgust like I'm used to, there's a newfound curiosity in people's expressions. Some smile at me and offer friendly waves or greetings, which rarely happens. I have to admit, it's a little unsettling. What's changed? I'm left to assume that what happened at the party the other night has made its way through the ever-expedient rumor mill, and while what that guy Cruz said was hurtful, the fact that Corey and the rest of the guys stood up for me seems to have made other people more willing to be kind, at least for now. I've learned better than to trust it long-term.

I shut my locker with a loud clang, mentally preparing for my first period. Suddenly, I feel someone's curious gaze on me and turn to see Sascha staring at me with raised eyebrows.

“Seems everyone's heard about your wild weekend,” she says teasingly.

I roll my eyes and reply, “You know how gossip spreads like wildfire in this school.”

We stroll side by side toward our first-period classes, talking about nothing in particular. Suddenly, I come to a halt and

pivot to face my friend.

“Hey, did you have a good time at practice?” I inquire.

She pauses, looking surprised. “Actually, I did,” she admits. “No one is more surprised by that than me, but it was cool.”

I raise an eyebrow curiously. “And what about watching Taz?” I prod.

Her face lights up with a mischievous grin. “Oh, the best part was when everyone else slammed him into the boards,” she declares with glee.

“Sash,” I say tentatively, “do you think you could ever tell me what went down between you two?”

She avoids my gaze, her lips pressing into a thin line.

“I’ll tell you all about my time in the cult if that will help,” I tease, relieved when she finally looks at me, trying to lighten the mood. “But seriously, I want to understand.”

Her shoulders shrug noncommittally. “We were close friends as kids, but he changed as we got older. He became more popular and found new friends. It was like he forgot about me completely. Remember when he introduced himself to us in the cafeteria? Like we had never known each other.”

I nod, understanding now why she seems hesitant to talk about it.

She shrugs, “He was a different person back then.”

“But weren’t we all different people back then?” I ask.

“Of course,” she replies with a nod. “But the essence of the person stays the same, no matter how much we change on the surface. Michael used to be kind and caring, but now he’s another popular guy who ignores people like me.” Her sadness is palpable. Sascha wears her tough armor the same as her eyeliner, thick and unyielding, but beneath it beats a sensitive heart.

“Look, he’s not the first friend I ever lost, and I’m sure he won’t be the last. I guess he was more important or special to me than I ever was to him.”

I reach out and place a comforting hand on her arm. “I understand,” I tell her. “People I was friends with before I was kidnapped didn’t recognize me when I came back. They didn’t know what to say to me or how to act, so they eventually quit saying anything. They quit calling. Quit trying to come around. It hurt,” I admit. I link my arms with hers as we continue to walk towards class. “But look at it this way. Now you have me.”

A small smile tugs at the corner of her lips as she quips, “And aren’t you just a little ball of sunshine?”

“I used to be,” I reply. “And I’m working on getting back there. Consider me the yin to your yang.”

We say our goodbyes, and I go to class, taking my usual seat near the front.

A couple of people smile and wave as they walk by me. Even Jennifer, one of the Vipers, greets me on her way to her desk. The feeling is surreal. It makes me uncomfortable in a different way than being gawked at. I don’t trust these people, and I’m not sure what they want from me, but Corey was right when he said spending time with him would raise my popularity. Is that all it took? Going out with the hockey team captain has made people forget all about my past. I wish it worked the same way for me.



Ivy- Age 16, 1986

Ever since I was forcefully taken from my home and brought here, I’ve been stuck in a constant state of dissociation. I walk around in a dreamlike fog where I’m floating above myself and watching everything happen from a peaceful haven no one can touch. That haven exists only in my mind, and I have to guard it, or I might go crazy, but even that is starting to crumble.

Auron talks about The Voice in the Sky and how we are all here for a greater purpose, but his words hold no weight. He

can never answer us about our fate or what's to come. Any questioning or doubt is met with anger and deflection. It's becoming clear that something sinister is happening here. Auron and some of the others are acting paranoid. I've heard them talk of moving the commune. I can't help but wonder if people from outside have discovered this place.

I haven't been interested lately in trying to unravel the truth. At some point, I started robotically moving about my days, staying in that safe place locked inside my mind, even as my body did menial tasks around the commune.

I'm assigned to work in the main building today. After cleaning up the waiting area and polishing the furniture in Auron's office, I notice a notepad on the coffee table and reach for it. Underneath, there's a magazine with a date on the cover: July 28, 1986. I feel my hands shake as I pick it up and study it closely, as if it holds all the answers in the world. And in a way, it does. According to the date, I've been here for nearly four years.

The room starts to spin, and I fear that I might faint. *How is this possible?* I see my reflection changing daily when I braid my hair in the dingy bathroom mirror, but I never realized how much time had passed. My birthday is June 26th, which means I'm 16.

Two terrifying realizations hit me at once. First, I gave up and stopped fighting back; that ambivalence has stolen years from me. The second is that I'm approaching the age where girls like me disappear without a trace. Time is running out for me, and I need to find a way out of this place before it's too late, even if it means risking everything.



The familiar routine of taking walks has returned to me, a balm for my restless mind. Each step brings me closer to potential escape routes, however unlikely they may be. But the mere act of imagining freedom fills me with hope.

Today is the day the dairy delivery truck arrives, and I eagerly anticipate its rumbling engine. As the afternoon wears on, I finally see the gates open, and the truck slowly approaches me. One of the young girls approaches, eager to help, but I kindly dismiss her. This is something I need to do alone.

The man with gentle eyes greets me with a warm smile as he steps out of the truck and unlocks the back door. A sense of nostalgia washes over me as I hear the radio playing inside. The soft strains of a slow, soothing song fill the air, unfamiliar yet comforting. I miss music, even if it's only playing in my mind. I pause and get momentarily lost in the lyrics, feeling that fate is responsible for this particular song being played.

The singer's voice carries quietly through the air, a whisper into my heart. His lyrics paint a picture of despair and destruction. He sings of our actions when faced with utter chaos and the destruction of our dreams. Who will come to our aid when there is no one left? The chorus tells us that it will be up to us to emerge from the wreckage and find our way to the other side.

His words grip my soul, stirring feelings of determination and resilience, urging me to take my next step forward. The melody is like a beacon in the darkness, guiding us toward hope and salvation.

As the driver unloads the crates, I scan the area for potential witnesses. The words resonate with me immediately. I see it as a sign and know I'm supposed to do what I'm about to do. Reaching into my pocket, I pull out a small folded note and slip it into his hand as he hands me an ice cream. His eyes widen with surprise, but he quickly glances around before subtly shaking his head, warning me to avoid drawing attention to our exchange. All I can do is hope that when he reads the note, it will ignite some flicker of understanding in him. I couldn't write much since "Mother" was constantly watching us, but those three words scrawled in my handwriting are all I could manage:

Please help me.

Chapter 22

“Nothing’s Gonna Stop Us Now”

Corey - Age 18, 1988

As another away game looms in the upcoming week, I can’t help but feel a twinge of melancholy. These trips are thrilling and freeing, a chance to escape from everyday life and immerse myself in hockey with my friends and teammates. But now, as I sit on the bus watching the familiar scenery pass by, I miss home more than ever. And let’s be honest, what I miss is Ivy. She’s been slowly opening up, finding her voice and standing up for herself, and seeing that light in her eyes is gratifying.

Despite her newfound confidence and tough demeanor, Ivy still carries a sense of unease when it comes to meeting new people. After everything she’s faced, it’s no surprise that she’s cautious and guarded, but she seems to relax a bit when others are genuinely kind to her without ulterior motives. It’s a small comfort in comparison to what she has endured. The Vipers seem to have backed off, at least for now. They haven’t invited her into their group but haven’t been outwardly hostile. I think that’s a win for Ivy and how she prefers it anyway.

When I called her the other night, I was wracked with nerves, which doesn’t happen to me often outside of

anticipating the first puck dropping. Her little sister answered, and her high-pitched giggles filled my ear before she passed the phone to Ivy. We chatted for a few minutes, and it dawned on me that I should take Ivy on a proper date, including meeting her family. Our relationship may still be classified as fake, but that doesn't mean I can't give her authentic experiences she may have missed out on. So far, our time together has been dictated by my interests, partly because I'm not sure what Ivy wants to do. I've never asked. *Wow. I'm a shitty boyfriend, fake or otherwise.*

The fourth-period bell echoes through the halls, and I dart to Ivy's locker, eagerly waiting for her. But she's nowhere to be found. My impatience grows, so I search for any areas I think she may be in. I finally spot her in the library, her head bent over a notebook, pen scribbling furiously across the page. When she looks up and sees me, her face lights up like a Christmas tree, and I can't help but grin back at her. She stands up from her chair and greets me with a warm hug, wrapping her arms tightly around my waist. We've come a long way in just a few short weeks.

I sit across from her as she fiddles with her books, tidying up the space.

"How have the last few days been?" I ask.

She sighs, stacking her books on top of one another. "Pretty good, I guess," she says with a nonchalant shrug. "Nothing too exciting is happening. Oh, but we're almost done with our English project."

"That's good," I offer.

"I'm still not a fan of the whole group project thing," she huffs.

"Can I take you out on Friday night?" I blurt out, surprising her. She peeks up, looking both weary and shocked.

"Take me where?" she asked, her innocence making me chuckle.

"On a proper date," I reply confidently.

Her eyebrows shoot up in surprise. "For real?"

“Yes, Ivy. For real,” I confirm.

I watch her bite her bottom lip anxiously, her eyes scanning the room as she tries to devise a plan for our date. “Where do you want to go?” I ask.

“I don’t know,” she admits, shaking her head. “I can’t decide.”

“Well, let’s think about it together,” I suggest, hoping to ease her nerves. “Tell me what you like to do, and we’ll figure it out.”

Her face scrunches up in thought as she gnaws on her bottom lip, “Will we be going anywhere where people will see us?”

“Why would you ask that?” My brows furrow in confusion.

“I just don’t know why you want to go on a proper date if no one is going to see it,” she explains. “What will I tell my parents?”

“This isn’t about that fake dating pact, Ivy,” I reassure her. “I genuinely want to take you out and do something fun. That’s what you tell your parents.”

She considers for a moment before speaking up again. “I love movies,” she says, a glint of excitement in her eye.

“Great,” I reply eagerly. “What else do you enjoy?”

A small smile forms on her lips as she thinks. “Ice cream,” she whispers.

“So, ice cream and the movies it is,” I declare with a grin, thrilled that we’re finally progressing. “Pick the movie and let me know,” I suggest.

“Can I pick Dirty Dancing or Mannequin?” she asks cheekily, the excitement on her face.

“Sure.” I shrug. “I love that stuff. I used to watch soap operas with my mom all of the time.”

“Me, too!” she shouts, then laughs at her overreaction.

“I’m up for anything, but I’d like to come to your house, pick you up, and say hello to your family.” Before she argues, I add, “That’s part of a proper date.”

Suddenly, her demeanor changes, and she bites her lip nervously. “There’s something you should know about my parents,” she says.

“Tell me,” I urge.

“They’re still not exactly in the best place.”

“What does that mean?” I ask.

She takes a deep breath before speaking again. “When I disappeared, it caused a lot of strain on them. I was gone for four years. Everyone thought I was dead,” she says, and my chest aches in response. “That kind of stress ruins marriages,” she continues. “They separated for a long time. My sister struggled with the guilt of me being taken and not her. As much as I lived as a shell of myself during that time, so did they.”

“Are they together now?” I ask her.

“Yes, they’ve been back together for over a year now,” she says. “My dad moved back in, and they went to counseling, but things are still strained sometimes. It’s like my whole family is learning to get to know one another again and how to be a family.”

“I think it’s great that everyone is willing to try,” I tell her. “I mean, I don’t even have a dad around.”

“You don’t?” she asks, confused.

“No. My dad took off on us when I was seven,” I tell her. “The guy you met at the car dealership is Alan, my stepdad.”

“Do you like him?”

“He’s cool and all, but he’s not my dad.”

“That must have been hard,” she says.

“You heard Cruz say that I grew up white trash—and he’s not wrong,” I tell her. “I spent the first thirteen years of my life

living in a trailer park. Sometimes we didn't even have enough food."

"I'm sure that must have been really difficult, Corey," she says with genuine empathy.

"It's nothing compared to what you went through," I tell her dismissively.

"It's not a contest. We've both had difficulties in our lives. Comparing them doesn't make one less valid than the other."

"So basically everybody's messed up and just trying to figure out their life?" I ask.

"Exactly." She chuckles.

"So then, we might as well get ice cream and watch a movie," I tell her.

Chapter 23

“More Than A Feeling”

Corey - Age 18, 1988

My stomach churns as I knock on Ivy’s door. I try to act cool and collected, but I have nerves inside. The door swings open and Ivy’s dad stands, his eyes scanning me up and down. He’s a big guy, not much taller than me but with broad shoulders and a slight paunch. I immediately observed the resemblance between him and Ivy.

“Hey there,” he says with a warm smile as he extends his hand. “I’m Paul. You’re the young man from the dealership. I recognize you.”

“Yes, Sir, I’m Corey,” I introduce myself and shake his hand. “Good memory. My step-father is Alan Finley, Finley’s Ford,” I clarify.

I’m welcomed inside, and as I step into the living room, I see Ivy’s mom, Irene, and her younger sister, Natalie, standing there with friendly smiles. Irene reaches out to shake my hand while Natalie waves excitedly.

Suddenly, Ivy appears next to me and touches my arm. “Everyone’s met now,” she says with a grin. “Let’s get going.”

“Maybe Corey would like something to drink?” Irene offers.

“That would be great,” I reply, causing Ivy to give me a dirty look which makes me laugh. I try not to show my nerves as I sit on the couch, surrounded by her family. I’d be nervous in this situation anyway, but knowing everything this family has gone through and how much trust they are placing in me amps up my anxiety.

Irene sits on the edge of the couch, her hands twisting and turning in her lap nervously. She mentions that she recently quit smoking after two decades and is still struggling to adjust.

My attention keeps drifting towards Natalie. She has bright eyes and a contagious laugh, and just looking at her makes me smile. She’s giddy with excitement for her sister’s date - maybe even more than Ivy herself. But as I look at her, I can’t help but think about the impact of Ivy’s abduction and how it must have affected Natalie. Though Ivy returned home almost two years ago, the trauma still lingers in their family.

“So you play for the Mavericks?” Paul asks.

“Yes, Sir,” I respond. “For about two years now.”

“That’s quite an accomplishment,” he says. “Are you hoping to go to the NHL?”

“That’s my goal,” I tell him.

“You know I haven’t been able to attend many hockey games,” he says. “But I’d like to.”

“I’d love for you guys to come out and watch a game,” I tell him.

“Can we go, Dad?” Natalie asks eagerly.

“Sure, Kiddo,” he replies.

Irene’s curious gaze lingers on Ivy and me as she asks, “Where will you two be going on your date tonight?”

“Ivy picked the plans for tonight, so it looks like we’re going to catch a movie and then go eat some ice cream,” I reply with a smile.

“That sounds like Ivy,” Natalie adds with a giggle.

We chat for a few more minutes until Ivy's parents appear comfortable enough to let her leave the house with me. We exchange our goodbyes, and Ivy rushes us out the door in a whirlwind.

Sitting in my car, she turns to me with an apologetic expression. "I'm sorry about all the questions."

"Don't apologize. They're awesome. I was excited to meet them," I reassure her. "You have a wonderful family."

"I do," she agrees. "Not exactly typical, I guess," she says with a pause.

"But whose family is?" I reply.

As we go to the theater, Ivy informs me she's chosen to see *Mannequin*. I don't mind a good romantic comedy, but the idea of a mannequin coming to life is more like a horror story.

The theater is mostly empty as we sit in the middle row and settle into the plush comfort of the new chairs. The aroma of warm, buttery popcorn wafts through the air.

Ivy's excitement is palpable as she shifts in her seat, her body unsure of what to do. I take her small hand in mine and place it on my leg, intertwining our fingers as we watch movie trailers and dancing refreshments sashay across the screen, reminding us to visit the concession stand. Soon the lights dim, the screen comes to life, and I can feel the warmth of her joy radiating from beside me, filling me with contentment and happiness.

The movie was okay, not anything I'd want to see again, but I enjoyed it more than I expected, mostly because Ivy couldn't stop giggling throughout the entire thing. I'm glad I asked her on a date. I can't think of anyone I'd rather spend time with. Lately, I'm happier when I know she's happy.

At some point soon, I'm going to have to examine my very real feelings for my "fake girlfriend."

We leave the theater and she grabs my hand, leading me to our town's favorite ice cream shop, Dawson's. The neon sign flickers above us as we enter, and the smell of freshly made waffle cones fills the air. We order our flavors, mint chip for

me and cookies and cream for Ivy, and sit at a small table in the corner. I can't resist stealing a few bites of Ivy's ice cream as we chat and laugh. She playfully scolds me but eventually gives in.

Afterward, we head to the park because neither of us is ready for this night to end. I've gathered bits and pieces of what happened to her through context and pieces of conversation, but of course, since I like her, I'm curious to know more about her life and who she is. I carefully broach the subject, hoping it won't ruin a nice evening that we've created.

"Do you ever talk about what happened?" I ask her.

"Sometimes," she says honestly. "Sascha's aware of bits and pieces, and of course, I talked to my family, and when I first got back, I had a therapist I talked to a lot. Not as much anymore, although I still check in with him sometimes."

"How long were you gone?" I ask her. "You mentioned it was a few years."

With a deep inhale, she closes her eyes before exhaling.

"Four years," she says, the weight of the time evident in her voice. "At first, it all blurred together. Some days I woke up ready to fight my way out, but others...I couldn't find the strength. Those days were the worst. It was like I became a numb robot going through the motions of a new reality." She opens her eyes again, staring into the distance as if reliving those difficult days.

"I can't imagine what that was like," I say softly, reaching to take her hand.

She looks up at me with tears in her eyes. "Fighting for my life every day - it was terrifying," she admits. "You were fighting hard, too, around that time," she says softly. "For a different life."

A wave of admiration washes over me. Despite everything she has been through, she always tries to understand and empathize with others. "You amaze me, Ivy," I tell her sincerely.

She finally meets my gaze, a small smile tugging at the corners of her mouth. "I've learned not to make excuses for anything," she shrugs before continuing.

"The scariest day for me wasn't the day I was taken or even the day I found out my role in Auron's plan. Auron was the leader of the cult that abducted me," she says by way of explanation. "It was the day I woke up and didn't question where I was. The fear and despair had been replaced by a numbness that consumed me. I put on the same clothes I had worn forever, mechanically going through the motions of another day in captivity. Deep down, I was a shell of my former self, drained by Auron's manipulation and psychological warfare. Worst of all, I was starting to believe everything he said, that there was no hope for me and no one cared about me anymore."

I don't respond with words, but our touch speaks volumes - our fingers intertwine as we sit under the starry sky. It's a small gesture, but hopefully, it brings her a sense of comfort.

As she pours her heart out about those final days, her hand quivers in mine. Side by side, we gaze up at the infinite universe above us, connected by the grip of our entwined hands and words that flow from her heart.

Chapter 24

“Sister Christian”

Ivy - Age 16, 1986

The days after I reached out for help were filled with anxious anticipation. Will the FBI come storming in, releasing us all from this living hell? Will Auron find out and punish me?

But as time passes, nothing happens. Life goes on as usual, or as normal as it can be. There is a strange buzz about the compound. Tensions are high, and patience is at a minimum. Security detail has increased, and those in charge seem especially energized and frenetic. Those who are captives sense a shift, but we're too afraid to ask too many questions.

Today, I'm working in the main building, surrounded by the men in expensive suits who always show up to speak to Auron. I lead them to his office. The hallway is lined with moving boxes filled with God knows what, but I am strictly forbidden from going near them.

The visitors' predatory gazes follow me to Auron's office, making my skin crawl. I heave a sigh of relief once I'm back at my desk, but it's short-lived.

Auron calls me into his office just a few minutes later. My heart races with fear and uncertainty as I enter the room to find

the three men sitting casually on the couch, eyeing me while Auron leans against his desk.

“Ivy,” he greets me with a smile that does not reach his eyes. “I have some news.”

My throat tightens as I struggle to swallow. “What is it?” I manage to ask, trying to maintain a calm facade.

“I have heard from The Voice,” Auron announces. “It is time for you to move on from this place and fulfill a higher purpose.”

My hands begin to tremble at my sides as tears prick at the corners of my eyes, threatening to spill over.

“What does that mean?” I ask. I don’t even recognize my voice. It sounds so small and helpless.

“Starting very soon, you will begin to visit the medicinal cleansing tent. You are ready to ascend to your next level of consciousness.”

My eyes narrow as I look at these men, so ready to destroy what’s left of my young life. An emotion I haven’t allowed myself to feel in a long time overtakes me: anger.

“No,” I say firmly.

Auron cocks his head to the side before speaking. “Gentlemen, leave us alone, please.”

The men exit the room as Auron comes to stand before me. “Ivy, you don’t want to disobey The Voice, do you?” he asks smoothly.

“I don’t want to go into that tent,” I say firmly.

“But you have to go in there. The Voice says it’s so.”

“And then what happens?” I ask.

“Then we see what the voice commands.”

“Does that have something to do with your men?”

“I don’t like this questioning, Ivy. I’ve shown you extraordinary patience and love since you arrived, and this is how you repay me?”

This is what Auron does. He tries to make it seem like you owe him something. Like you're lucky that you're here instead of living your life. His mind games worked when I was twelve. They don't work anymore.

I have very little time to figure out how to play this. He knows I'm not accepting his command, but his ego will be honored if I change my mind. It may buy me just a bit more time.

"Of course not. I'm sorry. My purpose is whatever The Voice commands."

He rubs his chin, feeling pleased with himself. "Good. I'm glad you came to your senses."

"When does my new journey begin?"

"You will start very soon," is all he says.



The paranoia that Auron and the others have been showing lately makes me realize that he has become unhinged. It's terrifying, but it's also an excuse for me to be able to try and make my escape.

I spend the next few days exhaustively searching for a way out. My brain races with endless scenarios, but each one ends with the same realization— I'm trapped in this hell. That thought alone makes my skin crawl, and my stomach churn. Meanwhile, I work tirelessly in the main building, pretending to be busy while secretly scouring for any opportunity to run.

That's when they arrive again, the men in sharp suits, their expensive cars gleaming in the sunlight. When they get out of the car, I can see a girl I recognize still inside. It's Lucy, the girl who vanished not long after I arrived.

The men disappear into Auron's private office, and I slip outside and creep up to the dark sedan. Gently, I crack open the car door, making sure not to draw any attention to myself.

“Lucy,” I whisper. “It’s Ivy. Do you remember me?” Lucy stares straight ahead and doesn’t acknowledge me until I reach my hand over and touch her leg. This startles her enough to shake her out of her catatonic state. She turns to look at me, but her eyes hold no emotion, just a black, voided space where the light used to live. I know she isn’t the same girl who had left.

“What’s happened to you?” I beg. Her eyes suddenly grow wide and a terrified expression crosses her face. She starts shaking her head back and forth.

“Ivy, you have to get out of here,” she pleads in a low voice. “The things you will be forced to do are worse than anything you can imagine.”

“Is it drugs?” I ask her. “Do they make sure you stay on drugs so you won’t fight back?”

“I can’t talk to you anymore,” she says and scoots across the back seat to the other side of the car, balling up into the fetal position. She’s terrified, and I’m not sure she understands what reality she’s in at the moment.

“Lucy, I want to help you.”

“You can’t help me, Ivy. Help yourself. Get out of here as soon as you can.”

“How? I don’t know what to do,” I plead, but Lucy retreats into herself, avoiding eye contact and refusing to speak further. Her body language says it all. She’s done with the conversation.

I scurry back to the main building and took my spot at the reception desk not long before the men finish their meeting. They are agitated and angry, especially Auron.

“Ivy, find Peter,” he commands.

“Of course, Auron. Do you have any idea where he is?”

“No!” he shouted. “Find him!”

I run out of the building and walk the perimeter where I find Peter standing near the edge of the fence. He’s hunched

over something, his body shaking as sobs break free from his throat.

“Peter,” I call, and when he turns to look at me, I can see what he is holding in his arms. It’s the body of his wife. I hadn’t seen Sally around in quite some time, and I wasn’t sure what had happened. Given the way she had been looking before disappearing, I assumed that she had finally succumbed to her addiction.

That may still be the case, but I have a nagging feeling that one of the others made it look that way.

“Peter, Auron is looking for you. He says it’s important.”

He continues to weep over the body of his wife before finally breaking his silence and turning to me.

“I’ll be there in a minute,” he says as he picks her up, cradles her lifeless body in his arms, and carries her to some unknown destination.

I return to the main building and inform Auron that Peter will be with him shortly, and I ask if he knows that Sally is dead.

With a self-satisfied look on his face, he says, “All things turn out the way they should,” thereby confirming my original suspicion that he had something to do with her death.

Sally was always unpredictable and unreliable, and Auron does not tolerate that. An example has been made of her, and her death will be used as another way to control Peter.

Peter comes stalking in ten minutes later. The tears have dried from his cheeks. I hear him and Auron yelling back and forth. They say it’s time to pack up and move, grab everything necessary.

There’s awareness in my heart that this is it. This is going to be my chance to somehow escape. There are too many of us here for them to count every person and know their whereabouts during this move. Plus, they don’t have the vehicles for everyone. They will have to bring in vans or buses, and the more people around here, the better the chance I have to disappear.

