

Campus FAKE



CFU HOCKEY BOOK 4

CADENCE KEYS

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Editing: Happily Editing Anns

Cover Design: Lily Bear Design Co

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To every person whose smile is hiding their deepest pain. May you see yourself in Sam and find the found family that will love you just as you are—happy, sad, and every emotion in between. And may you find a man like Harrison Gordon who will always say “I’ve got you” when you need it most.

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GORDY & SAM

Playlist

The First Time – Damiano David
Jealous – Labrinth
Forever and a Day – Benson Boone
Just Friends – Virginia To Vegas
The Outside – Alex Warren
I Wanna Be The One You Call – Benson Boone
you'd never know – BLÜ EYES
Say You Love Me – Fleetwood Mac
Gold – Myles Smith
Fall In – Humbear
Thinking 'bout You – STELLA LEFTY
Always Been You – Katie Hargrove, Harry Baymiller
Hiding Alone – Griff
healing hurts – BLÜ EYES
Off I Go – Greg Laswell

[Listen now on Spotify](#)

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CONTENT WARNING

THIS WARNING CONTAINS SPOILERS

This story includes car accidents, along with the death of a sibling, serious injury and hospitalization, survivor's guilt, grief, panic attacks, family estrangement, and painful parental dynamics.

As with the rest of the series, this book contains explicit sexual content and strong language and is intended for readers 18 and older.

Please take care of yourself. Sam and Gordy's story is one of healing and hope, and it earns its happily ever after, but the road there goes through some dark places. If any of these topics are tender for you right now, I understand completely, and I hope you'll come back to Sam and Gordy when the time is right.

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ONE

Sam

There were worse ways to spend a Friday night than being surrounded by hot hockey players.

Of course most of these guys were in deeply committed relationships, but still.

The dining room at the hockey house was packed with enough food to feed a small army, surrounded by people who had quickly become my family. The table had never been meant to hold this many bodies, but we'd made it work by cramming mismatched chairs around the table and threatening bodily harm to anyone who complained about elbow room.

"Pass the potatoes," Drew said, already reaching over Liam's plate like the concept of personal space was a suggestion rather than a rule.

"Dude." Liam shoved his arm away. "Use your words like a civilized human."

"I did use words. I said, 'pass the potatoes.'"

"You said it while already grabbing—you know what, never mind." Liam handed over the bowl with an exaggerated eye roll. "You're lucky Rory's adorable, or we'd have voted you off the island by now."

Harper snorted from her spot beside Drew, baby Rory nestled against her shoulder like a tiny, sleeping burrito. "Don't threaten him with a good time. He'd love the drama of a tribal council."

"I would absolutely give an iconic exit speech," Drew agreed, completely shameless.

God, I loved these guys. The chaotic energy of living in the hockey house had reminded me so much of what it had been like growing up as the

only girl with three brothers. That thought brought a stormy cloud that I quickly forced away.

Not today.

Today was a good day.

Today I was surrounded by people who loved me.

Family dinners had become a thing after Foster and Abby got together. What started as an excuse to get everyone in one room had morphed into something that felt a lot like tradition. Like *family*. The word still felt foreign on my tongue, but sitting here, watching Foster try to steal a roll off Abby's plate while she swatted his hand away with a smile, watching Harper sway gently to keep Rory asleep while Drew looked at her like she hung the moon—this was the family I'd chosen.

The one that let me be just Sam—no history, no baggage, no questions I didn't want to answer.

"Okay, but real talk," Liam said, pointing his fork at me. "Sam, you have to settle this. Who makes better mashed potatoes—me or Gordy?"

I made a show of taking a thoughtful bite, chewing slowly while Liam watched with the intensity of a man whose honor was on the line. Across the table, Harry—I refused to call a man as attractive as Harrison Gordon "Gordy"—didn't even look up from his plate, completely unbothered by the competition.

"Harry," I said finally. "And it's not even close."

Liam clutched his chest like I'd stabbed him. "Betrayal. After everything we've been through."