That night, as I lay sleepless in my bed, I'm aware it would be my last night at The Station. Whether I escape tomorrow or die, it doesn't matter. I grab my doll and the letters I've secretly written to my family, shove them into a small pillowcase, and hide them under my mattress.



I'm up early the next morning as "Mother" yells at everyone to grab their essentials. It's time to leave The Station and move to another home, as directed by The Voice; at least, that's what Auron has told everyone, and they seem willing to believe it.

The entire scene is pure bedlam. Everyone is trying to figure out what's happening, but no one receives direct answers to their questions. Trucks and vans begin to file in at 8:00 in the morning, and the men with guns are no longer guarding the fences but helping shuttle people onto the trucks.

Auron is nowhere to be found, of course. He probably skipped out late last night because he knows how badly this could go. *He's such a coward.* I clutch my pillowcase tightly, the only possessions that truly matter to me in this dark world. The line moves forward, and I follow the other girls towards one of the white vans. Just before I climb in, my eyes meet one of the armed men who has always glanced at me with a kind smile during my daily walks. Today, I want to break our silent routine and speak to him for the first time.

"Do you know where we're going?" I ask him.

"It's not for me to say," he replies sternly.

"Do you know how long we will be in these vans?"

"You need to stop asking questions," he says.

Desperate now, I turn on my most charming smile and sweetest voice.

"Please? Can I go to the bathroom quickly before we leave?"

After a moment of hesitation, he shakes his head in frustration and mutters, "Hurry up then. And make it fast. All the buildings are closed."

The guards had planned for this scenario. Every building on the premises has been locked, making it impossible for anyone to hide. My heart races as I scan the area, searching for a way out. The back fence line catches my eye - if I can make it there unnoticed, I can escape. I'll hide and wait until everyone is gone, then hike for days, if necessary, to find civilization. It's risky, but I have no other choice.

As I cautiously make my way over, pretending to scout for a secluded spot, a heavy hand grasps my shoulder, causing me to jump. I turn, and I'm met with the face of the man who drives the dairy trucks to the facility, and he holds me firmly in place.

Years have passed, and yet I've never heard his voice. It's deep and smooth, but now it holds a hint of urgency. "Come with me," he says, his hand outstretched.

I can't bear the thought of continuing this life for even one more day. "Please don't make me go," I beg, tears filling my eyes. "Just let me leave." My hands tremble as I wait for his response, hoping he shows empathy and lets me go.

A sense of urgency fills the air as he leans in close and speaks in a hushed tone, his words barely audible above the sounds of the bustling compound. "I'm going to help you escape," he whispers, "but you must be quiet and listen to me."

In this moment, I'm faced with a difficult choice. I could attempt to run for the fence and risk being caught or shot by the guards. But then I remember all the times this man has silently shown kindness towards me. Without hesitation, I make my decision. I will trust him and go with him. This could be my only chance at freedom.

We approach one of the parked vans, and I notice that it is well-stocked with computers, office equipment, and the boxes that had previously lined the office hallway, but it is devoid of people. The driver hastily swings open the door and beckons

me to crawl into the back behind the boxes and a pile of blankets.

“Do not come out, no matter what you hear,” he warns under his breath, moving boxes to obscure me from view, his movements precise and as inconspicuous as possible.

I obey his command and huddle under the heavy blanket in the cramped space, my heart pounding with fear as we wait to drive away. Memories flood back to the first time I was brought here years ago, lying in the back of a van like this one. The same terror grips me now as it did then, and I am filled with dread for what lies ahead.

I curl into a tight ball and silently weep, clutching a pillowcase for comfort. Suddenly, I’m startled at the sound of two doors opening and shutting, indicating that the driver has picked up someone else. That must be why he wanted me hidden under the blanket.

The van rumbles over uneven roads, jostling my body against the metal. I can hear muffled voices and smell a mix of body odor and gasoline. I hold my breath, counting the seconds until it’s safe to exhale. Time has become meaningless in this place, where every moment is filled with fear and uncertainty. The van continues, the only indication of our journey being the changing terrain of the road that I feel beneath me. How long have we been driving? I can’t tell. All I know is that I need to stay quiet and invisible, or else who knows what will happen when we reach our destination.

I strain my ears to pick up any conversation from the two men in the front. They speak in hushed tones, but I catch snippets of talk about “Auron” and “customers.” My heart races as I hear one say, “They’re getting close.” It confirms my suspicions that the authorities are finally onto something big here— kidnapping, drug trafficking, and who knows what else. My mind reels at the thought of how many innocent lives must have been affected by this operation.

The van’s engine growls and rattles as it swerves sharply to the side of the road. I can hear the two men in front arguing. Their voices rise in a heated exchange.

“Why are you stopping? We need to keep following the convoy,” yells a man whose voice I don’t recognize.

“I’m done with this,” retorts the other man, his voice laced with anger.

“I’m not going down because you suddenly grew a conscience.” Suddenly, a loud bang echoes through the vehicle, piercing the small space and causing my ears to ring painfully. I remain huddled in my hidden ball, too scared to emerge from underneath the blanket.

After a moment, the doors whip open. “Hurry up, Ivy,” the dairy truck driver urges. “You need to go.”

I cautiously lift the corner of the blanket, and my eyes fall upon a second man slumped over the dashboard. Crimson streams of blood pour from a deep wound on his head, staining the fabric of his shirt. His limp body gives off an eerie stillness.

“Is he dead?” I ask frantically, my voice coming out in high-pitched squeaks of panic.

“Don’t look at him,” my accomplice instructs, his eyes darting nervously. “Listen to me. We’re only a few blocks away from the police station. You need to go in there and get help. I’m leaving the van here. There is evidence on these computers and in these boxes that can put everyone away for a long time. You need to go now.”

This is it. After years of plotting and waiting, my chance to escape this nightmare has finally arrived. Adrenaline surges through my veins as I jump up, grab my makeshift bag, and fly out of the back of the van towards the police station.

I sprint down the street, but I can’t resist glancing over my shoulder to see the man staring at me with a mix of relief and fear on his face. Then he turns and bolts in the opposite direction.

I ran faster than I ever thought possible until I burst through the doors of the police station and collapsed onto the cold tile floor, completely exhausted but filled with a sense of liberation.

Chapter 25

“In The Air Tonight”

Corey - Age 18, 1988

My eyes are shut tight, my heart beating rapidly in my chest as I grasp Ivy’s hand with a newfound strength. Her voice is steady but laced with emotion as she tells me her story. I have never felt such an overwhelming sense of admiration for someone as I do for her at this moment. Every word she speaks paints a vivid picture in my mind, revealing the indescribable pain and fear she endured during her kidnapping. It’s like staring into an abyss of unimaginable horrors that were inflicted upon her.

When I first heard about her abduction, it was abstract to me. Now, hearing the details from her lips, I realize the gravity of what she has been through. The words and phrases that were once just distant concepts are now painfully real in my mind. And yet, despite it all, she sits before me with an unwavering strength and bravery that leaves me in awe.

Slowly, I open my eyes to find Ivy’s face hovering over mine, her blue eyes full of tears that spill down her cheeks. She reaches out and gently brushes away a tear from my eye. It takes me a moment to realize that I have been crying. I can’t remember the last time I showed such raw emotion.

“I’m so sorry,” I whisper to her, feeling guilty for all the pain and trauma she has gone through.

“It’s okay now,” she assures me with a small smile, though sadness still lingers in her eyes. “Well, as okay as it can be,” she shrugs.

“What happened to the cult?” I ask, hoping they have all been brought to justice and put behind bars. “I don’t remember hearing anything about it on the news, not that I watch a lot of news,” I admit.

“I was interviewed at the police station for hours,” Ivy begins, her voice tired and strained. “It was exhausting. They had called my parents, who were six hours away at the time. Somehow, they managed to get there in less than four,” she says with a weary chuckle. “The man who helped me escape was right. Those computers and boxes in the van were filled with incriminating evidence of everything the cult had been involved in.”

“So it was never about an alien race?” I ask, still trying to wrap my head around everything that has happened.

“God, no!” Ivy exclaims, shaking her head vehemently. “That was all just a front to lure people in. In reality, it was all about drugs and human trafficking. Auron, or Les Shaffer as we know him now, was caught in New Mexico shortly after I escaped.”

“How did he manage to evade capture for so long?” I ask, my mind spinning with disbelief.

“He was a master manipulator,” she responds, her tone heavy with bitterness. “And extremely intelligent.”

The more this story unravels, the more it ensnares me. “It’s hard to believe,” I murmur, struggling to grasp the magnitude of the situation. “And it went on for years.”

“Indeed,” she confirms, her voice dripping with resentment. “He had quite the lucrative operation. He had connections in high places, even within the government, who aided him in trafficking drugs. An influential state senator was implicated.”

I can't help but shake my head in disbelief, "That's beyond wild."

She laughs ruefully, "Sometimes, I still can't wrap my mind around it. It's like it happened to someone else entirely. But then I'll have flashbacks or nightmares, and it all comes crashing back, the harsh reality of what truly transpired."

"Incredible," I remark, trying to imagine what it must have been like for her when she returned home after everything had come to light.

"What was it like when you finally got back home?"

A deep sigh escapes her lips as she shakes her head, her words heavy on her shoulders. "It wasn't easy," she says with a hint of sadness. "You know when you're in a difficult situation, you romanticize what life was like before? You make it perfect in your mind, but honestly, no situation is perfect. No family is perfect." She pauses for a moment before continuing. "I had made everything perfect in my head. In my mind, I would go home, and everything would return to the way it was. I didn't give much thought to the time that had passed and the changes that had happened."

She takes a deep breath and leans against my shoulder, seeking comfort. "When my parents arrived at the police station, I could tell something was different. They looked older and worn down. And when we finally hugged and cried for what felt like hours, it hit me harder. They were looking at an older version of me that they had missed out on for so many years. They were angry about all the time they had lost but also relieved that I was alive and safe. It was such a mix of emotions all at once."

My grip tightens on her hand as I experience a surge of anger coursing through me. I struggle with the intensity of my emotions, unable to fully comprehend the depths of Auron's depravity.

"What a despicable excuse for a human being," I say through gritted teeth. "Not only did he take so many lives, but he also allowed so many others to suffer in the aftermath. He ruined countless families." I release a heavy sigh. "What was

it like seeing Natalie?" I ask cautiously, knowing that this may bring up more painful memories for her.

I feel her warm smile pressed against my shoulder and the weight of her words. "Seeing her for the first time was everything," she says, her voice filled with nostalgia and emotion. "I walked into the house, and it was different but still comfortable. The walls were a new color, and the furniture rearranged, but it still smelled familiar. Like home," she describes. "My aunt was there with Natalie, who had grown taller but still had the same bright smile. As soon as she saw me, she ran at full speed and threw herself into my arms, nearly knocking me over."

"She's a sweet kid," I offer.

"She is," Ivy agrees, then her tone becomes more serious. "Her guilt over what happened still lingered, but she shouldn't have felt any. If allowed to do it all again, I would still demand they take me instead. We, as a family, continue to work through and come to terms with it. We've gone to counseling, and most days, everyone has moved on and grown stronger from it. Even my parents are better than I could've imagined. Their marriage seems to be mostly repaired."

"Why did you ultimately decide to return to school?" I inquire, genuinely curious.

After contemplating, she responds, "When I first came back, I couldn't bring myself to leave the safety of my home. I spent my days hidden away in my room, immersed in movies and books. My mom tried to homeschool me, but it was difficult. We would venture out to places like the mall or the movie store, but the idea of facing kids my age was overwhelming. Then one day, it hit me that I had already let that man take so much of my childhood, and I didn't want to let him take this experience from me as well. So I made the decision to go to high school. I knew what people would say. I knew they would judge me without knowing who I was, but I wanted to do it anyway, to prove I could overcome this fear."

As she speaks, her eyes glisten with determination. She continues, "And then you came into the picture and made

everything easier and better. Your presence has been a great source of comfort and support for me, something I didn't even know I needed. "

I shake my head in disbelief. "I can't believe I thought I knew what was best for you without knowing your story. What a cocky asshole I am."

She chuckles softly. "Don't be too hard on yourself. I mean, you are," she teases with a smirk, "but your intentions have always been genuine. You wanted me to fit in while still staying true to myself. Thanks to you and Sascha's friendship, high school hasn't been as bad as living in a cult." She laughs, using humor to soften the weight of her words.

Chapter 26

“These Dreams”

Ivy - Age 18, 1988

The words tumble out of my mouth, and a strange sense of relief washes over me. My chest tightens, and my heart races, but it's a different kind of fear than the one I've held onto for so long. I've kept this secret deep inside for years, afraid that speaking about it would make it more real. Now, in this moment with Corey, I realize that sharing my story doesn't make it any less true or painful. His warm gaze and gentle touch offer a sense of understanding I never thought possible. And in this safe space, I can be myself: the girl who was kidnapped at twelve years old.

The human mind is a curious and complex thing, especially when it comes to dealing with trauma. I've realized that our thoughts can be our worst enemy, often leading us down a path of self-blame and guilt. I know deep down that I'm not at fault for what happened to me, but moments occur where I can't shake the thought that, somehow, I caused or deserved it. How could I have possibly done something that would permanently set me apart from everyone else? This toxic cycle of isolation consumed me for far too long, leaving me trapped in my thoughts and unable to break free.

Despite my efforts, most people, especially people my age, can't understand the intricacies of going through an experience

like mine. Something I've realized lately, they likely never will. Those same people would rather label me as strange or criticize my coping methods. Yet, I'm beginning to believe what Corey and Sascha have been trying to tell me— those people are inconsequential in my life.

My mind spirals as Corey's gentle fingers graze my face, turning it towards his. The touch sends a shiver down my spine. "Ivy," he murmurs, "Remember what I said last time we kissed? About not wanting an audience?" My heart races in anticipation as he leans in closer. "Well, there's no one else here now. Just you, me, and the truth between us." His eyes lock with mine, and my pulse quickens. "And I want to kiss you again."

My mind is reeling, unable to form coherent words in the face of Corey's intense gaze. I don't need to speak as he offers me a warm smile and cups my face with his hand. His touch sends goosebumps through my body, and I find myself leaning into it eagerly. His lips touch mine, and emotions surge and swirl within me like a tornado. He deepens the kiss, exploring my mouth with an urgency that matches my desire. My hands find their way around his neck, pulling him closer as if trying to merge our bodies. At this moment, nothing else exists but Corey and the intensity of our connection, and I cling to it desperately, trying to etch this memory into my every fiber.

The kiss may have started gently but quickly ignites into a blazing inferno fueled by the overflowing emotions we both pour into it. My mind and body are consumed by something I can only describe as pure desire. For the first time in my entire life, I'm experiencing lust, an intense longing for another person that can't be denied.

Our lips and bodies move in perfect harmony, and I'm overcome with the need to be as close to him as possible to make him feel as good as I do. This sensation is new and exhilarating, like discovering a hidden treasure deep within me.

As if in a trance, I swing my leg over and straddle his lap on the park bench. His body is warm and firm underneath mine. The scent of freshly cut grass and blooming flowers fills the

air. Our lips meet intensely, hands wandering and exploring each other's bodies. We're lost in the moment, caught up in a whirlwind of passion, and it's the best thing I've ever felt. Struggling to catch our breath, Corey finally breaks the kiss and gazes at me with a mischievous grin on his lips, causing my heart to flutter and my cheeks to flush with desire.

"Ivy," he whispers, struggling for breath, "You have no idea how many times I've thought about this moment."

A rush of heat spreads through my body at his words, the soft breeze rustling the leaves around us. His brown eyes are dark and intense, fixed on mine as if trying to convey his desires and emotions in that one look.

"You have?" I ask, surprised by his words and unable to hide the smile creeping onto my lips.

"Yes," he chuckles, his hand reaching up to tuck a loose strand of hair behind my ear, "But things are not going to get out of hand on this park bench. This is new to you, and I don't want you to rush into anything."

His consideration only makes me admire him more, and I nod in understanding even though every part of me wants to stay here with him forever.

"But-" I start, but he cuts me off with another kiss, his lips warm and eager against mine. The world fades away as we lose ourselves in each other's embrace.

"I don't feel rushed into anything," I tell him once we break apart, our breaths mingling in the space between us. He arches one dark eyebrow skeptically as if testing my words.

"Can we maybe sit here and make out for a while?" I ask nervously.

"That's exactly what we're going to do," he says with a smirk before leaning in once again and kissing me until I have no breath left in me. The moon glows over our entwined figures as we indulge in being together under the dark sky.



The hallway reverberates with slamming lockers as I click mine shut. My mind is still reeling from last night's events, and I can barely focus on anything else. My first date. Memories of our make-out session in the park play like a movie on repeat, making me blush at the thought. I try to brush off any embarrassment or insecurity, reminding myself that it was just kissing and nothing more. It's not like most people my age haven't already done far more. Corey has surely done more with other people, which is a thought that irrationally angers me to my core, so I do my best to block it out.

Walking to study hall, I can't wipe the goofy grin off my face as I think about how perfect it felt with him like we were meant to be together. Today, I'm wearing my heart on my sleeve, and everyone can see it through my love-struck eyes and blissful smile.

As I stroll down the crowded hallway, my classmates' voices fill my ears. Some call out friendly greetings, while others barely acknowledge my presence. It's a strange feeling to be known but not liked for who I truly am. My relationship with Corey is a façade, carefully constructed to keep me in the popular crowd. If anyone discovers the truth, I'll once again become an outcast, and this time it will hurt more because they'll see how desperate I am for someone like Corey to pretend to date me. Despite all this, I can't help but think about our moments together; they seem genuine. I've consciously decided not to overthink or analyze those feelings today. Instead, I'm going to enjoy them while they last.

I'm walking towards the library when a sudden burst of energy lifts me off my feet from behind, and I let out a surprised squeal. I see Corey's familiar smiling face, his strong arms securely holding me. A warmth spreads through my body at the sight of him.

"Hey there, Ivy Girl," he greets me with his usual charm. "Heading to the library?"

"Yep. I've got study hall, so I'm trying to finish some work."

Without hesitation, Corey offers to walk me over, taking my books in one hand while his other hand grasps mine. His long legs and confident strides make it hard for me to keep up as we go to the library together.

Abruptly, Corey's strides come to a halt as he turns to face me. His gaze is steady and piercing, his voice calm and measured.

"Don't do that," he says firmly.

"Do what?" I feign innocence.

"Don't walk behind me," he clarifies. A pang of guilt washes over me as I realize he's caught on to my habit of trying to blend into the background. Before I can respond, he continues. "Ivy, you do that sometimes. You try to make yourself small and invisible, so no one will notice you. If anyone in this school should be noticed, it's you, Ivy Owens. You're beautiful, smart, kind, and tougher than anyone I've ever met." My cheeks heat with embarrassment at his words.

"So from now on, I want you to walk with your head held high. Whether you're with me or Sascha or anyone else, but especially me," he emphasizes. "Walk next to me like my girlfriend." The way he says it makes my heart flutter, and a smile spreads across my face as I take his outstretched hand and step by his side, absorbing every little bit of his warmth like sunshine on my face.

Despite the occasional lingering stares, it appears that people are beginning to accept that the celebrated hockey God has found himself a girlfriend. Of course, whispers and snide remarks likely occur behind closed doors, but at least to my face, they appear tolerant and accepting.

We walk by as their curious gazes trail after us, trying to piece together how an average girl like me could have captured the heart of such a revered player. It's as though we're living in a fishbowl, constantly under scrutiny and speculation from others. I don't enjoy it, but with each passing day, the walls of judgment slowly melt away.

Corey walks me into the library and sets my heavy stack of books down on a large table before turning to pull me in for a warm hug, lifting me to my tiptoes with ease. His muscular arms wrap around my body, causing me to melt into his embrace. I bury my face into the soft shoulder of his sweatshirt and inhale, taking in the comforting scent of his cologne mixed with hints of musk and woody notes.

He sets me gently back down on my feet and leans in for a chaste kiss on my lips. His words come out hopeful as he invites me to his hockey game on Saturday.

“I have a hockey game,” he says, “and I’d like you to come.” He smiles before adding, “And your family, too, if you’re comfortable, but even if they can’t make it, I still want you to come.”

The excitement in his voice is palpable, making me blush, and my heart flutters at the thought of spending more time with him outside school.

Chapter 27

“Playing With The Boys”

Corey - Age 18, 1988

My body is like a coiled spring, buzzing with anticipation and energy. Every nerve ending is tingling, ready for the adrenaline rush before a game. Today, there’s an added layer of excitement. The thought of Ivy, and perhaps even her family, being in the stands adds a jolt of electricity to my already energized state. It’s like standing on the edge of a cliff, knowing that at any moment, I could fall, and I’m exhilarated by the thrill of it all. This game will be different, and I can’t wait for it to unfold with Ivy watching.

Adding to my anxious state is that Taz isn’t here yet. He missed our team meeting earlier this morning and warm-ups meaning he won’t be in the starting lineup today. Lately, something has been off with him. During practice, he’s been distant and distracted and missing more and more school. I know his dad has been traveling for work, leaving his older brother to care for him, but Taz’s brother is more interested in partying than responsibility. I worry that some of that reckless behavior might be influencing Taz. He’s always enjoyed a good party and downtime, but too much unsupervised time can lead him down a dangerous path.

We’re only minutes away from taking the ice for warm-ups. Coach’s office is a flurry of movement and noise, with him

pacing back and forth, yelling into the phone before slamming it down in frustration. I knock on his door, ready to take the brunt of his frustration as he barks for me to enter.

“Coach,” I begin, “I think I might have an idea for finding Taz. Can I use your phone?” The tension in the room is palpable as Coach stares me down, his intense gaze burning a hole through my chest. Finally, he sighs and gestures towards the rotary phone on his cluttered desk.

“I hope to hell you can get it done, Delzy,” he mutters before storming out of his office and slamming the door behind him, leaving me alone in his cluttered office. I take a deep breath and reach for the phone, dialing Ivy’s number. After three rings, her rushed voice answers on the other end.

“Hello?” she says, and my chest warms at the sound of her voice. *I’m so gone for this girl.*

“Hey, Ivy Girl,” I greet her with a smile. Her name rolls off my tongue like honey, sweet and familiar.

“Corey! What are you doing calling me? Aren’t you supposed to be getting ready to play?” she asks, with a hint of panic.

“I am,” I reply. “Are you just about on your way?”

“We are!” she replies eagerly. “Mom and Dad are waiting for me in the car.”

I can almost hear her bouncing on the other end of the line. “I’m sorry to ask, but can you do me a favor first?”

“Sure,” she replies cautiously, sensing something more serious in my request. “What’s going on?”

“I need you or Sascha or someone to go over to Taz’s house and check on him,” I explain urgently. The weight of worry sits heavily on my chest.

“He’s not there?” she questions, her voice urgent and concerned.

“No, he’s not. Coach is pissed.”

“I’ll figure it out,” she says confidently. As we disconnect our call, my unease lingers. We don’t have time to worry about him now, though - it’s almost time for me to take the ice and lead our team to victory. We’re playing The Stingers again, and Eckhardt is always a formidable opponent.

Stepping out of the locker room, a surge of electric energy greets me once I approach the rink. The gleaming ice reflects the bright lights above, and I take my first lap around, the crisp air biting my skin. I glide past the benches and spot my mom in her usual spot behind ours. Her proud smile and waving hand instantly put me at ease. It only then dawns on me that Ivy’s parents will be here too, so they will meet today. A wry shake of my head reminds me how this situation began as nothing more than a charade but has quickly turned into a tangled web of real emotions.

The warm-up skate winds down as the anticipation for the first puck drop builds when I spot Ivy and her family entering the arena and taking their seats. A rush of excitement runs through me as I scan the area, ensuring that Coach isn’t watching, before skating up to the boards where Ivy sits. I press my gloved hand against the glass, hoping for a response from her. My heart races as she meets my touch with a warm smile and places her hand in the same spot. It’s cute and corny as shit, and I expect to catch hell about it from my teammates later, but her sweet smile makes it worth it.

With a quick flick of her thumb, she signals that he’s okay. Relief flashes in her eyes as she mouths the words, but I don’t have time to ask her what happened. Instead, I nod and skate toward my team, fueled by adrenaline from the close call.

As soon as I reach Coach, he beckons me off the ice. My heart races as I wonder what could be wrong. Did someone get hurt? Is there a problem with our game strategy?

“Delzy,” Coach says, his voice grave. “I need you to head into the locker room.”

My stomach twists with worry as I ask, “Is everything okay, Coach?”

“No, it’s not okay,” he replies sternly before turning away and barking orders at my teammates.

I step into the locker room, my eyes immediately land on two startling scenes. The first is my best friend, his usually confident and lively demeanor replaced with one of dejection as he sits on a training table, head bowed in defeat. The second is Sascha, her tense posture and eyebrows furrowed in concern mingled with exasperation as she stands beside him.

Taz lifts his head, his bloodshot eyes struggling to focus through the exhaustion. The right eye is swollen and discolored, a vivid black and blue that tells me it was in recent contact with someone’s fist. His split lip is caked with dried blood, and he instinctively cradles one arm against his body, wincing with each breath.

“What the fuck happened?” I yell as I march over to him, tossing my stick aside in anger. Sascha holds up a hand to halt me, her expression conveying a silent plea for calmness.

“We don’t have time to talk about it right now,” he says, his breath heavy with the scent of tequila and weed. “You need to go play and win this game. Your mom’s here. Your girl’s here. You can do this one without me.” When he speaks, I notice the glassy look in his eyes and the unsteady way his upper body sways. “I’m in no condition to skate right now, but I’m okay.” I can’t help but shake my head in disappointment. I don’t know what he’s gotten himself caught up with, but it’s not good.

Taz gingerly approaches the training area with a heavy sigh, leaning heavily on Sascha for support. The rest of the team begins to filter in, each player focused and determined as they prepare before taking the ice for the game. Coach stands in front of them, giving a rousing speech.

“All right, you heard him,” Coach says. “We have a game to play. He’s here. He’s not dead, although he might be when I’m done with him.” His words are met with a mix of nervous laughter and determined looks from the players. “You need to go out there and play the game you’re capable of playing. The

trainers will take care of Taz and get him back in shape for us. You can talk to him after the game.”

“Yes, Coach,” I mutter reluctantly, shaking my head as I stand up straighter. I ask Sascha if she will stay with Taz during the game. Her incredulous look tells me she doesn’t have much choice. I can’t help but smile because even though she tries to act so hard, I know she cares deep down.

“Taz, I’ll catch you after the game,” I call out to him before grabbing my stick and walking out where our opponent awaits us. The cold air hits my face as adrenaline rushes through my body. I step from the rubber mat onto the ice, skate hard, and fast in a lap around the rink, fueled by the thumping music and raucous crowd, ready to give it my all for my team and Taz.

Chapter 28

“Back In Black”

Ivy - Age 18, 1988

When Corey’s frantic voice filled my ears through the phone, I called Sascha in a panic as soon as we hung up.

“What?” she grumbles groggily as she answers the phone, still half asleep.

“Sascha, do you happen to have Taz’s phone number?” I ask urgently.

“Why would I have *his* number?” she retorts.

“Never mind, Corey gave it to me. Please call him for me,” I plead.

“What do you mean? Why can’t you call him yourself?”

“Corey thinks he’s in trouble. They have a game today, and he’s not there. The coach is furious, and Corey’s worried something happened to him. Can you please call him or even go over to his house?”

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” she scoffs. “This has to be some kind of joke.”

“Sash, I’m so sorry for asking, but I’m with my family getting ready to leave for the game, and Corey is concerned.”

“Fine, I’ll go to his house,” she sighs reluctantly. “I’m sure he’s passed out under a pile of random women, but if I can manage to peel them off, I’ll tell him to go to his game.”

“Thank you, Sash. You are the best friend anyone could ask for.”

“You better remember this when I need a favor in return,” she playfully threatens before ending the call.

We stop on the way to the arena to pick up my sister, who had spent the night at her friend’s house. When we pull up, I can already see Sascha and Taz getting out of their car. Taz looks worse for wear, with dark circles under his eyes and a tired slump to his shoulders. I turn to my parents and urge them to head inside. “I’ll join you in a moment. There’s someone I want to say hello to.”

“Of course, Sweetheart,” my mom responds understandingly. “We’ll see you inside.”

Taz and Sascha make their way toward me, and I can’t help but notice that something is off with Taz. His gait is unsteady, and his usually confident demeanor is darkly muted. As soon as they are within earshot, Sascha speaks up.

“Well, I found him. And he’s alive.”

Relief floods through me, quickly followed by concern as I take in Taz’s appearance. Bruises mar his face, and his clothes are stained with dirt and blood.

“He doesn’t look too good,” I comment, unable to hide my worry.

“Thanks, Ivy. I appreciate that,” Taz retorts sarcastically.

Ignoring his tone, I turn to Sascha, “What happened?”

Sascha sighs heavily. “I’m not entirely sure. But he’s refusing to go to the doctor.”

Without hesitation, I step forward. “Can you take him to the locker room and have the trainers check him out?”

“That’s the plan,” she replies. “If you get Corey’s attention, signal him that Taz is fine, and we’ll deal with everything

after, okay?”

“Of course,” I tell her. I go inside, my heart beating too fast, worrying about Taz’s injuries and excitement to watch Corey play. I see Corey, tall and confident, gliding across the ice, his dark hair peeking out from under his helmet. Even if I didn’t see his jersey number “34,” I’d know him by how he skates alone.

He stops as he reaches me, sending a spray of ice to the side, and I get up to meet him at the glass between us. He gives me a cocky half-smile and places his gloved hand against the glass. In return, I place mine against it, a silent communication of the emotion between us. Soon enough, I remember my task and give him a thumbs-up sign while mouthing the words, “He’s okay.”

Corey gives me a grateful smile, sweat dripping down his face as he follows his team off the ice. The crowd’s roar echoes through the arena, heightening the energy in the air. I bounce in my seat, rubbing my hands over the denim of my jeans, unable to contain my excitement. My dad chuckles at my jittery behavior and suggests I go get us some snacks to pass the time before the game starts.

Grabbing Nat’s hand, we approach the concessions area, filled with the aroma of freshly popped popcorn and sizzling hot dogs. But as my luck would have it, Stacy and a few of the Vipers are also loitering around, their smirks and sneers aimed in my direction.

“Oh, Ivy,” Stacy purrs mockingly. “Is this your little sister?”

My jaw tightens, but I force a polite smile and instinctively step in front of Nat.

“Yes,” is all I offer before returning to focus on getting our drinks. I try to ignore their presence, but Amber makes it impossible when she directly addresses Natalie.

“Aren’t you just the cutest little thing?” Her voice drips with saccharine sweetness, making me cringe in disgust. She peers down at my sister, and I can practically feel her condescending gaze burning into my sister’s eyes. “At least you were never a

missing kid on a milk carton,” she sneers. “There’s still hope for you to turn out normal.”

A fiery rage shoots through my body, starting from my toes and reaching the top of my head. Every muscle tenses as I clench my fists in fury. How dare she speak to my sister like that. I’m tired of being pushed around by these mean girls. In a moment of wild impulse, I consider throwing my hot chocolate in her face, but rationality takes over when I remember it’s piping hot. Natalie, however, doesn’t exhibit that same restraint as she hurls her ice-cold soda toward Amber’s face and chest with a satisfying splat. The sticky, sweet liquid drips down Amber’s stunned expression as she stands frozen in shock.

“What’s your damage?! You grody little brat!” she yells at Natalie, her face red with anger as she takes in the now-discolored Benetton sweater. The once bright and vibrant colors have been stained by the caramel-colored soda meant to be my mom’s refreshment.

Nat shrugs nonchalantly as if this kind of accident is a regular occurrence for her.

“I may be ‘normal,’ but I’m also incredibly clumsy,” she says with a sheepish grin.

With a final icy glare, Amber and her clique storm off in a huff. I shoot Natalie a mischievous wink and whisper, “Come on, Clumsy, let’s fetch another round for Mom and head to our seats.”

The loud chatter of the crowd resonates throughout the arena as we make our way through the throngs of people, dodging elbows and bumping into knees. We weave through the rows of chairs and finally settle into our seats with a sigh of contentment. Bright lights dance and sparkle above us as music flows through the sound system.

A hush falls over the crowd as the lights slowly dim, leaving only a soft glow in the arena. All eyes are fixed on the center of the ice. Natalie jumps up, her face lit up with pure wonder and anticipation. The deep bass of the music begins to throb through the air, setting the stage for what’s to come. Suddenly,

a spotlight shines on the Mavericks' bench, signaling their entrance.

With each announcement from the announcer's booming voice, another player steps out onto the ice, causing a wave of excitement to ripple through the audience. My heart races with anticipation as they call Corey's name, and he skates onto the ice. And I'm not alone - my family is as thrilled as we all cheer and clap with the rest of the fans.

At the first sound of the puck hitting the ice, Corey and his opponent spring into action, bodies tensed and sticks poised for control. The clash is fierce, but Corey emerges victorious, his stick guiding the puck to his teammates' waiting hands. Even without Taz, the Mavericks play with precision and power, executing every play flawlessly. I watch Corey skate with grace and determination, and I'm filled with a sense of pride and joy for all he has accomplished - and will accomplish in his future career. At this moment, he is truly in his element, and there is no doubt that he will achieve all of his dreams.

They dominated the game, winning 6-0 over their opponents. The best part is that Cruz doesn't see the ice one time.

Chapter 29

“Only Time Will Tell”

Corey - Age 18, 1988

Today was epic. We dominated every aspect, which is not normally the case when we play this team. We're hyped as we enter the locker room. Cheers and congratulations fill the air. I glance around for Taz, but he must've already gone home. I'll have to call him later and find out what the hell is going on with him, but right now, I'm thinking about only one thing - seeing Ivy.

Throughout the game, I couldn't help but notice her bouncing around in her seat. Every time we scored a goal, she jumped up and down, pumping her fist. Her face was flushed with energy, and she screamed so loud that I could hear her voice, even with all the other people screaming simultaneously. Her family joined in on the excitement, laughing and high-fiving each other throughout the game. I think I'm going to be able to turn Ivy into a die-hard fan in no time.

After Coach finishes his quick speech, I hurry through my shower and dress quickly. My heart races with anticipation as I hope to catch Ivy and her family before they leave.

When I leave the locker room, she stands to my right, with Natalie and her parents. To the left, my mom eagerly awaits, a

proud smile on her face that never wavers whether we win or lose.

With a wide grin, I approach my mom and wrap my arms around her in a tight hug. Her perfume fills my senses, bringing back memories of childhood. She congratulates me on the game, beaming with pride at my achievement.

“Mom,” I say, excitement bubbling, “there’s someone I’d like you to meet.”

Her eyebrows raise in surprise and curiosity as she looks at me quizzically. We’ve never talked about girls before, let alone me introducing one to her. I can see the wheels turning in her head as she prepares for this unexpected meeting. We walk over to where Ivy and her family are standing to make introductions.

I feel a knot in my stomach as I stand between the two most important women. My mom looks at me with a soft yet curious expression while Ivy shifts nervously beside me. We made that stupid pact weeks ago to pretend to be in a relationship, but now I want more than anything for it to be real.

“Ivy, this is my mom, Maggie. Mom, this is my girlfriend, Ivy.” When I use the “G” word, everyone in the vicinity goes wide-eyed.

“It’s lovely to meet you, Ivy,” my mom says as they shake hands.

“It’s very nice to meet you too,” Ivy replies before remembering her family standing idly beside her, watching this interaction. “Oh,” she says with an embarrassed laugh, “these are my parents and my sister.”

Everyone makes introductions and small talk while I wrap my arms around Ivy.

“I’m so glad you could make it to the game,” I whisper with a smile. She’s wearing a black sweater, and her hair is pulled back in one of those scrunchie things. It’s blue, and I take notice of the fact that she’s purposely worn Maverick colors.

Her lips curve into a genuine smile as she gazes at me, her blue eyes shining with admiration.

“Are you kidding?” she exclaims. “That was radical! I can see why you love this so much.”

I chuckle and brush a loose strand of hair from her face. “There’s nothing like it,” I agree, my voice low as I lean and whisper in her ear, “except maybe kissing you.” A delightful shade of pink spread across her cheeks, making her look even more beautiful.

“I’m going to have dinner with my mom, but can we do something tonight afterward?”

She nods, her eyes sparkling with anticipation. How she’s looking at me reminds me of the last time we were together when we’d been making out for what seemed like hours. Our physical attraction is undeniable and only grows stronger each time we’re together. I know she’s feeling it, too, and as much as my body wants to take things to the next level, her boundaries and comfort are the most important things. At the end of the day, I want to spend time with her.



“So, tell me more about this girlfriend,” my mom implores once we’re settled into her favorite steak and seafood place for dinner. Alan is home, but Mom usually reserves these little dinners just for her and me to spend time together and connect, which I appreciate.

“I like her a lot,” I admit as I bite into a warm sourdough roll.

My mom nods and smiles. “She seems sweet, Corey. How long have you two been dating?”

“It hasn’t been long,” I reply nonchalantly. “But there’s something you should know about Ivy.”

My mom leans in curiously. “What’s up, Honey?”

“She’s become special to me,” I say with a hint of protectiveness in my voice, “and I don’t like it when people judge her based on this.”

My mom’s eyes widen with intrigue. “Okay, now you have my interest piqued.”

“Ivy was abducted when she was twelve years old,” I explain to my mom, a mix of sadness and frustration pulsing through me.

“Oh my God!” my mom gasps, her hand flying up to cover her mouth. “How terrible.”

My heart clenches as I continue, “She was taken by a cult and held captive for four years before she finally escaped and found her way home.”

My mom’s eyes widen in shock and horror as she processes the information. “That poor girl. The things she must have gone through.”

“It was a nightmare,” I say solemnly. “Does any of this sound familiar? I’m surprised you didn’t hear about it on the news.”

“You know I don’t watch the news,” my mom admits with a small shrug. “Too depressing. I prefer to stick to my evening soap operas.”

“That’s true,” I say with a small chuckle.

“How is Ivy doing now?” my mom asks with concern.

“She’s good, but things at school have been difficult. People haven’t been very kind to her since she came back.”

“Well, she has you now,” my mom says confidently. “And that makes all the difference.” That’s one thing about my mom that I’ve always appreciated. Given where we come from and what she’s endured as a single mother, she has an unwavering empathy for others.

My mom’s eyes sparkle with excitement as she asks, “So you’re taking her out tonight?”

I nod. “Yeah, we’ll figure something out.”

“I think that’s wonderful, Corey,” she says, her smile widening. “I’m happy for you.”

Her words warm my heart, and I reply, “Thanks, Mom.” Then I add, “Sarah and Ivy have become friends.”

My mom’s expression turns brighter as she exclaims, “That’s fantastic! We’ll have to plan a family dinner soon and have Ivy join us.”

Warmth spreads through my chest at the thought of having Ivy over. “That’d be great,” I reply with a smile, setting my napkin on the table and leaning back in my chair to accommodate the enormous amount of food I just ate. “Do you mind if I take off? I want to give Taz a call and check on him.”

My mom’s brow furrows in concern. “I noticed he wasn’t at the game today. Is everything okay?” I hesitate, not wanting to worry her unnecessarily.

“He didn’t feel well,” I tell her, leaving out that something may be seriously wrong. “I’ll see you tomorrow, though,” I add, changing the subject.

“Congratulations on your game today, Honey,” my mom says with a proud smile. “You know those college letters will start pouring in soon.”

My stomach twists into knots at the thought of leaving home for college, though it’s still months away. It’s always been my dream, and nothing will get in the way. Deep down, I understand what it means, and suddenly, leaving this town isn’t as appealing as it once was.

Chapter 30

“Love Walks In”

Ivy - Age 18, 1988

Despite promising to meet Corey at the diner, he insists on coming to pick me up and greet my parents once again. I never would have guessed that beneath his cocky exterior lurked such a sweet gentleman.

As the sun sets behind the hills, Corey’s car pulls into my driveway, and my parents invite him inside and chatter about the game for what feels like hours. I try to follow along, but the intricacies of the game still escape me, especially the terminology. I make a mental note to go to Crown Books and look for a hockey reference guide next time I’m at the mall.

Once we break free of my house, we head to the quaint diner down the street for dessert. I’m relieved when we arrive, and it’s nearly empty, creating a peaceful atmosphere for just the two of us. It’s been a busy day, and I’ve been dying to find time alone with him.

I order a generous slice of rich, decadent German chocolate cake while Corey opts for a warm, cinnamon-spiced apple pie topped with a scoop of creamy vanilla ice cream. He insists on sharing, as he always does, knowing that I can never finish my portion alone and he’ll finish both desserts.

We sit facing each other at the small bistro table, and his hands reach out and intertwine with mine, a simple gesture that never fails to make me giddy. It may be insignificant to others, but it's a reminder of something I lacked for so long: a connection to another human. Whenever I'm in his presence, everything is lighter and more vibrant.

"It was nice to meet your mom today," I tell him with a warm smile. "It's awesome that she comes to your games."

"Yeah, she's always been my biggest fan," he says with a proud smile. "She sacrificed a lot for me to get where I am today."

"I hope I have the chance to get to know her better," I say without thinking, immediately regretting my presumptuous thought.

"Actually, that's something I wanted to talk to you about," he says in a serious tone that sends a shiver down my spine. Sitting up straight, I meet his intense gaze.

"Is everything alright?" I ask, though, in my mind, I keep replaying the same thought repeatedly. This "relationship" has gotten too serious for him, and he wants out. His next words surprise me.

"Ivy," he begins, his voice a gentle yet determined melody. His eyes are fixed on mine, searching for something in their depths. "When I first suggested we fake date, it was a passing thought to help you fit in and see if things would improve for you. I only knew what others had told me about you at the time. But as I've gotten to know you more, I've realized..."

My mind goes blank as he speaks, fear creeping into my heart at what I believe he's about to say. With tears gathering in my eyes, I squeeze them shut, bracing myself for his inevitable revelation: "I don't want to do this anymore. This isn't what I signed up for." Instead, when I open my eyes again, they're met with a curious look from him.

"Did you hear me?" he asks with genuine concern.

"No," I confess, my vulnerability exposed, "I'm sorry. I tuned it out because deep down, I knew what you were going

to say.”

“What did you think I was going to say?” he probes.

“That you want to end our fake dating relationship,” I admit with a heavy heart.

“You’re right,” he says with a smirk, leaning back in his seat. The weight of his words crushes me as he continues. “But not for the reason you think. Ivy, I want us to be together for real.” My heart plummets onto the linoleum floor of the dingy diner as his words sink in. “I want you to be my girlfriend.”

I swallow thickly, trying to process the sudden turn of events. “Wait, you want us to go out for real?” I ask with disbelief.

“Yes,” he chuckles. “That’s what I’ve been trying to say all this time. You’re unlike anyone I’ve ever met. The more I learn about you, the more I want to learn.”

My mind is reeling with questions as I try to make sense of his declaration. “What about your busy schedule and not having time for a girlfriend?” I remind him.

“I think anything can work if it’s important enough,” he says with conviction. “And being with you is important to me.” He leans closer, his voice dropping to a low whisper. “I can manage to play hockey and be with you. Unless you suddenly become incredibly demanding and difficult to be around,” he teases. “Like one of the Vipers.”

A genuine laugh escapes my lips at his playful jab. “That’s never going to happen,” I assure him.

“Well, then, it’s settled,” he declares with a smile. “I’d like you to wear my jersey to the next game.” A wave of warmth washes over me at the thought of proudly sporting his number on my back.

“Okay,” I reply, still in disbelief over how drastically this conversation has shifted. “I’d like that.” Shaking my head clear, I recap the events of the past ten minutes. “So, just so we’re clear,” I explain, “Ivy Owens, the girl who spent her formative years in a cult surrounded by criminals and lunatics, now has a boyfriend?”

“Yes,” he says with a mischievous glint in his eye. “Not just any boyfriend,” he adds confidently, placing his hand on top of mine. “You have the *best* boyfriend.”

The anticipation and excitement coursing through my veins make it hard to focus on the decadent dessert before me. The rich, velvety chocolate melts on my tongue, but I can barely taste it over the joy bubbling inside me. Corey finishes the rest of our desserts, unsurprisingly, his eyes sparkling with happiness as he looks at me.

The sun has long since set, and the evening has grown later, but we aren’t ready to say goodnight to one another yet, so we decide to drive to the park. It seems it’s quickly become “our spot.” Corey grabs a blanket from the back of his car, and we stroll hand in hand along the path, illuminated by the soft glow of the streetlights.

We make our way over to a spot on the grass near the bench where I had confided in him about the most challenging part of my past. The lush green blades cushion our weight as we settle onto the blanket. We continue to talk about small things, like school, friends, and mundane daily tasks. I asked him about Taz, and he told me he gave him a call but would be visiting him in person tomorrow. A sense of relief washes over me, knowing that his friend has someone like him looking out for him.

“That guy saved my ass more times than I can tell you,” he says with a hint of gratitude in his voice. “This is the least I can do.”

“It was really cool of Sascha to help out,” I add, though, in the back of my mind, I know I’ll owe her something for her assistance later.

“Do you happen to know what happened between them?” He asks curiously.

“Not really,” I reply, remembering how vague Sascha had been when explaining their estranged relationship. “All she said was that they were close when they were younger, and then he drifted away.”

Corey nods, slightly furrowing his brows as he tries to understand their animosity. I can see the confusion in his eyes, and I'm just as lost in the explanation as he is. Slowly, we both settle into a laying position on the ground, our bodies angled towards each other with our shoulders touching. Our intertwined hands rest between us as we gaze at the stars above.

In the quiet stillness of the night, I turn my head and study Corey's profile. His dark hair falls messily over his forehead, and I can see the sharp angle of his jawline beneath the hood of his sweatshirt. As if he could sense my longing gaze, he slowly turns to meet my stare with an intense look of his own. The air around us grows thick and charged as if we are the only two people in the world. My fingers tingle with the urge to reach and touch him while my lips ache to taste his.

A playful smirk crosses my lips as I tease, "So, now that I'm officially your girlfriend, does that mean I have permission to kiss you whenever I please?"

He rolls over, his weight pressing down on me as he leans in. "You know the answer to that," and then he's kissing me. His lips move with masterful skill, seeking entrance that I won't deny. The heated strength of his tongue sends my entire body into a frenzy, the pit of my stomach swirling with heat and desire. As fast as he takes control, he pulls away and whispers in my ear, sending shivers down my spine. "It's so hard to control myself around you, Ivy."

I can feel myself growing hotter, knowing that I'm the one who stole the air from his lungs. He plants gentle kisses along my cheek before finding my mouth again. When I finally open my eyes, he has pulled back slightly, a hint of excitement in his intense gaze. But there's something else there, too, a raw vulnerability hidden beneath the passion and desire between us.

My voice is barely audible as I speak, my breath coming in short gasps. "It's not easy for me either," I whisper, the weight of his body pressing against mine. With trembling hands, I tug at the strings of his hoodie, yearning to pull him closer.

His lips meet mine with a fierce hunger, causing my body to tremble. I surrender myself to the pleasure, unable to resist the intense sensation that courses through me. He presses his weight fully on top of me, and I open my legs to make room for his hips. His lips curve against my neck, leaving trails of delicate kisses that turn firmer with each passing second. My thighs tighten around his waist as my head falls back, giving into the ecstasy of his soft caresses and licks on my sensitive skin.

He lavishes attention on my neck, and my lower body arches in response, urging him on. His hand slips under my sweater, teasingly tracing patterns across my stomach before returning to the passionate kiss that has me consumed. Our tongues tangle together in deep, full breaths that soon turn into short pants as our bodies begin to move in unison.

Corey groans and shifts his hips against mine, igniting a fire within me that threatens to consume every inch of my being. I push my tongue further into his mouth, eagerly exploring every inch as I swallow the rumbles of pleasure that escape his lips. My hands slip under his sweatshirt, absorbing the heat of his skin under my fingertips as they trail down his back, leaving a trail of goosebumps in their wake.

Corey pulls away for just a moment, his eyes never leaving mine as I lift my hips and silently plead for him to continue. As my legs part further, his hands grip my waist, and he pushes back into me, our bodies fitting together like puzzle pieces. My lips glide over his skin, tracing the contours of his muscular neck before pausing at his ear, unable to contain a moan as he presses against me with increasing intensity.

His hand returns to my stomach as I reach for it, guiding it up higher until it rests over my bra. I don't say anything, simply breathing heavily against him, my touch daring him to continue.

My fingers dance along the curves of his back, memorizing every perfectly constructed slab of muscle. He's hard in all the right places, including between my legs, and every touch sends electric shocks through my body.

Corey's head lifts, and the heat in his eyes becomes almost unbearable. "Are you sure about this?" he asks, his nostrils flaring with desire.

"I've never been so sure about anything," I reply without hesitation. He dips down to kiss me again, but this time there's a newfound urgency in his movements. "You're addicting," he murmurs against my lips before pulling back slightly to look at me through heavy lids. "We should probably stop," he says with a tight frown.

"Please don't stop doing what you're doing," I urge, moving my hips against his. He quickly takes my mouth again as we move together with increasing fervor.

The heat of our bodies is almost suffocating as he continues to kiss my mouth, trailing down to my neck, where he nips and sucks with practiced precision. His hand squeezes and rubs my nipple, causing tension to knot inside me and creating an ache deep within.

A loud moan works its way up my throat as friction from his movements becomes almost too much to bear. My body is on fire, every inch of skin flushing with desire, and I can feel Cory's gaze on me as he peeks at me through his dark lashes. My lips part in a silent plea just as my body explodes with overwhelming pleasure.

Corey's hands come up to cup my face as he continues to kiss me, swallowing the sounds coming from my throat. I continue to cry into his mouth as my body twitches underneath him.

He stops and smiles down at me, rubbing his thumb along my lower lip as I begin to giggle almost controllably at the feeling of my body. I know I'm blushing like crazy, but he only smirks, a little chuckle slipping from his swollen lips and then he sits up and tugs me into a sitting position.

His eyes bore into mine, full of concern and tenderness. "How are you feeling?" he asks softly.

"Amazing," I respond breathlessly. "And relaxed," I add with a playful giggle.

Corey lets out a low laugh as he helps me stand up, his hands lingering on my waist for a moment longer than necessary. "Let me take you home," he says, his voice filled with determination. "If I want to spend as much time as possible with you, I need your dad's approval."

I let out an exasperated sigh. "Ugh. Don't mention my dad that close to our first sexual experience," I joke.

The world around us fades into a blur as we sit in the car outside my house, caught up in each other's embrace. Our kisses are wild and passionate, our breaths mingling in the confined space as the windows fog up. It's as if time has stopped, and all that exists is this moment with him.

Eventually, I pull away, my mind filled with contentment and a newfound hope for the future. For the first time in maybe forever, I'm not haunted by thoughts of the past, but instead, my heart is filled with excitement for what lies ahead. As I drift off to sleep, his face is the last thing I see, filling me with warmth and joy.

Chapter 31

“Free Fallin”

Corey - Age 18, 1989

I'm relieved I don't have any away games this week, and I'm excited to spend some quality time with Ivy instead of traveling, yet a cloud of worry continues to hang over me because Taz has been distant and closed off. I haven't gotten to the bottom of what's going on, and during practice, when he's usually cracking jokes and goofing around, he's serious and quiet. That's not a bad thing, but it's just not Taz. I can't figure out what was happening with him, but I know I'll have to confront him if he doesn't start talking soon.

According to Ivy, who heard from Sascha, a physical altercation occurred at Taz's house the night he missed the game, most likely with his brother. Brian Tazman has always been a screw-up, living in the past and throwing away his chance at greatness with a cocaine addiction. Now, he's the one pretending to be a parent to Taz, though he's doing a terrible job at it. College offer letters are expected any day now, and I refused to let Taz's brother ruin his chances. If necessary, I'll take matters into my own hands and visit Brian.

We're deep into the school year, and our schedules are packed with sports games and student performances. Tonight, there's a band concert that I wouldn't normally attend, but Ivy is going since Sascha and Sarah are performing, so I decided

to go. Mom and Alan will also be going, and they're excited I'm finally doing something more "family-oriented."

I've convinced a few friends to join me in the bleachers of the auditorium. We're huddled together, dressed too warm for this cramped room. Also, being hockey players, we aren't the smallest group, especially Landry. That dude is the biggest guy in our league at 6'5", built perfectly for a goalie. Getting the puck past him is like shooting around a brick wall. If people only knew he's also the nicest guy until you make him mad. But when he's chill, he's basically a marshmallow. Right now, that marshmallow is nearly sitting on my lap. We got here late, and Ivy is sitting down near the front with her new friend, Kerri.

"Jesus, Landry, can you try to take up less room?" I ask, jostling my elbow against his for any spare inch.

"I can't, Delzy," he says with a shrug, "just suck it up, Man."

The announcer greets the crowd as we elbow and punch one another. Landry slaps me on the back of the head, knocking my ball cap off, and some adults in the nearby area shush us as one returns my hat with a disapproving stare.

The band members sit in a semi-circle, with Sarah at the front in her designated first chair in the clarinet section. Her fingers move over her instrument, pouring all her energy into each note. I remember when we were younger, and she would always have a reed in her mouth, obsessively sucking on them and leaving them all over her house. *It was truly disgusting.*

In front of the clarinets sits Sascha, in the flute section, wearing a white dress and minimal makeup that surprisingly softens her usually sharp features. She wears an intimidating facade, but I've learned she is fiercely loyal to those she cares about.

Ivy and Kerri share a laugh, drawing my attention to my girlfriend and her new friend. I don't know much about Kerri besides what Ivy told me. She's new to the area and moved here from Texas. She's a big farm girl who spends most of her time with horses, chickens, and who knows what else. Landry

can't look away from her, which I suspect is part of the reason he agreed to come tonight. *Seeing how he is about as big as a horse, they'd make a good couple.* I laugh when the joke comes into my head and make a note to burn him with it later.

As the final notes of the concert fade away, Sarah and Sascha decide to go home. Surprisingly, Kerri agrees to let Landry take her home.

After we all say our goodbyes, Ivy and I are left alone, and as much as I want to relive our steamy encounter from the other night, I don't want to give her the wrong impression. So instead, we drive around town aimlessly, sipping on Big Gulps and eating junk food from 7-11. But then, an idea strikes me. We turn onto the highway and head for the familiar streets of my old neighborhood.

I can't explain it, but something inside me yearns to bring Ivy to the trailer park where I spent my childhood. She's opened up to me about her struggles and experiences, so she deserves to know about this pivotal place in my past. When I shared our destination with her, she practically radiated enthusiasm and interest in anticipation of learning more about me.

We drive through the industrial area on the outskirts of town, with towering factories looming on both sides of the road. The once-familiar streets are now gritty and run-down, with graffiti covering every available surface. It's been years since I've been back, but seeing this place with fresh adult eyes reveals its true nature as a desolate dump. My stomach churns at the memory of arguing with my mom about staying here, realizing now how wrong I was to assume I knew what was best at thirteen years old.

"So this is where you grew up?" Ivy asks, her voice free of judgment and filled with genuine curiosity.

"Yes, this is my hometown," I reply. We drive along the main street, passing by familiar sights that bring back childhood memories. I point out my elementary school, and we continue to the small building that houses the ice rink where I first learned to skate. Though it's closed now, Ivy's

eyes light up at the sight, and she remarks how she can imagine a younger version of me gliding gracefully on the ice.

We approach the old neighborhood, and nostalgia washes over me like a warm ocean tide. Memories flood back to me of playing in these streets with my childhood friends and walking home every day from school, our backpacks heavy with textbooks and homework.

We do a slow lap around the trailer park, passing by familiar sights - the rusty playground, the small convenience store where I used to buy Pixie Stix and Big League Chew, and the narrow road lined with rows of rundown trailers. I point out the small mobile home my mom and I shared, now looking more dilapidated than I remember. The peeling paint and crooked shutters give it a haunted feel, as if it has been abandoned for years. The landlord was never one for upkeep or repairs; nothing has changed. A feeling of sadness floods my chest as I realize that this place will always hold a special place in my heart, but it will never be the same as it was when I was a child.

Mrs. Lyonne's old trailer looks better than I remember. The once beaten-up structure looks more inviting, its exterior painted a crisp white and trimmed with a deep green. The porch where Mrs. Lyonne used to sit and wave at me every day has been transformed into a charming outdoor space, and a pristine white picket fence encloses the entire thing. It's bittersweet to think that she's gone, but I'm grateful that whoever had taken over her home was giving it the care and attention it deserved.

Ivy tilts her head, her expression innocent and curious.

"Should we walk around?" she asks, looking at me with wide, hopeful eyes.

I shake my head, a small smile tugging at the corners of my mouth.

"Not in this area," I reply, my tone tinged with caution. "It used to be rough during the day, and now it's probably gotten worse, especially at night."

“Got it.” She nods, but her smile doesn’t falter. As we drive back toward home, she reaches out and lays her hand gently on my thigh, a reassuring gesture that comforts me.

“So, what are you planning to do when we graduate?” she asks, her tone conveying the weight of the question. I haven’t addressed this topic before, not wanting to dampen our time together with looming uncertainties.

“Well, it’s unlikely that any NHL teams are looking to pick up an eighteen-year-old, no matter how good he may be,” I say with a playful wink. “So, for now, I plan to play for a top university and hopefully get drafted into the pros.”

Her lips curve into a smile as she nods in understanding. “Do you have any specific universities in mind?”

“I do,” he says. “There’s a few good programs I would like to attend and coaches I would like to play under. One is the University of Minnesota, and the other is Boston University. Each one offers opportunities for both academics and hockey.”

Ivy exhales, likely doing the same thing I am, mentally calculating how far both places are from here. We’re still months away from that happening, so I force those thoughts out of my head.

“What about you? What do you want to do?”

Her face softens as she confesses, “I have no idea. I’ve spent so much time trying to get through each day that I haven’t had the freedom to think about the future.” She pauses, her eyes filled with longing. “There are things I like to do, though,” she says wistfully.

My interest is piqued, and I press, “Like what?”

A small smile tugs at the corners of her lips, “I like to write. I like children.”

A warmth spreads through my chest as I imagine Ivy working with children, her tender heart guiding them toward their dreams.

“So maybe something to do with one of those?” she finishes.

Filled with conviction, I reach out and squeeze her knee. “You’re going to be incredible at whatever you choose to do, Ivy,” I assure her. And I know without a doubt that it’s true.

Chapter 32

“Tarzan Boy”

Ivy - Age 18, 1989

With a determined stride, I climb out of my car and approach the school entrance. I am set on talking to Sascha and getting some answers about Taz’s strange behavior. As I wait, I see his unmistakable beat-up truck pull up, but what catches my attention more is seeing Sascha sitting in the passenger seat next to him. She looks less than thrilled to be there, but her presence raises concern.

Taz exits the car and says something to Sascha before walking to Corey and the other guys. Meanwhile, Sascha heads towards me, only glancing up at the last moment when she realizes I’ve seen everything.

“Don’t ask,” she says curtly as she walks past me in a huff.

“Wait, Sash,” I call after her, quickly following behind. “You don’t have to tell me anything if you’re uncomfortable.”

“Thank you,” she mutters as she continues walking, forcing me to jog slightly to keep up with her pace.

“Can you at least admit that it’s odd that you just rode to school with someone you claim to hate?” I press.

She stops and turns to face me, her expression serious. “What if I told you I didn’t have a choice?” she asks

cryptically.

“What do you mean?” I ask, confused.

Sascha shakes her head, “There are still things about me that I haven’t shared. It’s not because I’ve intentionally kept them from you. It’s just not something I think about or talk about often. If you can peel yourself away from Corey’s lips during lunch, let’s grab some sandwiches and chat.”

I reassure her by placing my hand on her arm as she looks up at me with worried eyes.

“I’ll meet you here,” I say before heading inside.

Lost in thought about Sascha and Taz’s mysterious behavior, I nearly collide with Kerri as I navigate the crowded hallway.

“Are you okay?” she asks in her barely there accent. Her long strawberry blonde curls are pulled back into a high ponytail, and she’s dressed in dark pegged jeans tucked into bright yellow socks that match her cozy sweater. It’s effortlessly cute and perfectly her. I can’t help but smile at the sight of her, knowing that she probably wears overalls, boots, and t-shirts when working at home.

It dawns on me that the small group of friends I’ve surrounded myself with all have one thing in common: they are unapologetically themselves. Kerri is no exception, and I’m grateful to have found such authentic people during my last year of school.

I lean against my locker, listening to the clanging of metal lockers and snippets of conversation as I wait for Corey. He arrives a few minutes later, his bright smile and morning kiss making my heart flutter. I never pictured myself becoming this girl who eagerly waits to see her boyfriend daily. But here we are, and I can’t help but think about him constantly.

As he walks me to my first class, I mention that I’ll be having lunch with Sascha today and ask if Taz has told Corey anything about what’s been happening. Corey shakes his head but mentions that Taz has been acting more like himself lately, which eases some of my worries.

After what amounts to an eternity of waiting for the clock to strike noon, I greet Sascha outside the cafeteria. She's sporting her signature all-black ensemble with a sleek black sweater, a flowy black skirt, and chunky black combat boots. We lock arms and head over to the Sub Shop for lunch.

We sit down with our sandwiches, and I can't help but tap my fingers nervously on the table, waiting for Sascha to open up about whatever is bothering her. I've learned from experience that pushing her too hard will only worsen things. Finally, she takes a deep breath and starts to speak. With a hesitant pause, she looks up at me with vulnerable eyes before sharing a secret.

"You don't know this about me, but I was adopted." She studies my expression for any signs of judgment and continues finding only understanding and compassion. "It's not something I usually talk about because it's never been a big deal. My birth mother was young, even younger than we are now. She wasn't able to raise a baby while still being a child herself, so she made the difficult decision to give me up for adoption. Luckily, my parents were able to agree to adopt me before I was born. To me, they have always been my true parents."

"Thank you for trusting me with this," I respond sincerely.

Her gaze shifts away, hinting at another layer to the story.

"This is where Taz comes in," she admits.

"IS HE YOUR BROTHER?" I shriek in a moment of unfiltered thought.

"What?" she says with a mocking laugh. "For the love of Dave Gahan. No! Just calm down, Nancy Drew."

"Sorry," I reply sheepishly.

"Anyway," she starts while giving me the side-eyed look of someone slightly annoyed, "my parents have always had a heart for helping children in need. They've taken in numerous foster kids over the years, and even though I'm their only officially adopted child, our home has always been open to

those who needed it. But as they're getting older, they haven't been able to take in any foster kids for the past two years."

I nod, trying to anticipate where this story is going. She's quiet momentarily, lost in her thoughts, before returning her focus to me.

"This is the part where it's not my story to tell," she says with a sigh, her words heavy with the weight of secrets and difficult situations. "I can tell you this, though. I guess things have been bad for Taz at home for a while. Some stuff went down with his brother the night before the game he missed, and when I told my parents about it, they offered to have Taz come and stay with us."

My eyes grow wide as I try to grasp the gravity of what she is telling me.

"Taz is living with you right now?" I squeak out, my mind reeling at the thought of having the notorious troublemaker in her house.

"Yes," she confirms, her voice tinged with frustration and exhaustion, "and it's as horrible as you think it would be. He's been staying at my house for less than a week, and I already want to kill him."

A mix of shock and amusement washes over me. *Who would've thought that Sascha and Michael Tazman, enemies by all of Sascha's accounts, would now live under one roof?* My hands instinctively fly to my mouth as if trying to contain a laugh at the irony of the situation.

"What am I supposed to do?" Sascha continues, her tone pleading. "He needed to escape that situation and had no one else. My parents do this sort of thing, so it makes sense, but now I have Michael Tazman two doors down, blasting his music, using all the hot water, and apparently driving me to school because my parents say it's a 'waste of gas' to take two cars to the same place." Her words spill out in a rapid stream of discontent, never stopping to take a breath, her face contorting into a mixture of frustration and resignation.

“Oh my God, Sash.” I say sympathetically. “I am so sorry that you have to be in this situation, but you must admit it’s funny.” My lips twitch with a hint of a smile, but hers form a tight line, and her eyes narrow into a sharp squint. She doesn’t find my amusement as amusing as I do.

“I’m grateful that you guys can be there for Taz,” I tell her.

“Yeah, I guess so,” she adds, aimlessly picking at the French roll of her turkey sub. “Anyway, I’m not sure how long this whole thing will last, but for now, it’s just how it is.” With a quick, decisive movement, she sips her drink, the glass clinking against the tabletop as she sets it down. Her expression changes suddenly, her eyes widening with shock and realization. “Now that I think about it, this is all your fault for luring me into this mess,” she exclaims, the accusation evident in her voice. “You owe me BIG TIME for getting involved.”

“Anything you want,” I tell her with a playful smile.

“Don’t tell anyone,” she requests. “Like I said, it’s not my story to tell.”

“Your secret is safe with me,” I reassure her. “I won’t even tell Corey. I’m sure Taz will tell him soon enough himself.”

“So let’s change the subject,” she suggests. “How are things going with you?”

“Good,” I reply. “Everything is going well.”

“You sound surprised,” she notes.

“I am a little bit,” I admit. “I mean, I didn’t expect to have to do anything but tolerate my senior year, much less enjoy it.”

“Oh my God,” she practically yells, slamming her hand down on the table and making me jump. “Speaking of enjoying things, did you hear that your boyfriend and the rest of those airheads will be in the talent show?”

“The what?” I say, caught off guard by her sudden outburst.

“The winter talent show,” she confirms with a nod. “Taz was blathering about it the other day. Apparently, it’s some secret project.”

“I’m both terrified and intrigued,” I confess as my mind races with possibilities.

Chapter 33

“Rock The Casbah”

Ivy - Age 18, 1989

Against all odds, Sascha’s suspicions were proven correct. Corey and the rest of the guys had been secretive about the upcoming talent show, but it’s now clear that they had signed up to perform. Whispers and mysterious disappearances had filled the week leading up to tonight, leaving Sascha convinced that they had been practicing in the gym. We couldn’t confirm their whereabouts or activities for the past five days despite our efforts.

I have suspicions about what’s going on, only because I’ve heard some music blaring from Taz’s truck that normally isn’t his style. They returned from lunch the other day while we were sitting outside, and I could clearly make out the high falsetto notes of Joey McIntyre emanating from the cramped space inside the truck.

Corey and the guys were howling with laughter when they emerged, and as soon as they saw Sascha and me eyed them skeptically, they stopped laughing and flashed us the sheepish smiles of children caught with their hands in the cookie jar.

I tried to pry the truth out of Corey, even threatening not to kiss him until he told me what they were up to, but he only laughed and with good reason. We both know it would be

impossible for me to make good on that threat. Kissing him has become my favorite thing, and there's no sense in denying it.

So here we are, gathered in front of the stage in the school auditorium, eagerly anticipating whatever grand spectacle they are about to present. The faint scent of freshly polished floor mingles with the buzz of excitement in the air and dissipates the smell of clove cigarettes that someone nearby smoked before coming in here.

The gymnasium falls into a hush as the lights dim, all eyes trained on the stage. I squint through the darkness, making out the distinct silhouettes of five figures emerging onto the stage, standing in a perfect line. The crowd erupts into deafening cheers and applause, their energy pulsating through every corner of the room, filling the air with excitement. No one knows what will happen, but we all sense it will be unforgettable.

As the noise dies down again, a palpable tension settles over the audience, holding them in its grip as the first music notes fill the air. The lights slowly come up, revealing Corey, Taz, Garrison, Landry, and McKay in all their glory. They stand tall and confident, exuding an undeniable aura of coolness and charisma. My heart races as I clasp my hands together in nervous anticipation.

The familiar beat and whistles of "Hanging Tough" fill the space, blending seamlessly with the excited shouts and screams of the crowd. *I knew it!* The five hockey players launch into action with synchronized arm waves, flawlessly replicating the iconic choreography from the music video. To my surprise, they aren't half bad at dancing, either. Even Landry, who stands out for his size among the group, moves fluidly to the rhythm.

Laughter and cheers cascade through the audience as the boys perfectly lip-sync their performance. Taz steals the show as Donnie Wahlberg, strutting confidently in a black leather jacket and ripped jeans. Even Sascha can't help but smile as he takes center stage.

And, of course, Corey easily embodies Jordan Knight, donning a stylish black button-down shirt, matching vest, and fedora, just like in my teenage fantasies.

I cover my face with my hands, torn between embarrassment and amusement at their unexpected choice of performance, but deep down, my heart swells with affection for these boys who would go to such lengths to put a smile on everyone's face.

The final notes of their performance begin to fade, and the audience can't help but feel a twinge of disappointment. Suddenly, the energy picks up again as the guys run off stage, only to return seconds later wearing nothing but jeans, white t-shirts, and dog tags.

The lights dim, and a makeshift volleyball net is swiftly set up by some nimble theater students in the center of the stage. Then it happens - the iconic song "Playing With the Boys" by Kenny Loggins starts playing, and the guys strip off their shirts with exaggerated zeal and begin mimicking every move from the infamous volleyball scene in *Top Gun*. The crowd erupts into a frenzy, especially the girls, who can't contain their excitement. *When did they find time to oil their chests between scenes?*

It's quite a sight; I can't blame anyone for drooling. Every one of these hockey players is packed with lean muscle. Amidst the chaos, one person stands out, at least to me—Corey. His always-present confidence, natural beauty, and charisma draw all eyes towards him on stage.

He's impossible to ignore with his perfect olive skin tone and build. As he dives for the ball and effortlessly pretends to serve it over his head, I can't help but admire his chiseled square shoulders and toned abs. He's a natural athlete with no problem with the limelight. He's destined for stardom. There is zero doubt.

When we think we've seen it all, all performers but Taz exit the stage as the stage crew peons deftly unfold a large black tarp and set it parachuting down into place across the floor. Taz strides confidently to the center of the stage carrying a

worn wooden chair to the center of the tarp. *What in the world could they possibly be doing now?*

With a mischievous grin, Taz sets up a tall ladder behind the chair and positions a bucket at the top. The opening chords of “What a Feeling” by Irene Cara fill the air, setting the scene for what’s to come.

Corey strides out, still wearing only a pair of worn 501s, and lounges in the chair, his eyes closed as he lets the music wash over him. Meanwhile, Taz ascends the ladder with precision and grace, holding onto the bucket of water like a trophy. Just when everyone thinks they’ve seen it all, Taz tips the bucket over, sending a cascade of water down onto Corey’s body.

The crowd erupts into cheers and laughter as Corey shakes off the shock. The other guys join them onstage to take their bows and revel in their accolades. They earned it. It was a phenomenal performance.

Beside me, all of the girls are shrieking at the top of their lungs while Kerri and Sascha grin with delight. The sound echoes off the walls and reverberates through my body, a cacophony of excitement and joy. As the cheering dies, Corey steps forward, his voice booming through the microphone and capturing everyone’s attention. His gaze locks onto mine, a mischievous glint in his eye.

“That was for you, Ivy Girl,” he says, his words rolling off his tongue like honey. “You’ve got the right stuff!”

I roll my eyes at his cornball reference and feel my face going three shades of scarlet as Sascha and Kerri pull me to my feet. Suddenly, I am a part of the talent show.

“Kiss her!” Kerri yells from my side, holding me up, not allowing me to sit and disappear into the sea of acid-wash jeans jumping excitedly around me.

Even Sascha gets caught in the tubular whirlwind of the moment. “Kiss her!”

Then the chant begins. I look around the auditorium at all the teen faces yelling, “Kiss her! Kiss her!”

Daylight streams in as I see Stacey and Amber leave hastily out one of the heavy push doors, but I was buoyed by the sight of Jennifer and Whitney, two of the less venomous Vipers, joining the chant, their fists pumping.

I shake my head at the overwhelming sensation of being the sudden feature attraction. I look back at the stage. Corey shrugs and then, without further hesitation, leaps directly off the stage, Patrick Swayze style, and trots up the aisle to where I stand.

“What do you think?” He grins, his face inches from mine as he leans down to be heard over the din of his adoring audience.

“You are mental!” I laugh, still embarrassed, as the chanting continues.

“Are you calling me crazy?” Corey asks with mock offense.

“That is exactly what I am calling you!” I affirm.

“Well then, Ivy Girl, I’m crazy for you.”

I know the crowd is yelling for HIM to kiss me, but I’m calling the shots right now. I stand on my tip toes and throw my arms around his neck to bring his lips to mine. He obliges by lifting me in his beautiful, oil and water-soaked embrace, and he kisses me deeply. We no longer hear the chanting. Instead, a volley of cheers erupts around us, but it is altogether possible that it is only me hearing my soul whooping in celebration.

Chapter 34

“Urgent”

Corey - Age 18, 1989

I laughed when Taz brought up the idea of participating in the talent show, but he was persistent, as always. He has a way of wearing you down with his enthusiasm. He even roped Landry into it, and once that happened, I couldn't say no.

As I stood on stage with my friends, lip-syncing and dancing, I was so happy we did it. Our last year of high school ends in just a few short months, and we will all cherish this memory forever. When Ivy's jaw dropped in awe at our performance, it made all doubts worth it. Her face was priceless, lit up with embarrassment when I dedicated the performance to her and that kiss. It was right up there with winning a championship. *I've definitely won.*

Everyone's hungry and too amped to go straight home, so we head to the diner. We take a big corner booth, everyone laughing and in good spirits. Of course, we won the show, which we knew we would. The fact that we'd been practicing these stupid songs and dances everywhere, including Taz and me in the locker room, didn't make Coach happy, but it was all worth it.

After we finish eating, we all go our separate ways. Taz offers to drive Sascha home because they live together now,

which is still completely unbelievable to me, but at least he's out of that house. It's taking all the restraint I have not to grab Landry and go over there and beat the shit out of his brother, but I know that won't help Taz. Besides, he seems happy living with Sascha's family for now. He's been sober and attending class and practice, so I'll let it go.

Now that the evening is winding down, I only think about getting Ivy alone. Every second I'm near her, my fingers itch to touch her, make her smile, and hear the soft coos she makes when I kiss her neck. I wasn't lying when I told her that she was addictive. If I could have Ivy Owens and fresh ice for the rest of my life, I would die a happy man.

That addiction is how we find ourselves here. The heat of our bodies radiates through the cramped space of my car. The windows are fogged from our heavy breaths as I unzip her jeans, her bra long since removed and tossed into the front seat.

"Please, please keep going," she begs. Smiling against her lips, my hand slips between her legs, under her plain cotton panties. Her begging is a desperate plea, and I can feel her need radiating from every inch of her body. My hand moves with purpose, and a moan escapes her lips as I start rubbing slow circles on her clit. I press my lips against her neck, devouring the taste of her sweat and desire. Her body is on fire for me.

My other hand leaves her neck and back to her breast, kneading and squeezing before rubbing my rough thumb over her swollen nipple. I apply more pressure to her clit as I dip my head and take her nipple into my mouth, flicking and sucking in rhythm with the hand that continues to work her pussy.

My thumb works her clit as I slip my middle finger inside. I know she's never been touched like this before, so I take my time, pumping my middle finger in and out until she begins to meet my timing with her hips. Sensing she's ready, I add another finger, stretching her slightly. My fingers are soaked with her arousal, the sounds echoing throughout the car.

She begins to buck at the feeling of my fingers inside her, and I know she's close. My body shivers in anticipation as I speed up my rhythm and take her mouth again, capturing her moans.

"Corey," she drawls, as her lower body raises off the seat and clenches around my fingers. I stop kissing her and watch her face, eyes closed in ecstasy, her head thrown back, and her orgasm rips through her body. It's easily the most beautiful thing I've ever seen, and I don't think I'll get enough of it.



Ivy

My brain returns to my body as I come back down to earth. My skin is hot and flushed, and my senses tingle as Corey removes his hand from my pants. His fingers are coated with my juices, and I stare in wonder as he smears some on my bottom lip and then dips his head and licks it off with a swipe of his tongue, gently sucking on it.

The scent of his cologne surrounds me, the weight of his body pressing against mine, and the taste of me on his lips is overwhelming. As we continue to kiss, I can't help but feel dizzy again with desire. Corey breaks away to trail kisses down my neck, causing shivers to run through me. "You taste like every fantasy I've ever had," he whispers, sending a jolt of pleasure through me. "I've never wanted anything more than you."

"It's my turn to say the same about you," I reply breathlessly.

Corey looks at me with surprise before grinning mischievously, "We're not having sex in this car, Ivy," he says with a chuckle. "You are far too precious to lose your virginity in the back of a 1984 Ford Escort that smells like sweaty hockey gear and stale Cheetos."

"I'm not losing anything," I start. "I'm choosing to give you something because I care about you." Corey's eyebrows shoot

to his forehead, and he gets a sheepish look, knowing his word choice wasn't perfect. "But I wasn't talking about sex," I say.

"So what are you saying?" he asks with hopeful curiosity.

"I know I'm not experienced, but I want to make you feel good. I want to show you I care about you. So, what I need you to do is stop worrying about the car, which smells fantastic, by the way, just like you, and take your pants off."

First comes the look of surprise, both at my words and tone, which is the sassy one he likes, and then he can't move fast enough to get his pants down, which makes me giggle.

My breath hitches in anticipation as he shimmies out of his jeans in the cramped space. I've never seen a naked man in real life before. In movies, yes, but only for a split second. This is an entirely different experience.

Corey's strong arms flip us over, and I straddle him in the small seat, my body pressed against his as I take in his naked form. A thrill runs through me at the sight of his arousal, tenting the fabric of his boxers. With eager hands, I tug them down until his erection springs free, landing just below his navel. The sight of him is even more breathtaking than I could have imagined. His skin is smooth and taut, rippling with corded muscle from years of hard work. And then there are those tantalizing wisps of hair, a dark trail that starts at his belly button and leads to exactly where my eyes are trained. It's all I can do to resist running my fingers through it. He is a feast for the eyes, a delicious combination of strength and sensuality.

A smirk crosses Corey's face as if daring me to continue, but his arrogant expression only fuels my desire. I reach down and grasp his hardened length, stroking it from base to tip. "Like this?" I inquire with a sly smile.

"Just like that," he answers hoarsely, his eyes heavy with lust. The knowledge that I am the one causing him pleasure makes me feel powerful and confident.

I continue to stroke him as I lean down and place a soft kiss on the tip. It seems like a fitting introduction for our first

meeting, and his dick twitches in response at the contact. Flattening my tongue, I trace up and down the underside of his shaft before swirling my tongue around the head.

With a deep groan and his head falling back against the seat, Corey gives himself fully to my hands and mouth. Encouraged by his response, I take him deeper into my throat with gentle suction. His head comes forward again, and he cradles the side of my face as I move on him, licking and sucking on the head each time I pull back, using my hand to slide up and down the base in unison. His heavy lids allow him to watch every movement intensely.

I repeat the process, using the tip of my tongue to explore every inch of his sensitive flesh. The warmth of his skin against my lips sends shivers down my spine, and I moan softly in desire. Suddenly, Corey pushes me back, breaking the suction with a satisfying pop.

“That’s so good, Ivy,” he admits, his voice filled with need.

“Perfect,” I say with a wicked smile before diving back into my task with even more fervor. The taste of him on my tongue is intoxicating, driving me to devour him even more eagerly. His hands are tangled in my hair, pulling just enough to send sparks of pleasure through me. And then I feel it - the moment he loses control and gives in to his release. I eagerly swallow every drop, savoring him.

When I look up at him, he’s regarding me with wonder and awe. “You’re amazing,” he tells me.

“Everything with you is amazing,” I reply, my voice husky with desire. “Baby.”

Corey chuckles and pulls me close to his chest, holding me tightly. “I knew I’d love how that sounds on your lips.” His words thrill me, and I nuzzle closer, feeling content and at home in his embrace.

“Should we talk about the future?” Corey asks. It’s not the first time he’s brought it up, and I’ll admit I’m avoiding it.

The future scares me, and I never want to spoil our precious moments together by talking about what may or may not

happen in a couple of months. So instead, I reply sleepily,
“Can we enjoy this moment for now?”

He squeezes me tighter and kisses the top of my head, his
way of conceding for now.

Chapter 35

“Hold Me Now”

Corey - Age 18, 1989

Excitement thrums through my veins as I prepare for the upcoming hockey game. Landry called me last night with exciting news— he’s officially joining the Mavericks. It’s a huge accomplishment, considering he’s been training with us on a practice squad while still playing for the high school team. We don’t have much time left before we all go our separate ways after graduation, so playing a few games with him as a Maverick is a special moment.

Despite being pressed for time, I stop by Ivy’s house on the way to drop off my jersey for her to wear at the game. As she answers the door, my breath catches in my throat. She’s barefoot, wearing only short shorts and a tank top that shows off her toned arms and stomach. Her hair tumbles down in loose waves around her face, giving her a wild and carefree look. The desire to push her back into her bedroom and hear her moans of pleasure overwhelms me, but I resist.

“What are you hiding behind your back?” she asks, eyes curious and sparkling. I can’t help but grin as I slowly reveal my surprise.

“An industrial-sized pack of condoms,” I answer with a mischievous glint in my eye.

Her hand immediately flies to her mouth as she lets out a giggle.

“What? Really?” she exclaims, trying to contain her laughter.

I play along, feigning innocence. “What do you think it is?”

She mimics my earlier actions, standing on her tiptoes and clasping her hands together in anticipation. “Is it your jersey?” she asks eagerly.

“Of course it is, Ivy Girl. I told you my girlfriend wears my jersey to games,” I reply, unable to hide my amusement at her excitement.

With a delighted squeal, she jumps up and down and reaches for the blue and black jersey in my hands. She looks it over carefully before holding it up to her face and inhaling deeply. A chuckle escapes from deep within my chest as I watch her.

Her delicate, feminine voice fills with sweet excitement as she leans closer to me, her nose buried in the collar of my jersey. “Oh, this smells amazing,” she declares. “It smells like you. I think I’ll be sleeping in it.”

I can feel my heart race at the thought of her curled up in my jersey, wearing something intimately mine.

“Don’t put that thought in my head, or I won’t be able to play this game,” I reply, trying to push away the distracting images. But my body betrays me as I feel myself start to get hard in my sweats. *Think of Taz’s Grandma. Yep, that does the trick.* Finally, I shake off the thought and ask about her parents coming to the game.

“No, they can’t make it. It’s just me and the girls,” she says with a small smile.

“Okay, Baby, sounds good. I’ll see you soon,” I tell her, wrapping my arms around her and kissing her soft lips.

I run out, jump into Taz’s car, and speed towards the arena. As we merge onto the main road, he turns to me and asks, “Have you told her yet?”

I sigh and shake my head. “No, not yet.”

“Why are you holding off telling her? You’ve made your decision,” he says bluntly.

“It’s not that simple,” I confess. “This is hard, and it’s going to change our relationship. Every time I bring it up or mention anything about the future, she changes the subject.”

“Well, the sooner you tell her, the better,” he advises. “It will hurt you both more if you wait too long.”

The weight of the secret I’m keeping from Ivy sits heavy on my shoulders, like a boulder that I can’t shake off. The truth is, I received my acceptance letters weeks ago, a fact that surprises me every time she doesn’t ask about them. Perhaps she already knows but doesn’t want to acknowledge it. When we first started this fake dating scheme, it was just for fun, a way to pass the time and help her get through her dreaded senior year. But things have changed, and the thought of saying goodbye to her causes a deep ache in my chest.

But as much as I wish I could stay, I’ve made my decision. I’ll be attending Boston University and playing hockey. Time is running out for me to tell Ivy before someone else does, like the local paper who came by yesterday for a small interview. They promised to run the story before graduation. And our athletic director at school wants to announce it and hold a big commitment ceremony for me. But I can’t let anyone find out before Ivy, my girlfriend. I need to talk to her soon...before it’s too late.



With under twelve minutes left in the third period, our team is down 4-2. It’s been a frustrating night - we’re known for our quick moves and tight defense, but tonight it seems like all of our skills have abandoned us. Cruz, usually a decent defenseman despite his complete incompetence in daily life, is having an off night. He seems constantly out of position and letting too many pucks slip by.

Desperate for a change, Coach benches him at the start of the third period. But even without Cruz on the ice, we can’t

find our rhythm. Our puck handling is slow and sloppy, and penalties have added to our deficit. The other team has capitalized on two power plays already.

Looking up at the stands, I search for some motivation. And there they are, Ivy, Sarah, Sascha, and Kerri. Sascha lounges with her black boots propped up on the seat in front of her, giving off her usual “I’d rather be anywhere else but here” vibe. But Ivy, Sarah, and Kerri are on their feet, jumping around and cheering wildly. My eyes linger on Ivy wearing my jersey, which hangs loosely on her small frame. A primal feeling stirs inside me as I take in her beauty. The pink tint on her cheeks from cheering for me only makes it stronger. Suddenly, winning this game feels like a foregone conclusion with them in the stands supporting us.

On the ice, their star player is a young French-Canadian prodigy named Gagne, who recently moved to the United States to pursue his hockey dreams. He glides across the rink with effortless speed and fearless aggression. I’m determined to send a message to Gagne’s team that we’re serious contenders.

I patiently await my opportunity as Gagne receives a pass from a teammate. He swiftly moves towards the corner of the net, but it’s too late, and he’s forced to retreat behind the goal. Seizing my chance, I meet him at the boards with a powerful check reverberating through the arena.

The crowd erupts into a frenzy, and my teammates’ sticks bang against the ice in approval. The energy has shifted in our favor. Taking control of the puck, I dart towards Taz racing down the rink. With precision and skill, I maneuver past defenders and set up Taz for a perfect shot, which he delivers with a powerful slap into the back of the net.

From that moment on, our team has all the momentum. We fight hard until the end, eventually securing a thrilling overtime victory with a final score of 5 to 4. It may not have been the ideal first game playing alongside Landry, but we battled together and emerged victorious.

In the bustling locker room, we all struggle to prepare for the evening ahead. Prom has been brought up, a thought that has crossed my mind but never dwelled upon. My mind has been preoccupied with Boston and conversations with Ivy.

“Are you taking your girl?” Landry asks, interrupting my thoughts.

“I’m not sure,” I reply, lost in contemplation. “I haven’t considered it. I don’t know if she’ll see it as a big deal.”

Taz chimes in from beside us. “Dude, you have to ask her to prom. You may not realize it, but it’s a big deal for girls.”

“I think I’m going to ask Kerri,” Landry declares, causing Taz and I to exchange a knowing look.

“What?” Landry questions.

“Nothing,” I quickly assure him, my hands raised defensively. “I like Kerri, she’s bitchin’. It’s just that she seems more interested in being friends. I’d hate for you to get your hopes up for nothing.”

“Well, she’s the only person I want to go with,” Landry says determinedly. “Even if we go as just friends.”

Turning to Taz, he asks, “What about you?”

Taz laughs. “Oh, Man, I don’t know if I want to be tied down to one girl. Going with one person means you can’t talk to anyone else or dance with anyone else. And forget about leaving with someone else.”

“You’re such a pig,” Landry teases with a chuckle.

“Why don’t we all go together?” I suggest. “The girls are all friends and Sascha doesn’t have to go as your date, she can just come with us. Maybe Sarah, too.”

“Yeah, I don’t know, Man,” Taz says. “I spend a lot of time with Sascha as it is. I’m worried every night she’s going to kill me in my sleep.”

“Come on. It’s your Senior Prom. Don’t you want to spend it with your friends? I bet I can check if Alan can get us a car to rent that’ll fit everybody?”

“That’s cool, I guess. Let’s see what the girls think about it,” he agrees.



Under the stars, Ivy and I are lost in each other’s touch amidst the rustle of leaves and the faint sounds of laughter from other park-goers. My hands roam across her warm skin as we lay on a blanket on the grass. In a moment of stillness, I pause and look at her. “Would you maybe want to go to prom with me?” I ask, heart racing.

“Really?” she responds with surprise. “You haven’t mentioned it, so I figured it was something you weren’t interested in?”

“I’m interested in anything you are,” I tell her sincerely. “Supposedly, it’s one of those experiences we must have, like a rite of passage or something. Some of the guys were thinking we could all go together.”

“Oh my gosh, that’s a great idea,” she exclaims. “As long as we don’t have to go with Amber, Stacy, or anyone from that group.”

“No way. Those girls know to stay as far away from us as possible. Have they given you any trouble?” I ask, concern evident in my voice.

She shrugs nonchalantly. “No, not much. Sometimes I hear little remarks and comments about you feeling sorry for me, but it honestly doesn’t bother me anymore. Thanks to you and my friends, I’ve found my little groove in high school.”

“Well, that makes me very happy,” I say, shifting my weight on top of her as she widens her legs to make room for my hips to settle between them. The cool night air sends shivers down my spine as Ivy’s hands run through my hair and pull me closer.

The stars twinkled above us, casting a soft glow over our secluded spot. Everything feels perfect and right with the world.

“I can feel how happy you are,” she teases, her voice light and playful. “Which reminds me,” she says, a mischievous glint in her eye. “We haven’t had the sex talk.”

“What do you want to talk about?” I ask, trying to keep my voice steady.

“I’d like to have sex with you,” she blurts out. “I’m ready, and I want to. But I feel like you want to hold off,” she responds.

A pang of guilt shoots through me. She is partly right. I want her more than anything, but knowing I’m leaving makes it more complicated.

“That’s not it at all,” I assure her. “I just want the timing to be right.”

She looks at me intently, her expression unreadable for a moment.

“I know,” she says, “But you’re gonna have to give it up soon,” she says with a sly smile, pulling me in for a deep kiss.

At that moment, I realized I want nothing more than to make her happy. Then, a thought enters my mind, and I can’t help but bring it up.

“Have you thought more about what you will do after graduation?” I ask tentatively.

Her lips pause against mine before pulling away slightly. For a moment, I think she might open up and share her thoughts with me, but instead, she replies with a nonchalant, “Nope, not too much,” before kissing me again, signaling that she still doesn’t want to talk about this subject.

Chapter 36

“Waiting for a Star to Fall”

Ivy - Age 18, 1989

My sister’s voice rings out excitedly as I try on another dress, the sixth one today. I turn to her, questioning the fit.

“Do you think it looks good? Maybe it’s a little too fluffy around the hips?”

She practically screams with delight, her eyes sparkling with anticipation.

“Not even!” she exclaims. “I can’t wait until I get to go to prom,” she says wistfully, lost in her dreams of the perfect night.

Mom joins in, adding her approval. “It’s very flattering, Sweetheart.”

I turn to face myself in the full-length mirror, studying my reflection. The royal blue satin strapless dress hugs my curves and ruffles delicately at the hips, falling just above my knees. It’s cute, but I’m not sure if it’s me. Then again, I’ve never worn formal wear before, so who am I to know what suits me best?

Nat chimes in, saying that this color is perfect for me and will be easy for Corey to match with his tie and cumberbund. I

hear the curtain slide from the changing room next door as Sascha emerges in her signature color, black, but with a unique twist. Her spaghetti strap satin dress is adorned with a layer of beautiful purple lace, adding a delicate touch to her usual bold style.

And then there's Kerri, stepping out in a bright yellow dress that matches the vibrancy of her personality. But it doesn't quite fit against her pale skin and reddish hair. We all agree that the green dress she had on earlier suited her better, and she nods in agreement.

I'm surprised Kerri decided to go to the dance with Landry, but she made it clear they were going as friends. Sascha reluctantly agreed to attend solely because Sarah would be there, providing her with a buffer from Taz. It's funny how living together hasn't softened their relationship; if anything, it has only heightened their tension.

We're excited about the big night despite any lingering doubts or anxieties. We have plans to dress up, ride in a lavish limousine (courtesy of Corey's stepfather), have dinner at a fancy restaurant, and then attend the dance. Kerri's family generously offered their barn as a location for an after-party, where we will spend the night. Of course, her grandparents will be checking in on us periodically, reminding us that this is our first taste of adulthood.

After picking out our dresses, we go to the florist to order boutonnieres for the boys. My mom also insists on getting one for Taz so he "doesn't feel left out." I can't imagine Taz feeling left out, but it's a kind gesture nonetheless.

We continue browsing the mall for the perfect accessories and jewelry to complete our looks. Eventually, we end up at the tuxedo shop, where the guys try different styles. Corey and Landry confirm what color dresses Kerri and I are wearing as we peruse the shop. They've finalized their rental choices by the time we catch up with them at the cash register. They carefully choose colors and patterns that coordinate with our dresses, except for Taz, who boldly opted for a purple crushed velvet tuxedo that somehow matches Sascha's dress, despite him not knowing what she'd be wearing. The irony isn't lost

on us, especially Sascha, who storms out of the tuxedo shop muttering under her breath.

Before heading home for the day, we grab some food from the bustling food court.

“Prom is one week away,” Kerri exclaims. “I can’t believe how quickly this year has passed.”

“You’ve barely been here for a few months, and yet it feels like you’ve been with us all along,” Taz jokes.

“But she’s right,” I chime in. “A few months ago, I was standing in front of the school with my cherry Pop-Tart, trying to be invisible and blend into the background.” Corey squeezes my hand under the table.

“You were never invisible to me, Baby,” he whispers, causing a chorus of laughter and french fries to be playfully thrown at us.

“And before we know it, graduation will be here,” Taz says, looking at Corey strangely. Corey returns the look with a glare that speaks volumes about their unspoken tension. The group ignores the palpable hostility and enjoys the rest of our meals, talking about nothing in particular.

The drive to my house is filled with tense silence, but I can’t help but bring up the elephant in the room as soon as we park.

“So, what was going on at the food court?” I ask, trying to keep my tone casual.

Corey’s head tilts to the side, his expression curious. “What do you mean?”

“I couldn’t help but notice how Taz looked at you when discussing graduation.”

He lets out a heavy sigh and finally meets my gaze. “I’ve been trying to tell you, but you haven’t been ready to discuss it.”

Feeling a knot form in my stomach, I step out of the car and walk towards my front porch, needing some space for this conversation. I sit down on the steps and bury my head in my hands, taking deep breaths of the cool evening air.

“You’re leaving,” I say softly, knowing it’s true even though he hasn’t said it yet. “I’ve always known that you were meant for bigger things. I’m so proud of you.”

My heart aches at the thought of him leaving our small town and chasing his dreams, but I know deep down that it’s what he needs to do. Still, saying goodbye will be one of the hardest things I’ll ever do.

He settles down next to me, his gaze fixed ahead and his lips pressed into a tight line. The silence between us is heavy with unspoken words. I muster a weak smile and attempt to swallow the lump in my throat.

“So, where did you ultimately decide to go?” I ask, feigning nonchalance.

His eyes briefly meet mine before flickering away. “Boston,” he says quietly. “Full ride.”



Corey

Ivy’s golden curls bounce as she shakes her head, turning to face me. Her blue eyes, usually bright with excitement, are now red-rimmed and filled with a sadness she’s trying desperately to hide.

“That’s amazing, Corey,” she says, her voice barely above a whisper. “I’m not surprised at all. I think it’s exactly where you belong.”

“Where do you belong?” I ask.

She takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly, shaking her head again.

“I don’t know,” she admits, her voice laced with uncertainty.

“Do you think you want to take classes at the community college?”

“Maybe?” she shrugs, looking lost in thought. “I still don’t know what I want to do.”

“My mom always says that’s the beauty of our age.” I offer with a small smile. “We don’t have to have it all figured out yet.”

As we sit there in silence, the late afternoon sun casts a warm glow, reminding me that the journey matters even though we may not know our destination yet.

“Your mom is right,” Ivy concedes with a sigh, her voice tinged with frustration. “I wish I had *anything* figured out.”

“You’ve come so far this year,” I remind her gently.

“I have,” she admits, a glimmer of pride shining in her eyes. “I’ve figured out a few things between you and my friends. Just not who I am, and that’s an important one.”

I nod in understanding. “It is. So if you’re feeling lost here, maybe you can find yourself in Boston?”

Her brow furrows in confusion. “What do you mean?”

“Ivy,” I plead, taking her hands in mine, “come to Boston with me.” It’s something that I’ve thought about but didn’t know I was going to ask until the words poured through my mouth, straight from my heart.

She stands abruptly, shock written all over her face at the unexpected request.

“Corey, I can’t just go to Boston.”

I rise to meet her, my heart racing with desperation.

“Why not? You have just as much chance of discovering who you are there as you do here.”

Her hesitant expression gives way to one of contemplation, and for a moment, hope flickers in my chest like a well-lit candle.

“I can’t go to Boston, Corey. That’s your dream.” Ivy’s voice trembles with emotion as she looks into my eyes, sending my hope plummeting toward the Earth at light speed.

“But my dream is also to be with you,” I confess, my heart racing with the weight of my words and the fear of rejection.

“It’s been a dream being with you,” Ivy says, her fingers intertwined with mine, “But we always knew you were meant for more than this town.”

“I don’t know what my future holds,” I admit as my gaze searches Ivy’s face for any sign of doubt or hesitation.

“I’m not ready to uproot my life and move to a new city. You’ll be busy with classes and hockey, and I don’t want to hold you back.”

“That’s not how it would be,” I insist, brushing a strand of hair from Ivy’s face. “It would be us together, facing whatever comes our way.”

Ivy shakes her head, conflicted, “I just don’t know, Corey. This is all so new and overwhelming for me.”

My heart races as I gather the courage to tell her everything. The weight of my words feels heavy on my shoulders, but I know I need to do this.

“I understand it’s a lot,” I finally say, my voice trembling. “I’ve been thinking about this for a long time.” I pause, taking in a deep breath before continuing. “I was scared to tell you because I didn’t want to lose you.” My words spill out in a rush, fear, and uncertainty, making them stumble over each other. I look at her with pleading eyes, hoping she will understand. She meets my gaze, her own eyes glassy with unshed tears. “Will you at least consider it?” I ask, hoping against hope that she will say yes.

She doesn’t respond momentarily, and I feel like I can’t breathe. Then, with a small smile, she says, “I will consider it.”

Relief floods through me as I wrap her in my arms. We stand there momentarily, clinging to each other, until I feel brave enough to twirl her around in a circle. She lets out one of those cute squeaking noises that I have always loved, and it feels like the weight of the world has lifted off my shoulders.

“I love you, Ivy,” I whisper into her ear, my voice full of emotion.

She pulls back slightly and looks up at me with tears in her eyes.

“I love you too, Corey,” she says, her voice thick with emotion. “And I’m so proud of you.” Her words are like music to my ears, and I hold her even tighter, ingraining this moment into my very being.

Chapter 37

“And We Danced”

Ivy - Age 18, 1989

My hair is curled and swept to one side, held in place with too many pins to count and a lot of hair spray. My makeup's in place, more dramatic than normal, thanks to Natalie's encouragement and a how-to guide from the latest issue of *Mademoiselle* magazine. My nails are painted with a delicate French manicure. I've managed to get myself into my strapless bra/corset and dress without pulling a muscle.

We decided to gather at my house and have the limousine pick us up. Some of our parents will be present, orchestrating the traditional pre-prom photo session in all the usual poses. I still have about twenty minutes until everyone arrives, so I walk around with my arms in the air, trying to keep my dress from getting armpit stains. *Why am I sweating so much?*

Nerves and anticipation kept me awake last night, causing me to barely get any sleep. The fact that Corey is leaving in a few weeks has been looming over us, as is his insistence on me coming with him. The thought of him leaving without me makes my chest ache in a way that reminds me of the lonely nights I spent crying myself to sleep at The Station. However, the idea of going with him scares me in a completely different way. I'm torn about the right decision, so for now, I push it out of my mind and try to focus on the present moment, which is

challenging, given that the immediate future is all everyone can talk about right now.

Corey's signing day was a momentous occasion at school, with the local paper even sending a reporter to cover it. The article they published did a good job of capturing his excitement and plans to attend school in Boston.

As for Taz, he also has a couple of offers on the table, but he's remained tight-lipped about them. I can't blame him. Choosing a college is a big decision, especially since he also has to consider where he wants to continue to play hockey.

Landry appears content to stay put and continue playing for the Mavericks for now, and he may or may not take some classes at the local college.

My friends are making strides towards their future goals as well. Sascha has chosen a college just two hours away, close enough for us to visit each other often. She's undecided on her major, but she will do great in whatever she decides to do.

Kerri, on the other hand, is a lot like Corey. She knows exactly what she wants - to become a large animal veterinarian. She's been accepted into a prestigious university six hours away.

Sarah is planning on going to nursing school in Virginia, so my group of friends will be scattered across different cities and states soon, and the thought of it is like sinking into quicksand, an overwhelming sense of being pulled in multiple directions at once. It's not as if I didn't see this coming. Everyone sent out college applications months ago, but the reality is starting to sink in.

I seem to be the only one unsure exactly what I want to do or where to go. The thought of staying here and watching my friends leave, one by one, fills me with a sense of dread. It's so overwhelming that I've been avoiding it altogether. And tonight will be no different. I want to bask in the warmth of their company and forget about the uncertain future awaiting me outside of this moment.

I pace back and forth nervously, my heart racing as I wait for Corey to arrive. When I round the corner and see him standing in the doorway, shaking my dad's hand, the breath is knocked from my body. I thought he couldn't look more handsome than he does after a hockey game, sweaty and filled with adrenaline, but seeing him in a tuxedo takes it to a whole different level. He looks like a work of art come to life. His dark hair is neatly combed back from his face, highlighting his sharp jawline and piercing brown eyes. He looks so grown up and suave, and I can't help but stare at him in awe. As our eyes meet, I can tell he feels the same way. His gaze softens, and a small smile plays on his lips, making my heartbeat hasten.

"You look so beautiful," he says as he approaches me, his mom and Alan standing behind him.

"So do you," I reply with a nervous giggle.

One by one, everyone arrives, looking wonderful and equally excited for tonight. Maggie reminds her son about the corsage he's holding, and he nervously fumbles with a plastic container. He spent the last week asking me questions about the flowers that I didn't have the answers to. Despite his uncertainty, he made a great decision.

He places the corsage on my wrist, and it's both stunning and fragrant. Delicate white sweetheart roses and freesia mingle in a beautiful arrangement, tied with a blue ribbon that perfectly matches my dress.

In return, I pin his boutonniere onto the lapel of his crisp tuxedo, unable to resist planting a quick kiss on his cheek as our parents snap pictures.

After all of the posing, the limousine arrives, and eventually, we can escape the dissecting eyes of our parents and my little sister long enough to exit. Excitement bubbles in our stomachs as we climb into the luxurious vehicle, none of us ever having been in a limo before. The interior is adorned with plush leather seats and a bar, stocked only with water, of course, and we can't resist playing with the window partition and sunroof.

Corey and I constantly touch each other. Our relationship has moved to a deeper level since we confessed our feelings.

We hold hands, our fingers intertwined, or my hand rests on his leg, and vice versa. The electricity between us is palpable in the car, heightened by the atmosphere of the evening.

As we ride towards our destination, we can't help but giggle and share knowing glances, lost in each other's company. I'm still too nervous and giddy to eat much once we arrive at the restaurant. The seven of us sit around a table in the dark-lit restaurant pretending to be the adults we aren't quite yet, sharing stories about high school. I mostly listen, having only stories from the past several months to share.

As usual, I nibble at my food, knowing that Corey will finish whatever I can't. Before long, we're back in the limo and headed toward the golf course, where the dance is being held.

As soon as we enter the grandiose ballroom, I'm immediately struck by the beauty of the space. Twinkle lights are delicately strung over the wood beam vaulted ceiling, casting a soft glow. Balloons and streamers adorn every corner, adding pops of color to the room. Each table is elegantly covered with a silver tablecloth and topped with a stunning flower centerpiece.

In the far corner of the room, a towering DJ booth looms above the crowd, pulsing with flashing lights and throbbing speakers ready to blast music onto the dance floor. It's a sensory overload in the best way possible.

The Vipers' eyes are on us as we move through the sea of people, but I don't let it faze me. I'm here with Corey and my closest friends, and that's all that matters. This is my perfect prom night, something I never dared to imagine when I was trapped in that suffocating cult for years on end.

As we claim a table and set down our belongings, my feet throb in protest from the uncomfortable heels I insisted on wearing. Kerri has already kicked off her shoes and is carefree and radiant, dancing barefoot in the center of the dance floor. Sarah is talking to Sascha, who is shooting daggers from her eyes at Taz over Sarah's shoulder.

This rag-tag group of misfits is more than I ever dared to dream of. They love me unconditionally and don't judge me for my past. And right now, surrounded by laughter, music, and joy, I couldn't be more grateful for them.

The guys return soon enough, and my eyes are drawn to Landry. It's obvious how he watches Kerri. His gaze is full of adoration and longing, yet she remains completely oblivious, assuming he's satisfied with being friends.

She confided in me about a past toxic relationship that left her wary of opening up again. If she were open to it now, I doubt she would be interested in starting anything so close to the end of our senior year. I'm certain Landry knows all this, but love isn't logical or rational, at least not in my experience. I am hopelessly in love with a boy about to embark on a journey bigger than he even realizes. The likelihood of our relationship surviving his future is slim, if not nonexistent. But despite the odds and the way I will shatter like broken glass when he leaves, I wouldn't change anything about our time together.

Perhaps Landry and I are kindred spirits in this way— both hopelessly drawn to people destined for greater things, even if it means risking our hearts.

Strong, warm arms wrap around my waist as a tender kiss is planted on my bare shoulder, snapping me out of my thoughts.

“You couldn't resist my moves at the talent show,” Corey jokes, a playful glint in his eyes. “I know you're dying to get me out on that dance floor.”

“Absolutely,” I reply with a laugh, feeling the heat of his body against mine. I only want to spend the rest of the night swaying to the music in his embrace.

The lights twinkle above us like stars as we move together, lost in our little world. Every step and dip is like a dream; I never want it to end.

Chapter 38

“Crazy For You”

Corey - Age 18, 1989

The evening has been full of laughter and dancing with the boys and Ivy. Every chance I could steal a moment, I kissed or touched her somehow. It's been a great evening that is only getting better since we're ready to head over to Kerri's house for the after-party. Taz and I parked our cars here earlier today so we could drive since the limo was only booked to bring us to dinner and the dance.

As we pile into the cars and drive off, we all get a second wind - the excitement of the evening fueling us even more. Kerri's house is about fifteen minutes outside of town, on a sprawling twenty-acre farm owned by her grandparents. Landry and Kerri ride with us, and Taz drives Sarah and Sascha.

“So, what exactly should we expect at your farm?” I ask jokingly.

“Well, we have horses, goats, a llama, a rooster, sheep, pigs, chickens, and turkeys,” Kerri replies with a smile.

“How do your grandparents manage to take care of everything?” Ivy asks.

“That's part of the reason I'm here,” she says, her voice conveying mystery and intrigue.

“Is there any animal we need to be aware of?” Landry asks with a laugh, his eyes bright with curiosity.

“Buzzy can be particular,” Kerri answers, her expression turning serious, “and Vincent is a little aggressive.”

“Are those your grandparents’ names?” I ask with a chuckle, my lips curling into a smile at the thought.

“No, Silly,” Kerri laughs, her eyes sparkling with amusement.

“Who the hell are Buzzy and Vincent?” Landry asks, now wide-eyed and invested in this conversation.

“Buzzy is my chicken. She’s really old and can be persnickety, which is strange because she’s a Silkie, and they are usually very docile. It’s probably because she’s nearly blind. But she’s not too bad, come to think of it. You really should only be wary of Vincent van Goat and Colonel Cocky,” she explains, her tone filled with both affection and warning.

I nearly swerve off the road because I’m laughing so hard at the names of these (apparently mean) farm animals.

“What the hell is going on at your farm?” I exclaim through gasps of laughter.

“It’s just a normal farm,” Kerri says with an adorably clueless shrug, unaware of how comical her statement sounds.

“How can you tell which animals are which?” Landry asks, his interest piqued by anything Kerri talks about.

“Well, Vincent van Goat is missing an ear—,” Kerri begins before being interrupted by Landry’s snickers.

“Naturally,” he says with a smirk, trying his best not to burst into laughter.

“And Colonel Cocky is a big white rooster, and he’s territorial. But most of his feathers have fallen out. The vet says it’s due to his anxiety. So he’s more pink than white right now,” Kerri finishes with a small giggle.

“Are any of your animals normal,” I ask with a chuckle.

“Most of them,” Kerri responds thoughtfully. “Only Buzzy, Vincent, and The Colonel have problems.”

Our laughter rings out as we pull into the driveway next to Taz’s car.

“What’s so funny?” Taz asks, raising an eyebrow in curiosity.

“We have to keep a lookout for one-eared goats and massive pink cocks tonight,” Landry chimes in between gasps of amusement, leaning against the car for support.

Sascha rolls her eyes, and with a dry tone says, “Always on the lookout for those.”

Kerri’s cheerful voice cuts through our laughter, “Come on, let’s head over to the barn.” We follow her, the moon casting a golden glow over everything, illuminating our path toward the rustic wooden structure.

The smell of hay and animals fills our nostrils as we enter. It’s a large space, and in the center, her grandparents have set up outdoor furniture for us to use, and there’s a stack of sleeping bags in the corner.

Taz hoists his heavy duffle bag off his shoulder and drops it with a thud. He rummages through the contents, pulling out a case of cheap beer, bottles of sweet Boone’s Farm wine, and a six-pack of vibrantly colored wine coolers. Excited chatter fills the air as everyone rushes to change into comfortable clothes from their bags before meeting back at the designated sitting area.

Ivy wraps herself in a thick, knitted wool blanket and selects a wine cooler before snuggling up next to me. We spend what feels like hours laughing and reminiscing about the year, our voices carrying through the stillness of the night.

It’s colder with each passing minute, and Ivy nudges me, her breath soft against my ear as she murmurs her desire to be alone. My mind is racing with nerves, like the anticipation before a big hockey game. We briefly had the sex talk, and I know it’s on Ivy’s mind. I’ve hesitated because I’m leaving and would never want her to be hurt. She’s considering

coming with me now, so things are different. I brought condoms with me just in case the night took a turn in the direction I was hoping for.

We say goodnight to our friends and slip away around the corner of the barn as Ivy takes my hand in hers. The distant sound of music drifts towards us from where our friends gather, granting us a semblance of privacy as we find our secluded spot among the hay bales. We settle onto the makeshift bed I've created with pillows and sleeping bags, cocooned in our private world.

Our lips meet in a tender kiss, and I let go of all my worries and lose myself in the moment with Ivy by my side. Ivy stops and rubs her nose against my own.

“Is this happening?” she whispers.

“Yes,” I reply breathlessly, “if you want it to.”

The taste of her lips lingers on mine as Ivy responds to my kiss, her tongue meeting mine with a soft urgency. My body moves over hers, our positions shifting until I'm between her legs. She spreads them willingly, inviting me in. Her tongue dances with mine, retreating and plunging in a dance of passion and desire. Occasionally, I pause to nibble on her lower lip, savoring the sweet taste of her.

Dipping my head lower, I trail soft, feather-light kisses down her neck, feeling her pulse quicken beneath my lips. I bite and suck at Ivy's neck, reveling in the sounds of pleasure that escape her lips. My erection presses against her, eliciting moans from both of us.

My hand, finding its way to the bottom of her sweatshirt, slips underneath and travels up. I can feel the warmth and softness of her breast in my palm as I tease her hardened nipple with the pad of my thumb.

Leaving a trail of kisses along her neck, I arrive at her hardened nipple. With a flick of my tongue, she arches into me, her fingers tangling in my hair. I take her nipple into my mouth and suck gently at first before increasing the pressure, knowing it will drive her wild.

With practiced and precise movements, my fingers glide under her soft sweatpants, tracing the curves of her warm belly. Her gaze never leaves mine as I retreat to the small patch of hair between her legs, only to realize she's not wearing underwear.

My arousal becomes almost unbearable at the realization.

“What are you doing to me?” I growl, eagerly helping her remove her sweats and pulling her sweatshirt over her head. In front of me lies a goddess, her body begging for my touch. Every inch of her is perfection, from the sun-kissed strands of blonde hair cascading down her shoulders to her piercing blue eyes to the swell of her breasts to the alluring curve of her feminine hips.

Unable to resist longer, I place tender kisses on her smooth belly and trail them along her hip bones.

“Corey,” she whispers, bringing me back to reality. “You need to get naked.” I chuckle in response, realizing I had been so captivated by her beauty that I had forgotten I was still fully clothed.

As I sit back on my heels and reach for the back of my sweatshirt to pull it over my head, Ivy pounces on me with a mischievous grin. Her weight sends us both tumbling backward, laughter bubbling from our lips as she urges me to lift my hips so she can slide off my sweatpants. With a hungry look in her eyes, she takes in the sight of my bare body, eliciting a shiver of excitement through me.

“You weren't wearing underwear either?” she teases, her voice dripping with desire.

I quickly flip her onto her back and crawl on top of her, pressing my lips against hers before trailing kisses down her neck. My teeth graze and nibble at the sensitive skin, causing her to arch into me with a soft moan. When I finally reach her breasts, her tightened nipples beg for attention. I take one into my mouth, swirling my tongue around the hard peak before sucking on it as I knead the other breast with my hand.

With each flick of my tongue and tug of my lips, Ivy becomes more undone, throwing her head back in pleasure. As I feel her hips rise in response to my touch, I move my hand between her legs, sliding my fingers through her pubic hair and into her wet pussy. The evidence of her arousal is unmistakable, and with ease, I insert a finger inside her while leaning up to kiss her with even more devotion.

Alternating between the rhythmic thrusts and focused stimulation of her clit, Ivy's body responds eagerly to my touch. Her breath hitches, and her kisses become desperate as she surrenders herself to the pleasure.

"That's it, Baby. Come for me," I urge, my fingers increasing the pressure on her sensitive bundle of nerves.

Her body begins to tremble and quake around me, her legs quivering and hips lifting off the bed as her orgasm surges through her. She arches her back and cries out my name.

I tenderly kiss her lips as she smiles, running my hand through her hair and brushing it away from her flushed face.

Moving to retrieve a condom from my bag, Ivy's eyes rake over me with desire. Turning back to her, I take a moment to appreciate the sight before me. Laid out naked and vulnerable, she is the epitome of beauty in this moment.

"Are you sure you want to do this?" I ask once more, my voice strained with worry.

"I have never felt more certain about anything," she replies, her eyes filled with determination.

With a flick of my wrists, I tear open the condom and toss the wrapper carelessly to the floor. Ivy's gaze remains fixed on me as I roll it down my aching cock. The anticipation is palpable as we both know what will happen.

Once fully sheathed, I lower myself onto her, parting her legs eagerly. My lips latch onto her sensitive nipples, sucking and teasing until she moans and arches her back. Slowly, I make my way up to her waiting mouth, plunging my tongue inside as our bodies grind against one another in anticipation.

But then, breaking away from our heated kiss, I lift myself slightly and meet her gaze. With deliberate movements, I guide myself into her heat, inch by agonizing inch. Every muscle in my body tenses with restraint as I resist the urge to snap my hips forward. Instead, I hold back and savor every moment, allowing her time to adjust and revel in the exquisite sensation of being so connected with the woman I love.

Ivy's hands grip my hips and pull me closer, urging me to push completely inside of her. She winces as I do, so I pause and press my lips against hers in a soft kiss.

"Are you sure you're okay?" I ask with genuine concern in my voice.

"I'm perfect," she responds with a breathy sigh, her eyes locked onto mine.

"I love you," I tell her and I start moving my hips, undulating to avoid going too deep and causing her discomfort. The way she feels around me is unlike anything I've ever experienced, tight, warm, and all-consuming. But it's not just the physical sensation that overwhelms me—it's the intimacy, trust, and care she has for me. She knows me better than anyone else ever has, and yet, she still wants me, not because of my status as a hockey player or the way I look, but for who I am. Her desire for the real me, the bastard kid from the trailer park, is the biggest turn-on I've ever known.

"I love you, too," she confesses, her nails digging into my back with urgent need. Her sharp claws trail down my spine, leaving a fiery sensation in their wake. She begins to relax into our rhythm, her moans growing louder and more intense with each thrust of my hips. I watch as her body becomes flushed with excitement, her skin glowing in the room's dim light.

I pull back on my knees, giving myself better access to her most sensitive spot. With one hand guiding our movements and the other focused on pleasuring her clit, I can see the pleasure building within her, reflected in the arch of her back and the way she barely moves against me.

With each stroke, I intensify the pressure on that special spot she craves, sending waves of pleasure coursing through her

body. She tightens around me, her muscles contracting and releasing in perfect harmony.

The slickness between us increases with each thrust, heightening our pleasure even further. I can't hold off any longer; with a final burst of control, I grip her hips and release into the condom.

The intensity of my orgasm is unlike anything I've experienced before, and for a moment, I worry that I might black out from sheer pleasure. Holding onto Ivy's hips for support, I collapse onto her trembling body. We lay together for a moment, catching our breath and basking in the moment.

Slowly, I slide out of her, the final moments of our lovemaking lingering in the air. I remove the condom, tie it off, and toss it aside.

Falling beside her, I pull her close into my arms as we lie together, our limbs tangled and our bodies coming down from their blissful high. Our breaths are heavy and labored. Neither of us can form words as we bask in the love and pleasure shared between us.

As the haze of passion starts to fade, my heart begins to race once more when my brain takes over, and I try to figure out how we will make this work. With me living in the cramped dorms and being consumed by hockey and school, it seems like an impossible feat. But deep down, I know we will find a way if we both want it enough.

When I think we can catch our breaths and relax, a piercing scream breaks through the silence around us. We stop and listen to ensure we aren't imagining things, but it happens again. A shrill, ear-splitting cry echoes from outside.

In a rush of adrenaline, we jump up from the tangled sleeping bags and hastily throw on clothes, me pulling on my sweats while Ivy grabs her own and throws her sweatshirt over her head.

Whatever is happening outside can't be good, and we aren't going to waste any time finding out what it is.

We burst out of the barn just in time to see Taz, or rather, Taz's naked ass, running across the field with a furious pink rooster hot on his heels, clucking and flapping its wings in anger.

"Stop, Cocky!" Taz yells, his voice panicking as he continues streaking through the field.

Standing beside me, Ivy can't help but wonder aloud, "Why is Taz naked?"

"The better question is, 'What did he do to piss off that rooster?'" I reply, trying to stifle my laughter.

Kerri's frantic shouts fill the air as she tries to control Taz and the angry bird, neither of whom is listening.

Suddenly, Landry appears, running past us at full speed, though I doubt he knows what to do if he catches up to them.

Then Sascha comes into view, her wicked cackles echoing through the night. She had something to do with the situation unfolding before us.

I pull Ivy closer and kiss her head as we watch the chaotic scene unfold before us. This was truly the most incredible night of my life.

Chapter 39

“I Won’t Hold You Back”

Ivy - Age 18, 1989

My schedule since prom night has been nothing short of chaotic. Every available moment has been spent stealing time with Corey, but our obligations have made it difficult. In addition to juggling work and our relationship, we’ve had finals, graduation, practice for the ceremony, and all the necessary family gatherings that come with end-of-year planning.

But today is the day I’ve been anticipating: graduation. There was a time in my life recently when I didn’t think I’d ever make it to this point. As I stand on the brink of completing high school, I can’t help but reflect on this past year. How different it could have been if Corey hadn’t convinced me to go along with his crazy idea to fake date. Despite my initial doubts, I’m grateful to him and our friends, who made this year more memorable than ever imagined.

My eyes fall upon the navy blue graduation gown hanging from a hanger above my door. I reach up and carefully place the cap on my head, studying myself in the mirror. Excitement swells within me at the thought of graduating, but it is quickly overshadowed by the nervousness churning in my stomach about the future. Corey is eagerly waiting for me to decide if I’m moving with him after graduation. The more he brings it

up, the more anxiety floods through me as I struggle to choose between following my heart or following my head.

I'm trapped between two paths leading to different futures that could ultimately break my heart. I want to be honest with Corey about my uncertainty, but whenever I try to tell him, his excitement pulls me back. The last thing I ever want to do is see him hurt, so I keep hoping that his enthusiasm and confidence will be enough for both of us.

I'm startled by a knock on my door and surprised when I hear my mom talking to Corey. I take the cap off my head and set it on the bed as he enters my room and sweeps me up in a giant hug.

"Happy Graduation," he says, pressing a soft kiss to my lips.

"Someone's excited," I tease, my voice laced with amusement.

"Of course I am," he responds, gently placing me back on the ground.

"We are almost out of here, and you know what that means?"

"No more shitty group projects in Mr. Payton's class?" I quip.

As he chuckles, his smile widens, and his eyes crinkle at the corners. The warmth of his laughter spreads through my body, a feeling I've come to love and expect whenever we're together.

"That too," he says, mischief glinting in his gaze. "But more importantly, we're finally getting closer to our move." He scratches the back of his neck, a trademark gesture when he's deep in thought. "We should tell our parents," he exclaims.

I can't help but smile as I take in his excitement and contagious energy.

"It's graduation day," I remind him, gesturing to the cap and gown hanging on my door. "Let's not overshadow it with anything too serious."

He nods, considering my words before reluctantly agreeing. “You’re right,” he concedes. “It can wait until tomorrow. For now, let’s enjoy tonight.”

I watch as he walks towards the door, each step filled with anticipation for what’s to come. Before leaving, he turns back to me and plants a sweet kiss on my lips, then playfully smacks my ass. As I watch him leave, I can’t help but wonder how I’m going to make this decision that will impact both of our lives.



Corey’s arms encircle me as we sway to the pulsing beat of the music, his lips brushing against my cheek. The barn is alive with energy, packed with our classmates and their families for Kerri’s graduation party. I can’t help but be disappointed that the animals are safely locked away tonight— no chance of a repeat of the wild entertainment from a few weeks ago. I’d pay good money to see that debacle again.

“Can you believe we did it?” Corey asks, his voice barely audible over the music.

I turn to face him, remembering just a few hours ago when we stood on the football field in front of everyone and officially graduated high school. I never thought saying goodbye would be so hard, but then again, I never could have imagined all the amazing people and experiences I would have during the past year, especially the boy in front of me.

I wrap my arms around his waist and meet his gaze, getting lost in his beautiful brown eyes.

“You lied, you know?” I say playfully.

His brows furrow in confusion, “About what?”

“You told me if I dated you, my life wouldn’t magically be better, but it is.”

Corey’s eyes soften as he rests his forehead against mine, our warm breaths mingling in the small space between us.

“I love you,” he whispers, his voice full of emotion. Memories flood my mind, the first time we met, the sparks that flew between us, and how we fell in love amidst all the chaos.

His lips brush against mine for a brief moment before he pulls away, and I press my head into his chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart.

“You’re not coming to Boston,” he states with certainty. I glance up and see the sadness in his eyes. He knows my heart better than anyone.

I gaze back at him, my heart aching at the words I have to say.

“I can’t,” I admit, my voice trembling with fear. Corey’s expression falls, hurt etched clearly across his features.

“Let’s go somewhere quiet,” he says, taking my hand and leading me away from the noisy party. We find ourselves in our special spot in the barn, where we first gave into our desires and became one.

My vision blurs as I gaze at him, my heart heavy with the weight of the truth I need to share. His rugged features are etched with concern and fear as he looks back at me.

“I’m scared,” I confess, my words trembling as they leave my lips. “I don’t think I’m ready to leave this place.”

He reaches out and captures my hand in his, the calluses on his palm a familiar comfort against my skin.

“I understand, but you can’t let that fear hold you back forever, Ivy,” he says gently.

“I need time,” I admit, feeling guilty for not being able to push aside the nagging doubts in my mind.

“I don’t have any time to give you,” he replies sadly, the pain evident in his expression.

A pang of regret lances through my chest as I speak.

“I would never ask you to,” I promise. “I would never want you to give up your dreams for me.”

“But you became a part of my dream,” he says softly, his eyes shimmering with unshed tears.

Tears stream down my cheeks as I meet his gaze.

“Do you know how much I envy you?” I ask, my voice cracking. “You’ve known who you are meant to be since you were thirteen.”

“I can’t wrap my head around why you can’t figure out your true self in a different city,” he states, his eyes searching for understanding.

“I don’t expect you to understand,” I say with a shake of my head. “Hell, even I don’t understand half the time. It just doesn’t feel right for me to leave right now. Until nine months ago, I didn’t want to leave my house. But now, I’m getting more comfortable with who I am and what I want, and I need time to figure that out on my terms. I’m not where you are yet.”

“I’m not trying to push you into anything you’re not ready for,” he reassures me. “You know I would never do that.”

“I do,” I nod. “And thank you for respecting that. Your life in Boston will be busy and fulfilling, and I need to focus on finding my path. You’ve been such an important part of the changes I’ve made this past year, but now it’s time for me to take some steps on my own.”

“So, what you’re saying is ‘right person, wrong time,’” he says, understanding dawning in his eyes.

“Yes,” I reply honestly, my voice shaking with emotion. “Perfect person, wrong time. And it breaks my heart. It kills me that I can’t pack up and move with you without a care in the world, but I owe it to myself and to the little girl who lost four years of her life to try and figure out what I truly want from the rest of this journey.”

“I only have sixteen more days here,” he says softly.

Those words hit me like a ton of bricks. I only have sixteen more days with him before our paths diverge. But deep down, it’s what needs to happen for both of us.

I struggle to speak through the sobs that are threatening to escape my throat. My voice is a whisper as I say, “I know. I was hoping we could spend as much time together as possible before you leave.”

Pain flashes across his face, and he takes a step back. “I can’t, Ivy,” he says, his tone filled with agony. “It’s too hard. Every second with you would be a reminder of our looming goodbye. I don’t think I could handle that kind of torture.”

My heart feels like it’s breaking in two as I ask, “So, this is it? This is goodbye?”

He looks into my eyes with a mixture of love and sadness.

“I think so, at least for now,” he responds. “I don’t know what the future holds for either of us, but I will never regret our time together.”

We stand there holding hands, both of us crying silently. The pain in my chest is unbearable, and part of me wishes my heart would just stop beating altogether.

“I love you, Corey Delacour,” I manage to say before standing on my tiptoes and giving him one last salty kiss.

“I love you too, Ivy Owens,” he whispers back. “Always.”

Chapter 40

“Can’t Fight This Feeling”

Ivy- Age 23, 1994

A heavy silence hangs in the air as I finish recounting my story. The group stares at me with wide eyes, some with tears streaming down their faces.

Sascha and Kerri wear empathetic expressions while the others look on, unsure what to say. It’s a reaction I’ve received for years whenever I speak about the cult, so it doesn’t surprise me.

To ease the tension, I reassure them that I’m okay. “So, that’s the story. I told you it was a little crazy,” I say with a forced smile.

“It’s not crazy,” Amy replies. “It’s amazing. I can’t believe it ended so abruptly. That must have been heartbreaking.”

“It was. It is,” I correct myself. “But it didn’t end abruptly,” I respond with a sad sigh. “We both knew it was coming. We just avoided it until the moment when we couldn’t anymore. Especially me.”

“And you didn’t talk after that?”

“Not a word,” I reply. “I wanted to, but I had to respect his wishes to end things when we did.”

“Wait, you’re going to see him tomorrow?” Michelle asks incredulously. “After five years? You must have some strong emotions about that.”

“Oh, believe me, I have plenty of emotions,” I reply with a sad chuckle. “That’s why I’m drinking so much wine right now.”

Amy’s jaw drops in disbelief as she asks, “You never once asked Sarah about him?”

“No,” I admit, shaking my head. “I couldn’t bring myself to at first. We had an understanding in the beginning that we wouldn’t talk about him. As time passed, the wounds slowly began to close.”

“But did they ever truly heal?” Michelle’s question hangs in the air and I shrug my shoulders.

“No, but I’ve accepted that pain as a part of life now,” I say with a forced smile.

Misty’s voice breaks the silence that follows, “What do you think it’s going to be like?”

I pause before answering honestly, “Strange, but it’s not as if we left things badly.”

Sascha lets out a scoff beside me, “Ivy, you’re my best friend, and I love you, but that man was crushed. He hasn’t come home in five years.”

“Of course, he was sad and hurt. We both were,” I reply defensively. “But we understood why things had to be how they were.”

“We’ll see,” Sascha says skeptically. “He skates harder and angrier than ever, I’ve heard.”

“But so much time has passed now,” I reason. “Five years is a long time. I’m sure any hard feelings he may have had have dissipated. Besides, I wouldn’t be surprised if he showed up tomorrow with some beautiful woman on his arm.”

“What about you?” Amy pipes up.

“What do you mean?” I ask, confused.

“Have you dated in the last few years? Did you move on?” Amy presses further.

My heart sinks at her words. Dating was the last thing on my mind as I tried to focus on school, work, and spending time with my family.

With a slight hesitation, I confess, “I’ve had a few flings, but nothing serious.” Nothing like the all-consuming love I experienced at eighteen years old.

Some days, it seems like I may never be able to move on from Corey Delacour.

“That story sounds like it’s straight out of a movie,” Amy remarks. “You two should be together,” she says with genuine sadness.

I shrug. “I guess you can blame the timing.”

“Is it a better time now?” Misty asks, her eyes curious. “Have you found yourself or whatever you were looking for?”

“I have.” I nod. “Watching all of my friends move on and leave me behind was tough,” I say, glancing at Sascha and Kerri with a wistful smile. “But it forced me to figure out what I truly wanted without any outside influences, no friends, no boyfriend, no one. I got to spend a lot of lost time with my family, which I needed. In the end, it was the right decision.”

“It sucks that the right decision is usually the hardest one,” Kerri offers sympathetically.

“That’s so true,” Sascha agrees. “We’re proud of you, Ivy. You’re strong, confident, and never let anything break you.”

“Should we get some more wine?” Michelle offers, breaking the somber mood.

“It’s getting kind of late,” Sascha points out, glancing at me with concern.

“I think we should replenish our wine reserves,” I suggest, gesturing toward the nearly empty bottle on the table. “And maybe someone else can regale us with some stories of their teenage years.”

Misty hesitates before replying, “Well...I don’t have one as juicy as yours, I’m afraid. Just a trail of loser ex-boyfriends, but I am dying to hear about what happened between Michael Tazman and that rooster.”

Kerri grins mischievously, exchanging a knowing glance with Sascha. “Oh, we all want to know,” she drawls.

Sascha erupts into laughter and quickly defends herself. “Hey now, I had nothing to do with that craziness.” However, as her best friend, I can see right through her facade.

“The best part is, both cocky and Vincent are still alive and kicking,” Kerri adds with a chuckle. “Slowly but surely.”

Misty chimes in, “Why didn’t we just have the wedding at your grandparents’ barn? Think of the entertainment!”

“Well, that’s a fantastic question,” Kerri says with a sly grin, “But I think Sarah was afraid of what might happen if we let loose there.”

As the ladies continue their playful banter and swap stories of school and past relationships, I feel a weight lift off my shoulders. By sharing my story earlier, I’ve been met with understanding and support instead of judgment or disbelief. It gives me hope that the difficult decision I’ve made for my future is right. However, that sense of excitement and optimism is short-lived as I realize I have sixteen hours until I will come face-to-face with Corey Delacour once again.



Corey - 1994

My heart is heavy with conflicting emotions as I return to this place. The familiar streets and buildings bring a sense of comfort but also a pang of sadness for how much has changed. This town was once my home, the place where I belonged. Even after five years away, it still holds a special place in my heart, but it doesn’t exactly feel like home anymore.

As I drive from the airport, the scenery is all too familiar. The same shops and houses line the streets, with a few new

buildings sprinkled in here and there. Sadly, some of the places where I used to spend time with friends have closed down or been replaced by something else. My mom has kept me updated on the happenings around here, but it's a different feeling to witness it with my own eyes. It's a reminder that time marches on, even when we're not there to witness it. Everything changes.

Instead of following the well-worn path into town, I feel an inexplicable pull towards the highway that leads to the old trailer park. It's not the nicest area, never was, but it holds so many memories for me.

As I approach, I see that not much has changed. The trailers are still clustered like a small community, but now they seem more beaten and worn down. Graffiti covers dumpsters and abandoned buildings, signs of neglect in this forgotten town.

I reflect on my past here as I drive slowly through the park. All those years, I couldn't wait to leave and make something of myself somewhere else. And now, standing at the peak of what I thought would make me happy, success in hockey, I realize that life isn't so simple.

The path to true happiness isn't lined with achievements and accolades but rather with treasured relationships and unforgettable experiences. This truth becomes most apparent when something remarkable happens, and all you want to do is share it with that one person who is no longer a part of your life.

Don't misunderstand me, I have been blessed with many opportunities. I'm on the brink of signing with the team of my dreams, and my college hockey career has been exceptional, earning both success on the ice and my degree. My circle of friends and teammates is strong, and I couldn't ask for more over the past five years. But I'm nagged by a restless stir. It's been present since I walked out of that barn so long ago.

Even in moments where I should feel content, surrounded by good company, admiring a beautiful woman's presence, or celebrating a victory in the Frozen Four, there's always a lingering sense of something missing. As much as I hate to

acknowledge it, I know deep down what that something is. And while I have learned to accept this reality, understanding that dwelling on the past will not bring fulfillment, it still tugs at my heartstrings in quiet moments.

I leave the trailer park behind, but I can't bring myself to drive straight to my mom and Alan's house. There are a few things I need to see first, and besides, I know their house will be in chaos this morning with everyone getting ready for the wedding. I missed the rehearsal dinner last night because of a prior commitment in Boston, so I'm arriving late, and I need a moment by myself to breathe and process what it means to me to return to this town.

I pull up to Donnelly Ice Center and step out of my car. It's a bustling Saturday afternoon, with kids running in and out of the center. My feet feel rooted to the ground when I approach the entrance like they refuse to move any closer. This place holds some of the best memories of my life, but it also brings back pain that I'm not ready to face just yet, so I sit and watch the hustle and bustle, unable to go inside.

I'm not sure how long I stand there, watching families filter in and out of a place where I spent so much time. As I watch, waves of nostalgia crash over me, stirring up emotions I keep guarded down low, far from the surface. Maybe this trip is about allowing myself to feel these things so I can finally find closure and move on with my life.

My next stop is Ivy's childhood home. My body would've carried me to this place even if I didn't want to come here. I know from conversations with Sarah that Ivy has an apartment now, but I can't resist stopping and looking over where we spent so much time together, especially parked on the curb in front of her house. Those hours with her in my beat-up car, kissing and talking, are among the most intimate of my life.

After I left town, I had every intention of reaching out to her. But every time I picked up the phone to call, the pain would become too overwhelming, and I couldn't find the courage to hear her voice again. We both needed to be alone, at least in Ivy's eyes, and I wanted to give her that space. I did

resort to checking in on her occasionally with Sarah. No details, just generally wondering if she was doing okay.

As I sit in front of the house, I'm shocked at how much our breakup still hurts to this day. Mostly because it wasn't anyone's fault. No one did anything wrong, yet, our time together was cut short. It wasn't fair, which may be the most difficult thing to grapple with.

I was angry with Ivy at first. It was easier than allowing myself to feel the pain, so I blamed her for not trying harder and for not giving us more of a chance. As I got older, time dulled the sharp edges of the breakup, and I understood what she needed.

I no longer hold any anger towards her. The bitterness has faded away over time. That doesn't mean I'm looking forward to seeing her. It will undoubtedly hurt like hell, especially if she is with someone new. That might destroy me.

There was a moment when I considered not attending this wedding at all, trying to come up with any excuse to get out of it, but Amanda insisted that it would be important for public relations and she always gets what she wants.

Finally, after wasting too much time driving down memory lane in this rental car, I pull up to Mom and Alan's house, and more memories of my teenage years come flooding back. The familiar house where I spent most of my adolescence stands before me, reminding me how hard they worked to get me to this point.

I always wanted to take care of my mom and lift her out of the difficult place we once called home. I thought it was my job since my dad had abandoned us. In some ways, I think I also saw it as my place to take care of Ivy. But now, as I step out of the car, I realize that perhaps no one needed me to do those things.

My heart swells with love and emotion as my mother runs down the driveway, her face lighting up at the sight of me. We embrace tightly, and as she leads me inside the house, nostalgia overwhelms me. I've seen her over the years when she visits me in Boston, but being in our home together is

different. It feels like coming full circle. She fills me in on the latest with the wedding festivities and some of the things happening around town, and I try to listen while my brain keeps reminding me on repeat that I'm about to see Ivy again.

Chapter 41

“If You Leave”

Ivy - Age 23, 1994

My heart is pounding as we gather in the bride’s suite before the ceremony. I try to focus on Sarah, but every glance at her makes me more nervous. She looks like an ethereal being, radiating beauty and joy.

Her long, dark brown hair cascades down her back in loose waves, perfectly complementing her delicate features. The use of contact lenses brings out the deep richness of her eyes, making them sparkle with happiness and anticipation.

A pang of envy hits me as I realize she’s accomplished everything she set out to do— travel, education, and marrying the man of her dreams. I can’t help but hope those things will be possible for me one day too.

The wedding planner arrives to inform us it’s time to take our places for the ceremony. My stomach twists into knots at the thought of walking into that church, knowing Corey will be standing at the front, waiting to see his cousin get married.

The music begins, and I slowly walk down the aisle, trying to keep my breathing steady and avoid eye contact with anyone in particular. But as I get a few feet from the altar, I can’t resist looking up, and my gaze immediately locks onto Corey’s towering figure. There he stands, next to Tim, Sarah’s

fiancé. My feet turn to lead and I come to a stop, unable to move any closer. The sight of him is almost suffocating, and my heart feels like it might burst from my chest.

Kerri nudges me from behind, and I manage to slowly begin walking again. My feet feel uncertain beneath me as Corey's intense gaze burns into my skin like a branding iron. It's almost unbearable, the way he looks at me. I try to avoid his eyes, but they keep pulling me in like a magnet.

My carefully constructed smile feels strained as I attempt to look anywhere but at him, but it's no use. Just like the first time our eyes met, there's an irresistible pull towards him that I can't deny. Every nerve in my body is on fire, and I wonder if he still feels the same electricity between us.

The eyes of every guest in the church seem fixed on me, and even though I desperately want to run back in the other direction, I take a deep breath and focus on putting one foot in front of the other.

I reach my designated spot in the front of the church and turn to face the doors I just came through as the processional music fills the air. I can see Corey standing tall and poised from the corner of my eye. Even from a distance, I can see how much he's changed in the five years since he left this town. No longer a boy, he exudes confidence and charm as a handsome man. His dark navy suit fits his muscular frame perfectly, emphasizing his broad shoulders and chiseled features. He looks like he could be walking down a runway instead of an aisle.

His hair is styled in a trendy fade, short at the back and slightly longer on top. My heart aches as I remember running my fingers through those soft strands of hair. My hands itch as I imagine the feeling.

Standing under the warm glow of the church lights, the chocolate brown eyes that used to sparkle with warmth whenever they met mine seem distant as he stares back at me. My cheeks flush under his penetrating gaze, filled with emotions I struggle to decipher.

He breaks our gaze and turns to watch his cousin making her way down the aisle. I can feel the tension between us, the unspoken words hanging in the air since we last spoke. I regret not reaching out to him before this moment, not trying to clear the air between us.

Now it's too late, and I have to endure this entire ceremony with him standing a few feet away, able to see the turmoil raging inside of me while I paste on a fake smile and pretend that everything is fine.

The ceremony unfolds before my eyes like a beautiful dream, bursting with vivid colors and fragrant scents that saturate the air. The vibrant hues of the floral arrangements starkly contrast the upheaval within me. Despite my efforts to focus, my mind keeps wandering back to another time when things were simpler and our love was still alive.

At one point, I catch him sharing a secret smile with a woman sitting in the audience. She's a stunning redhead dressed in a breathtaking cornflower blue gown that complements her striking eyes.

He brought a date to this wedding. Of course, he did. He's moved on, just like he should have. Like any normal person would do. But seeing it in person hurts more than I ever thought it would. The realization hits me like a punch in the gut and threatens to make me sick right here near the altar.

My hands clasp tightly around my bridesmaid bouquet of tulips, their delicate stems crushed between my hands as I struggle to maintain composure. My palms are slick with sweat, staining the soft satin ribbon wrapped around the bouquet. I try my best to stand still and not fidget anxiously from foot to foot, but inside I'm a chaotic mess of emotions that threaten to spill over at any moment.

The ceremony ends and we all flow onto the perfectly manicured lawn for family photos. The cool evening air offers me comfort and a moment to breathe, which I desperately need.

I spot Corey approaching, pausing briefly to exchange pleasantries and have short conversations with guests. My

heart races as I try to guess how he will react when he sees me. *Will he acknowledge our past? Or will he pretend like it never happened?* The uncertainty is almost unbearable, especially as I try to sort through my feelings for him.

As the bridesmaid group finishes their photos, I step back to give Corey and his family space for their pictures. The other bridesmaids, now aware of our complicated history, exchange knowing glances between him and me. Sascha's hand slips into mine, a comforting gesture as we watch them capture memories.

"Are we done with these photos?" I ask Sascha.

"I think so," she responds, "at least for now."

"I need a drink," I announce, but a familiar voice stops me in my tracks before I can take more than a few steps.

"Five years later, you're still running away from me," he says.

My heart throbs painfully in my chest as I slowly turn to face him - the man who helped me mend my broken pieces, the man who still holds those pieces in his hands.

"I'm not running from you, Corey Delacour." I try to keep my voice steady. "I was just going to grab something to drink."

"Great, Ivy Owens," he responds with a nonchalant shrug. "Why don't I join you?"

We stand at the edge of the fluttering reception tent, unsure how to break the years of silence between us. Corey adjusts the tailored fabric of his suit jacket, his fingers smoothing out any imagined wrinkles. Meanwhile, I nervously fiddle with the delicate lace on my flowy dress, wishing for a distraction from the tension thick in the air.

The awkwardness between us is suffocating, and we struggle to make small talk. The bartender stands patiently behind the bar, his eyes flitting expectantly between us as he waits for our drink orders. Corey requests a beer while I opt for a flute of champagne.

As we wait for our drinks, I catch a whiff of freshly cut grass and blooming flowers from outside, reminding me that this is supposed to be a joyous occasion. But with Corey standing next to me like a stranger, I can't help but feel sad amidst all the celebration.

With our drinks in hand, we face each other, waiting for someone to make the first move. My mind is racing, trying to find the right words to say.

"The ceremony was beautiful," I finally manage to say awkwardly, breaking the tense silence between us.

Corey chuckles and shakes his head, clearly feeling just as awkward as I do.

"How are you?" he asks, exhaling the breath he was holding.

"I'm okay," I reply with forced cheerfulness. Most days it's true, but today feels like a lie. And I think he knows it too, but we continue to play along.

"This is kind of strange," Corey remarks.

"It is." I chuckle in agreement. "It's crazy how you can go from being so close to someone to having no idea what to say to them. I hate it."

"It's me, Ivy Girl," he says tenderly. "You can tell me anything."

Hearing that familiar nickname sends a wave of emotions through me, and the dam breaks; the tears I've been holding trickle down my cheeks.

"Hey, hey, don't cry," Corey reaches out and gently wipes away a tear from my cheek with his thumb. The simple act transports me to a place that feels more like home than anything I've ever known. *Right person, wrong time.* Then I remember he's here with a date and quickly pull away and try to gather myself.

"Sorry," I mumble. My stuttering apology barely makes it past my lips as I frantically try to gather my thoughts and regain composure. "How long will you be staying?"

I have to leave tomorrow,” he responds, his voice tinged with a hint of regret. It’s not surprising. I know he’s reaching the end of his college career and surely has a lot of things to wrap up.

“I’m sure you’re busy,” I say with a small smile, trying not to let disappointment show in my eyes. “I’ll let you get back to your date.”

His brows knit together in confusion before he turns to look over his shoulder. His gaze lands on the redhead at the bar, chatting with his mom. He shakes his head and lets out a soft chuckle.

“That’s Amanda,” he says.

I hate Amanda.

He continues, “She’s here to do a piece on me for the team.” A glint in his eyes betrays a hint of excitement.

“With the university?” I can’t help but feel relief flood through me at the thought that she isn’t here for romantic reasons.

“No,” Corey says with a slow shake of his head, a small smile playing on his lips. “She’s here to do a write-up for me when I get introduced to my new team in Edmonton.”

I stand frozen, my jaw hanging open in shock. Corey always dreamed of playing hockey in Edmonton—the same city where his idol made his mark.

“Corey, are you serious?” I nearly scream, barely able to contain my excitement as I jump up and down and clap my hands. “You’re going to Edmonton!”

“I am Ivy Girl,” he confirms with a beaming grin. “I just found out about it last week. Since I was already planning on coming home for this wedding, they thought sending someone from public relations out would be nice.”

My heart swells with pride and joy as I instinctively launch myself into Corey’s arms, hugging him tightly.

“I’m so proud of you,” I tell him, my voice choked with emotion as tears stream down my face.

At that moment, I know deep in my bones that I made the right decision to let him go, because if I had been there in Boston, feeling scared and alone and uncertain, it would have been a distraction for him. And now, seeing how happy and fulfilled he is, I couldn't be more excited or proud of another human being.

Corey's embrace is strong and unyielding, lifting me effortlessly off my feet as he spins me around, and I let out a squeak, his favorite reaction. His laughter fills the air, infectious and joyful. As he sets me down gently, a fond smile graces his features.

"Thank you for always believing in me," he says sincerely. My heart swells with love for this man who has always been my rock, even when he wasn't here.

"I never stopped believing in you," I assure him, my voice full of conviction.

For a moment, we gaze into each other's eyes, communicating without words.

And then Corey speaks again, his voice low and vulnerable. "I never stopped believing in you either." The admission is like a balm to my soul, reassuring and comforting.

Suddenly, his mouth crashes against mine. It's rough and raw and perfect. He grabs my face in both hands, holding me steady as he deepens the kiss, running his tongue along my lip and capturing it gently between his teeth. I moan into his mouth and then grip the back of his head tightly, pulling him closer so that our bodies are pressed together, and it feels like heaven on earth.

Corey pulls away from the kiss, his body tense as he steps back. His head shakes slightly, and he mumbles, "I'm sorry. I didn't plan that. I got caught up in seeing you again."

My hand instinctively rises to touch my swollen lips, the lingering warmth of his kiss still tingling on them. I fight back tears, knowing he saw it as a mistake while I saw it as a lifeline for my aching heart, the breath my lungs have been desperate for.

With a brave front, I offer him a soft smile, though my voice trembles with emotion.

“It’s wonderful to see you,” I say, trying to push down the lump in my throat. “I can’t wait to watch you play on television.” As the words leave my lips, memories of cheering him on at past games flood back, and my heart swells with pride and longing all at once.

“Take care, Ivy,” he says as I watch him walk away again. He doesn’t take my heart with him this time. It’s impossible since it’s been with him for five years.

Chapter 42

“Hard Habit To Break”

Ivy - Age 23, 1994

The rest of the reception passed in a blur, memories and emotions swirling like a storm. I vaguely recall posing for pictures and watching others dance and celebrate while I sat in a daze, fighting back tears with every fiber of my being. I couldn't bear to do anything that would mar Sarah's special day, so I shut down and went into robot mode, something I hadn't done since my darkest days.

Corey disappeared not long after our conversation, but I couldn't help but notice that Amanda had also slipped away. I tried to convince myself that he was happy and where he belonged now. When I finally managed to break free from the party, I said goodbye to the girls and made a beeline for the safety of my apartment. The silence engulfed me like a soft blanket, offering some respite from the chaos within my heart.

I've changed into my most comfortable baggy pajamas and I'm currently lying in the fetal position watching *St. Elmo's Fire*, when there's a soft knock on the door. Somehow, my heartache has become a whole body ache as I slowly reach the door. I'm sure it's only Sascha here to check on me, but when I open the door, I'm staring into the brown eyes of the man I love.

“I’m not sorry,” Corey says, restlessly running his hand through his hair. “I’m not sorry I kissed you,” he repeats, his eyes locked onto mine. “Ever since I laid eyes on you, it’s all I’ve been able to think about.”

“You disappeared,” I reply, unsure what else to say. I’m not even sure he’s standing at my door. He may be some elaborate dream my brain created.

“I had to show Amanda around town,” Corey explains, his gaze never wavering from mine. “We drove to the high school and Donnelly’s, but all I could think about was getting back to you, so I dropped her off at her hotel and drove here.” His words hold a sense of longing and vulnerability as he stands before me, pouring out his feelings.

“Can I come in, Ivy Girl?”



His mouth crashes against mine, an intense and passionate kiss that leaves no doubt about our desires. All the pent-up longing and need pour into our embrace.

We make it to my bedroom while we continue our fiery kiss like two thirsty wanderers, finally finding a cool oasis in the desert, shedding clothes along the way.

Corey pushes me back onto the soft mattress with a gentle yet firm touch. His body hovers above mine, the weight of his hands braced on either side of my face. All conversation is forgotten as we give in to the overwhelming emotions building between us.

As I run my hands down his strong, defined shoulders, I feel every muscle tense. I trace the small patch of hair on his chest before continuing lower over his abs, stopping at the V in his hips. His skin is hot and cold, causing him to shiver from my touch. The electricity between us is undeniable and only intensifies as we give ourselves completely to each other.

I feel a surge of eager anticipation as he trails kisses down my body, his lips leaving a trail of heat in their wake. His

strong hands glide over my curves, kneading and squeezing, igniting sparks of pleasure within me. I can't help but moan with each touch, my fingers tangling in his hair as I pull him closer, urging him to continue.

His intense gaze travels up my body, taking every inch of me with hungry eyes.

“Ivy,” he whispers, the sound of my name on his lips sending shivers through me. “I need to taste you.”

My heart flutters at his words as he captures my mouth in a passionate kiss, sucking and nibbling at my lower lip while I eagerly explore every hard contour of his body, scratching lightly with my nails.

He buries his head in the crook of my neck, his lips tenderly brushing against my skin, causing waves of pleasure to ripple through me. His warm hands roam across my body, exploring every inch intimately as I tilt my head back, savoring every moment spent with him.

The brush of his fingertips against my skin sends a trail of tingling pleasure through my body. They dance down my chest, tracing the curves and valleys before cupping and squeezing my breast. His skilled hands knead and massage, rolling my nipple between his fingers.

With each kiss he plants on my body, I grow more and more aroused. His lips linger on my breasts, causing me to moan as he smiles against my skin. His nose grazes over my stomach, leaving a trail of goosebumps in its wake. His eyes are filled with satisfaction and desire when he looks up at me.

My anticipation builds as he moves down my body, tugging at my underwear until it's off. His breath tickles my inner thigh, and I can't help but squirm in excitement as he kisses and sucks at the area. My senses are overwhelmed when his tongue runs up and down the length of me, igniting a fire within me that only grows stronger with every passing moment.

Without warning, he spreads me open with his thumbs and kisses my clit, taking his time to explore every inch of me. I

writhe beneath him, unable to contain the building need within me. He continues to kiss and lick me, sweetly and softly, until I can't take it anymore and begin pushing against him, seeking more friction.

Sensing my desperation, he adds more pressure to my clit and slips a finger inside of me. The sensation is almost overwhelming as he adds another finger and works me with them. He sucks on my clit harder, sending waves of pleasure through me until I can't hold back any longer.

"Watch me," he demands, pulling my attention to his heated gaze. I stare at him as he devours every secret of my body, as if I am his only source of nourishment. He watches me intently as he hooks his fingers inside and presses against my front wall while his tongue lashes at my clit with several hard flicks. My body responds instantly, arching off the bed and convulsing with pleasure. He continues his assault, lighter now, as I ride out my orgasm, and doesn't stop until he's licked every last ounce of my release. Finally, he lifts, his lips and chin glistening with my nectar.

As our eyes meet, his mouth captures mine in a blistering kiss that sends shivers down my spine. He pulls back slightly and looks deeply into my eyes. "You want me inside you?" he whispers breathlessly.

My heart pounds with desire as I respond breathlessly, "Yes." The anticipation builds as we both crave each other's touch.

"I don't have a condom," he says, but his words do nothing to extinguish the fire in my belly.

"We're good. I'm on the pill."

"I'm clean," he replies. "I've never been bare inside of anyone." His eyes search mine, and I understand what he's saying. This is something he would only give to me.

"I trust you," I tell him, and it's the truest thing I've ever said.

He draws his hips back and then pushes forward into me. Our bodies fit together perfectly, and I revel in the feel of his

bare skin against mine. As he begins to slowly pump in and out, his tongue mimics the same movement on my lips, sending waves of pleasure through my body. I grind underneath him, savoring the sensation of him deep inside me.

After a minute, he reaches down and puts his hands under my ass, tilting my hips up slightly so that he hits the bundle of nerves deep inside me. The combination of that feeling and the friction working on my clit as I grind below him is almost too much to handle. I grind harder, using his body to chase my high.

“Come for me,” he growls in my ear, and a shiver runs down my spine. I climb higher, his words echoing in my mind like a mantra. Our movements become more frantic as we both reach our peak, and I cling onto him tightly, our bodies intertwined as we ride out the intense waves of ecstasy. Moments later, the intense pleasure of my orgasm slams into me, causing me to moan uncontrollably.

“I can feel you squeezing my cock,” he says breathlessly, his voice thick with desire. “That’s it, Baby,” His words intensify the waves of ecstasy coursing through my body.

As my orgasm subsides, he flips us over while still deep inside of me, holding onto my hips as he drives into me from below. My legs are jello, muscles drained and depleted, but I’m determined to give him everything I have.

I sit up and ride him, lifting my hips up and down in sync with his thrusts. Our hands are clasped together, our bodies moving together in a primal dance. He starts to move faster, and I allow him to take control, using my body for his pleasure. After a few more powerful snaps of his hips, he releases my hands and grips my hips tightly, holding me in place as he reaches his climax. I can feel the moment his orgasm hits, sending shockwaves through both of our bodies.

“Fuck, Ivy!” he groans loudly as he pumps through his release. The sound of his pleasure only serves to heighten mine.

I collapse onto his chest, both of us struggling to catch our breath as we come down from our shared euphoria. His heart

is pounding against my skin, matching the pace of my racing heartbeat.

With a slow, drawn-out moan, I rise off of him, and he slides out of me. The moment is electric, with every nerve in my body tingling from the intensity of our connection. As I lay beside him, catching my breath and trying to come back down to reality, he speaks in a sweet voice.

“I can’t even tell you how many times I’ve dreamt of this moment,” he says, gazing at me with longing.

“Maybe half as often as I have,” I reply vulnerably.

We lean into each other again for another kiss, our lips meeting softly. Our hands roam and explore each other’s bodies as we hold onto this time together.

“You know I have to leave in a few hours,” he reminds me, breaking the tranquility of the moment.

“I know,” I reply, trying not to think about his impending departure.

“So, what’s keeping you here?” he asks gently, his warm hands rubbing soothing circles on my back.

“Nothing really,” I admit with a sigh, “except maybe the skating lessons.”

He leans back so he can look me in the eyes.

“You’re taking skating lessons?” he exclaims with surprise and amusement.

“Oh no,” I reply smugly, a playful glint in my eye. “I teach skating lessons to kids.”

“You do?” he questions, eyebrows raised in surprise.

“I do,” I confirm with a proud smile. “After you left, I started skating every day. Maybe it was a way for me to feel connected to you or because you inspired me with your words about dancing on the ice. Either way, I became pretty good, and now I get to teach children.”

“Ivy, that’s incredible,” he says sincerely, admiration evident in his voice. Then his expression turns somber as he adds,

“We’re right back in the same place we were five years ago, aren’t we?”

“We are,” I reply, gnawing on my bottom lip. “That didn’t take long,” I remark with a half-hearted chuckle.

“Ivy, I don’t know where you’re at in your life, but I can’t ask you to come with me again. It almost killed me last time when you said no.”

My heart aches at the memory, but I know he’s right. Instead, I ask tentatively, “Can you stay for a while?” My voice is small as I hope beyond hope that he will agree to spend more time with me before he has to leave once again.

“Yes,” he replies with a tender smile, his lips brushing against my forehead in a gentle kiss. I feel myself drifting off to sleep, lulled by the steady rhythm of his heartbeat beneath my ear. Everything feels perfect and safe.

As I surrender to slumber, I hear him whisper, “I will always love you.” The words wrap around me like a warm embrace, filling me with contentment.

When I wake up to the bright rays of sunlight filtering into my room and the distant sounds of chirping birds and construction on the house across the street, I realize Corey is no longer by my side. The emptiness next to me is a reminder that this perfect moment was only temporary, and reality has come crashing back in, once again leaving my heart in broken shards.

Chapter 43

“Only You”

Ivy - Age 23, 1994

I stare at the decision before me, and I can't help but think that this might be the dumbest thing I've ever done. The weight of it settles on my shoulders like a heavy cloak, suffocating and overwhelming.

It's been weeks since I last saw Corey and he poured his heart out to me and I couldn't find the words to respond. His parting words, "I will always love you," took up residence in my broken heart and sat sharp and heavy. I pretended I had not heard him. I pretended to be asleep to avoid responsibility for being the caretaker of his heart in the face of him leaving again. It left me paralyzed to lay bare my own.

He left.

I tried to justify it repeatedly, but I was met with nothing but regret. How could I have let him walk away from me again? How could I have been so blind to what was right before me?

Right person. Right time. Finally.

I remember how sure he was of himself and his future when we were younger, and I, still lost and unsure of who I was supposed to be, couldn't keep up with him. He had dreams and goals, while I was content just being with him. I knew it was

for the best when he left our small town. But he took a piece of me with him when he left.

I understand now what Corey always knew; he was meant for more than our small town could offer. And now, as I face this crossroads in my life, I'm meant for those same things too.

I didn't tell him about the book. He doesn't know how his quiet strength inspired me to break free of my captive chains and tell my story. He doesn't know that because of him, I'm not scared anymore. He doesn't know how I turned those rambling journal entries of a young girl into something that will inspire people.

He doesn't know what he means to me, even from the distance we've lived the past five years.

I no longer need Corey to make me who I am; I've grown and discovered myself over these past years without him. I needed to do that. But there's no denying that a part of me will always belong to him. And now, as I hold onto that conviction with a newfound strength, I know what I must do.

My mind has been filled with the clichés of romantic movies for years, and I've decided it's time to make a grand gesture. It's time to stand outside his window with my boombox held high over my head and declare my undying love.

So yes, aside from risking my life to break out of a human-trafficking cult, this may be the dumbest thing I've ever done. But for the first time in a long time, it also feels like the bravest and most right thing I could do. Loving Corey has always been the easiest thing for me, and I no longer let my fears stand in the way.

In the past few days, I have declared to everyone I love that I am following my heart, and in doing so, I quit my job, packed a bag, and drove straight to the airport.

With a pounding heart and trembling hands, I nervously board the plane to take me to Boston. The roar of the engines and the slight jolt as we take off fills me with fear and excitement. As we soar through the clouds, I can't help but

imagine Corey's reaction when I show up unannounced. *Will he be happy? Surprised? Angry?* The possibilities race through my mind like a rollercoaster ride, adding to the thrill of my first-ever plane trip. My hands grip my complimentary ginger ale like a vice, afraid it will spill from the tremors racking my body.

Finally, after an eternity, we land in Boston, a new city filled with unknown adventures and possibilities awaiting me.

From there, I head to the arena where Corey has spent the past few years becoming one of the top centers in collegiate hockey.

Today is media day for Corey's announcement about joining Edmonton, and I refuse to miss it. Nothing will keep me from being by his side. Even if he no longer wants me, I will settle for his friendship.

As a hopeless romantic who admittedly has watched far too many 80s movies, I step out of the cab wearing a pair of jeans and Corey's old Mavericks hockey jersey. It's been sitting in my closet for years, and despite the tears I shed while wearing it to bed on countless nights, I could never bring myself to get rid of it.

My heart pounds in my chest as I walk through the double doors of the arena. Security greets me with curious eyes and asks why I'm here. When I tell them my purpose, they direct me with kind smiles to where I need to go. My palms are slick with sweat as I made my way towards Corey.

With trembling legs, I make my way into the bustling arena, the sound of skates carve through the ice and chatter fills the air. The stands are packed with people, their eyes fixed on the shining ice. At its center stands Corey, his tall figure clad in a sleek orange and blue hockey jersey, flanked by two men I assume to be his coaches. Beside them is Coach Dupree from the Mavericks, smiling ear to ear.

Cameras flash, and reporters eagerly interview those surrounding Corey, praising his skills and expressing excitement for his addition to their team's roster. Amidst the

commotion, I find a seat and take it all in with wide eyes, my nerves momentarily forgotten.

I know there's a possibility he may ask me to leave or reject me altogether. Still, in this moment, I'm so grateful to witness this incredible milestone in his career. No matter what happens next, I will cherish this memory forever.



Corey - 1994

My gaze sweeps over the crowded arena, taking in the sea of familiar faces. The team members are scattered throughout the stands, along with a few trainers and individuals associated with the team. I spot my mom and Alan sitting near the top, her eyes brimming with tears that she tries to hold back. She didn't want to sit too close to draw attention away from me.

My search comes to an abrupt halt when my eyes land on the one person I had been hoping to see all day but never thought I would—Ivy. She looks stunning in my Mavericks jersey, her smile radiating love and support. It surprises me that she's here without me asking. I won't lie. I hoped she'd come. I hoped she'd realize our connection had never left after we spent the night together.

Since I saw her, I haven't been able to get her out of my head. Not that I ever could. The ache in my chest that I used to ignore was filled when I was with her again. Now that she's here, I won't let her leave.

As soon as the media attention disperses and people start to scatter, I make my way through the crowd and up to the stands where Ivy waits for me. As soon as her arms wrap around me, I spin her in a circle, unable to contain my happiness. Placing her back on solid ground, I press my lips to hers.

"You're here!" I exclaim, my heart fluttering with excitement. "I can't believe you're actually here."

"I'm here," she says with a smile, her eyes sparkling with happiness. "And if you'll have me, I don't want to leave."

“If I’ll have you?” I repeat, feeling a surge of emotion. “Ivy, you captured my heart the day you nervously nibbled on a Pop Tart in front of school, trying to be invisible. But to me, you were never invisible. You shined like the brightest star in the sky.”

As I speak, the memories flood back— the first time we met, our first date at the park, the prom, and the countless moments that led us to this point. “But I need to ask you something,” I continue.

“What’s that?” she asks, wrapping her arms around my waist and looking into my eyes.

“How do you feel about strange money, cold weather, and Tim Hortons?”

A slow smile spreads across her face.

“I’m ready for everything,” she responds confidently.

“Looks like it’s you and me against the world now,” I say with determination.

“You and me against the world,” she echoes with a grin on her face, her perfect face, the familiarity of it, every angle indelibly etched in my memory and replayed on an endless loop all these years, here with me now, my Ivy Girl.

Epilogue - "You Make My Dreams (Come True)"

Ivy - Age 24, 1995

As the airplane door swung open onto the ramp, a fierce gust of icy air assaulted me, stealing my breath and making me shiver despite my bundled layers. The cold in Canada is no joke, as Corey had warned me. Today's temperature is a staggering -23 degrees Celsius, equivalent to -10 degrees Fahrenheit, and I've been obsessing over it since Corey left.

It's been almost a month since I last saw him, the longest we've gone without seeing each other since I showed up in Boston. He had to come up here early to start training with the team while I took care of some things back home. Mainly getting my book published.

It's surreal to think that people are interested in my story now. I kept those memories locked away for years, afraid they would consume me. Now that I've shared it, I feel truly free. Corey always said that would happen, and that handsome son of a bitch was right.

Every detail of my chaotic and emotional journey spilled out onto the pages as I relived them. From the day I was taken and listened helplessly as my sister screamed in agony to the moment I finally found my way to freedom. As I wrote, those

years became as vivid as the crisp Canadian air surrounding me.

With trembling fingers, I wrote about Auron, a man so skilled at manipulation that he convinced hundreds of people to stake their lives on the promise of a better future through a fantastical tale of aliens and voices from the sky. I held nothing back as I revealed his true nature, a ruthless drug lord, kidnapper, human trafficker, and likely murderer.

He may not have directly taken a life with his own hands (though I highly doubted it), he was the puppet master behind the loss and devastation of countless individuals.

Justice caught up to him in the end. Last August that wretched man died in prison, a fitting punishment for the years of torment he had inflicted upon innocent souls. Before he met his fate, I made a trip to see him. It was something I needed to do.

I sat across from him, separated by a thick pane of glass, as his face registered shock. He knew that my actions had landed him behind these cold, unforgiving walls, and in that moment, I wanted him to see me—strong, triumphant, and thriving despite his attempts to break me. The pride in my eyes must have been a glaring reminder of his ultimate defeat.

His slender fingers eagerly wrapped around the phone, ready to spin his web of deceit once again. I stubbornly refused to pick up on my end, not wanting to hear his smooth voice or be subjected to his endless lies. Instead, I focused on the small doll in my hands, a reminder of the terrified twelve-year-old girl he had preyed upon and the only thing he had allowed her to keep. Her hope.

Corey wasn't too happy when I told him he could make the trip with me, but I would go in to see Auron alone. He would've loved nothing better than to have five minutes alone with Auron, but in the end, I spent those five minutes with my captor alone, staring into his cold, soulless eyes, refusing to give him the satisfaction of speaking to me.

Auron died alone in his cell, stripped of all his fortune, fame, and followers. I couldn't have written it better myself.

The man who aided me remains a mystery to this day. He plays a pivotal role in my story, though he is not easily labeled a hero or villain. Throughout the journey of writing this book, I found myself constantly pondering his character. Such a paradoxical figure, complicit in the dark operations at The Station yet capable of showing empathy and kindness.

He may have only been a mere delivery man, but he was on Auron's payroll all the same. How many secrets did he know? How many lives did he witness being destroyed, yet chose to remain silent? Amidst the chaos and despair, he showed me a glimmer of hope and humanity with his small gestures. When he could have easily ignored my plight and stayed loyal to Auron, he instead chose to risk it all and help me escape. For that selfless act, I will forever be grateful.

Even now, when I hear the upbeat melody of "Wake Me Up Before You Go-Go," memories of him flood my mind. I hold no resentment towards him or anyone else involved in my ordeal. The past is behind me, and I have finally let go of my anger and bitterness.

The book chronicles not only my years with the cult but also the aftermath of my return when I chose to isolate myself. I believed that by hiding from everything, I could erase the pain and trauma of those years. It wasn't until my family, friends, and most importantly Corey showed me the power of facing and embracing our struggles that I began to find strength in my experiences.

Auron is a part of this story, but he holds no credit for the person I have become. That honor belongs to me— a strong woman, daughter, friend, and now fiancée. Yes, you read that right, fiancée.

In the midst of our time in Boston, Corey got down on one knee and presented me with a stunning opal ring surrounded by delicate diamonds. My left hand now bears the symbol of our unbreakable bond.

Considering Corey's busy hockey schedule and our move to a new city, we're taking our time with wedding planning. It's fine with me since I'm eagerly looking forward to continuing

my writing journey, perhaps exploring lighter themes in the fiction genre this time.

As a new resident here, I'm thrilled to join Corey in his efforts to support a charity close to his heart, providing equal opportunities for children interested in ice skating and hockey regardless of their financial backgrounds. Who knows? Maybe I'll even find time to offer skating lessons once again.

I gather my luggage and make my way outside, waiting for a cab to whisk me away to my new home. The sun beats down on me, but a deceiving chill lingers, making me shiver despite the warm rays.

Corey had asked me to take a later flight so he could pick me up, but my eagerness to get here won out. I can't wait to see the apartment he's chosen for us. He's been giddy with the excitement of a child on Christmas morning, eager to show me around our new home.

In just twenty short minutes, the temperature has plummeted significantly. The cold bites at my exposed cheeks, reminding me that I am woefully unprepared for this weather. Mental note: invest in some proper winter clothing, perhaps something suitable for an Antarctic expedition.

Suddenly, a sleek and luxurious black limousine glides up to the curb. The driver steps out gracefully and professionally, his crisp suit and stylish chauffeur's cap adding to his polished appearance.

"Ms. Owens," he greets me with a courteous nod.

This unexpected luxury takes me aback and I can only manage a surprised reply of, "Yes?"

The driver's voice is smooth and polished, betraying a hint of formality.

"I'm here to take you home. Mr. Delacour requested that I pick you up." *Of course, he did.* He helps me store my luggage in the trunk, and I take a seat in the back, sinking into the plush comfort of the soft leather seats. We drive off and I watch the scenery glistening with fresh snow in the afternoon light.

It takes over thirty minutes before we get to the city, passing by bustling streets and towering buildings. Soon enough, we pull up to a set of large apartment buildings. They're tall and sleek, with large, darkened windows facing the city like sentinels overlooking their domain.

I thank the driver as I gather my things and make my way into the lobby. The marble floor sparkles under my feet as I locate the elevators and haul my belongings inside, feeling a little out of place in this opulent setting. Apartment 912. I hope Corey remembered to leave the door unlocked for me, I think, as the elevator steadily climbs to its ninth floor.

The elevator dings to alert me to my arrival as I readjust my grip on my suitcase and begin to walk down the hallway. It's bright and modern, painted a deep gray with black and white art that adorns the walls like a contemporary gallery. The air is scented with a subtle hint of citrus and luxury as I approach my new home.

Standing before our apartment, I take a deep breath, excitement bubbling in my chest. This is it, the start of our new life together. I reach for the door handle, but my hand meets resistance. It doesn't budge. Panic rises in my throat as I jiggle it again, but it remains tightly closed. He forgot to leave the key. My heart sinks as I glance down the hallway and then back at the numbers on the door to make sure I have the right apartment. There's no mistake; this is where I'm supposed to be.

With a sigh, I slide down the wall and land on the floor with a thud. I can't go to the hockey arena because I don't know where it is or how long Corey will be here. Frustration gnaws at me as I chew on my thumbnail, wondering what to do next.

Suddenly, I hear the familiar lock click and sit up straighter. Looking left and right, I see no one in the hallway. Tentatively, I stand up and place my hand on the door again. This time, the handle turns easily under my touch. Confusion fills me as I push through the door and find myself engulfed in bright light and loud voices.

“SURPRISE!” A wave of shock hits me as I realize there are people everywhere, our friends, our family. Tears prick at my eyes as Corey appears in front of me, a huge grin on his face as he embraces me.

“Welcome home, Ivy Girl,” he says softly before kissing my lips sweetly.

Overwhelmed with emotions, I laugh nervously and place a hand over my racing heart. “How did you know I was coming home early?” I ask, a wide smile spreading across my face. This unexpected celebration is the best welcome home I could have ever asked for.

A warm, hearty laugh escapes his lips as he gestures towards my right. My best friends stand there, beaming with excitement and joy.

“What!” I exclaim, rushing over to embrace Sascha, Kerri, and Sarah. “How did you all manage to come here?”

“Your fiancé is quite resourceful,” Sascha replies with a grin.

I weave through the crowd of guests, my heart bursting with happiness at seeing both sets of parents and even my sister, who took time out of her busy junior year of high school to attend. Taz and Landry are present, manning the bar. They have been unwavering friends to Corey throughout the years. Their presence only adds to the magic of this moment.

Corey’s arms envelop me in a warm, comforting embrace, and I lean into him, taking in his familiar scent.

“I wanted you to have a little bit of the comforts of home when you got here,” he says softly.

I look up at him, and I know that wherever he is, that’s where I want to be. His love and presence are all I need to feel safe and content.

We stand surrounded by boxes and everyone we love in our new apartment, and I can’t help but think about all the struggles and challenges we faced to get here.

The truth is, I wouldn't change a single thing. Every obstacle led us to this moment, where we are together, stronger than ever before. Our love for each other knows no bounds.

Despite the uncertainties ahead, I feel an overwhelming sense of peace knowing we will face it together. As long as I'm with Corey Delacour, I will always be home.

THE END.

I wish I could've gotten to know you better. You seem like really awesome people. Never change.

Have a bitchin' summer. K.I.T!

Steffanie

If you enjoyed *Strange Love*, please head to Amazon/Goodreads to leave a rating and review!

Big, Awesome Thanks

When I say this book was knocking around in my head for over a year, I mean it was *at least* a year. I kept telling anyone who would listen that I wanted to write an 80s romance, and our heroine had to be in a cult. **A cult?** Yes, there had to be a cult. There is something so inherently 80s about that to me.

In the middle of writing it, I thought to myself, “This book is unhinged. Maybe I should pull back.” That’s when my oldest daughter said, “It is, Mom, but in the best way. Lean into the craziness of it.” So I did, and I’m so grateful for her encouragement. I had so much fun with this book that I decided to create an entire series based on the Merrimack Hockey Team of the 1980s.

My husband was amazing, as always, during the long hours in front of the computer and he was incredibly patient as I talked about the 80s for months on end.

To my writing friend, my accountability partner, my source of sanity when I’m trying to do too much, Rin Sher. Thank you for everything you do for me as an author and more importantly, as a friend.

To the best beta readers around, Misty Unser and Sarah Beth Ols. You ladies make me feel like I know what I’m doing and keep me from getting too far off track when I try to make everything a mystery. I’m happy with the book if you’re happy

with it. I'm very lucky to have you both make time to read my books. You are the best!

And of course, my amazing editor. My confidant in crime and the best cheerleader I could ever ask for. Thank you so much, Amanda Villa, for your knowledge, patience, and love! You are the raddest person on the planet!

Also By Steffanie

Can't wait for Taz and Sascha's book? Keep reading for an exclusive excerpt from thier book, Tainted Love, releasing summer 2024.

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Excerpt from Tainted Love

Sascha - Age 13 1983

“Kevin asked for my phone number!” Emily screeches at the top of her lungs before shoving a bagel bite into her mouth.

“I thought you liked Scott?” I reply.

“I mean, I did like him. Not like-like him, though. Not like I like Kevin.”

I have to shake my head to try to keep up with her. Emily is boy-crazy. She’s always been too preoccupied with boys, but ever since we reached middle school, she’s gone as crazy as a soup sandwich. I’ve heard all week that Scott is “the cutest boy in eighth grade.” Now because Kevin asked for her number, Scott is old news.

“I can’t believe you don’t like anyone,” she says before following up her bagel bite with a handful of MnM’s.

I look around the party and scan the crowded basement of Dee Dee’s house. Her parents have a nice setup down here. It doubles as another living space, and right now, that space is being used to celebrate her fourteenth birthday with balloons, snacks, music, and the ever-present awkwardness between boys and girls our age.

I hear a familiar laugh, and my eyes land on a boy wearing faded 501s and a Beastie Boys tee shirt. My heart flutters, reminding me of the crush I’ve had for years. A crush I

desperately want to stop crushing on, but my stupid heart has a stupid mind of its own.

Michael Tazman.

We used to be close, but things changed when we became middle schoolers in seventh grade. Michael started playing hockey and made new friends, most of whom are shallow and mean. He's not exactly like them, but the fact that he enjoys their company disappoints me.

I miss the boy I grew up with. I miss playing tetherball with him, sharing lunches, and silly jokes.

I miss my friend.

I should just give up on him. He barely acknowledges me anymore. But something keeps me tethered to him. Seeing his smile, even from afar, makes my heart feel full and light. I'm retrieved from my walk down memory lane to the present as Dee Dee announces it's time to play "Spin the Bottle."

For the love of Tears for Fears, do we really have to do this? I turn to get as far away from this ridiculousness as possible, but a hand grips my elbow, holding me in place. "Oh no, you don't, Bell. You're doing this."

My friend Darius studies me with kind eyes and a warm smile. He's the only one who knows about my feelings for Michael, and I'm the only one who knows about his feelings for Owen. We commiserate over our unrequited love, but he's worse off than me. As far as we know, Owen is straight, and Darius is the furthest thing from his radar. I guess if he wants to sit around an old Coca-Cola bottle and torture himself, I'll join him in solidarity.

About twenty of us are sitting in a circle around said bottle as Dee Dee excitedly exclaims she's going to start. Michael and his friends sit across from us, sipping from a flask and laughing over inside jokes.

The bottle stops on Owen, and Dee Dee excitedly leans into the middle of the space to meet Owen for a short, soft kiss amongst a chorus of "OOOOOOs" from the onlookers. I glance at Darius, who watches with wistful eyes.

The bottle makes its way around the group, a talisman of first kisses and future couples, before being placed in front of Michael. My heart races as he smirks, grabbing the bottle with his large hand which is currently painted with cuts and bruises across the knuckles. He flicks his wrist and the bottle explodes in concentric chaos.

Don't land on me. Wait. Do land on me. No. Don't land on me. This is horrible.

The bottle spins rapidly until the shag carpet slows its movement. Time stops as I watch the mouth of the bottle come to a full stop directly in front of me. Everyone is hooting and hollering, and my first instinct is to run hella fast in the opposite direction. Darius gently places his hand on my back, urging me forward with a mischievous glint in his eye.

Fine. I'll do it. I'll kiss Michael Tazman in front of people I wouldn't usually even share a bag of Doritos with.

Michael smiles as his friends push him forward, and soon we are mere inches apart. My stomach erupts in butterflies, and I fear people will see through my normally unaffected demeanor.

We slowly inch closer, until we're nose to nose, and I can smell the alcohol on his warm breath. What a dick. My first kiss is about to be tainted by tequila.

Michael stops and I inch forward just a millimeter more and close my eyes when I feel the softest pressure of his lips graze mine. Then they stop, and my eyes fly open as those lips fall into the wide smile of laughter and Michael's tequila-breath sprays in my face.

"I can't do it, Man." He laughs, looking back at his friends. "I tried. But I can't."

His friends are howling with laughter now. Laughing about kissing me. Laughing at me. It's almost like I was a dare he just couldn't seem to complete. It's mortifying.

I can feel the hot tears sting the back of my eyes. My throat feels tight since my heart is currently caught in it. Everyone is either laughing at me or looking at me with pity. I'm not going

to cry in front of these douchebags. I close down the emotion whirling through my body like a Kansas tornado and carefully stand, pivot, and walk away with calm, measured steps.

I'm Sascha fucking Bell. I will not show these losers how I'm affected. But one thing is for sure.

Michael Tazman is dead to me.

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