"You asked for honesty, Li. I gave you honesty." I grinned and reached for my wine. "Maybe if you stopped trying to sneak protein powder into everything, you'd have a shot."

"That was *one time* and it was Drew's fault."

"What the hell, man. Don't even lie. It was your idea!" Drew argued.

The table erupted into laughter, and I let myself sink into it. This was what I'd been missing for so long—the easy warmth of people who actually liked each other, who showed up not because they had to but because they wanted to.

I'd originally chosen Montana as a fresh start. I'd had no idea the family I'd become a part of while here.

"So what's everyone doing for break?" Abby asked, steering the conversation like the organized angel she was.

“Harper and I are staying local,” Drew said. “We’re not ready for a Dumontier-Tinsley holiday circus yet, and if we go back to Meadowbrook, both sets of parents will demand we stay with them. We’ll spend Christmas Eve with her family and Christmas Day with mine but otherwise, we’ll be here in Dunridge. We’d rather not add fuel to the fire that’s just finally started to settle down.”

Harper’s lips twitched. “That’s probably a generous way to describe it. Really our families are still looking for any reason to start the feud back up and we want no part of it.”

“Ah, don’t worry about your folks. They’ll still have a son around for Christmas,” Liam said with a grin. “They like me better anyway.”

Drew glared at Liam. “That might’ve been true before you were dating their daughter. Now, you’re on just as thin ice as I am.”

“What about you, Sam?” Harper asked. “Big Lowe family Christmas?”

I kept my smile bright and easy. “You know it. My mom goes all out—matching pajamas, way too much food, the whole nine yards.”

The lie slipped out smooth as silk. I’d gotten good at that over the years. And it wasn’t entirely a lie. My mom did used to go all out. Or at least she had the last time I’d spent Christmas with them. But I spent most holidays with my aunt in San Diego. I hadn’t been back to Seattle since I was seventeen.

Not since...

I cut the thought off immediately.

“Sounds nice,” Harper said, her smile telling me she believed every little lie I’d told her. Guilt wormed its way through my stomach. I hated lying to them.

But I hated the idea of how they might look at me if they knew the truth more.

The sensation of being watched pulled my attention to my right, where Harry sat next to me. He’d been quiet all evening, which wasn’t unusual for him, but I caught him watching me with those steady gray eyes. Like he could see right through the performance to whatever was underneath.

I looked away first.

“What about you, Gordy?” Abby asked. “Heading to Connecticut?”

He gave a small nod. “That’s the plan.”

Something flickered across his face—there and gone—but I recognized it. It was the same tightness I felt in my own chest whenever someone

mentioned going home. Like the word itself was a trap.

Before I could wonder anymore about it, a knock echoed through the house.

“Expecting anyone?” Foster asked.

A chorus of nos answered him.

“Who even knocks?” Liam asked. “All of our friends know they can just walk right in.”

“I’ll get it,” I said, pushing back from the table. “Maybe it’s a delivery guy. You guys order anything?”

Honestly I was grateful for the excuse to step away. The holiday talk had stirred up things I’d rather keep buried, and a few seconds alone in the hallway sounded like exactly what I needed.

The walk to the front door took maybe ten seconds, but something shifted in my chest with each step. A heaviness I couldn’t explain. The kind of gut feeling you got right before everything went sideways.

I shook it off. I was being dramatic. It was probably a delivery, or a neighbor, or—

I opened the door.

And my whole world tilted.

“Surprise, Sammy.”

My oldest brother, Jordan, stood on the porch, immaculate in a charcoal coat that probably cost more than my semester’s tuition. His blond hair was perfectly styled, his smile wide but forced. He was the golden boy of the Lowe family, but instead of being the prep school boy I remembered, he looked like he’d stepped right out of a board meeting and onto my doorstep.

What the hell was he doing here?

“Jordan.” My voice came out strangled. “What... How did you—”

There were so many questions fighting for first place that they all got tangled together.

“I was passing through on my way back from New York.” He said it casually, like Montana was a minor detour and not a thousand miles out of the way. “Thought it made sense for us to catch a flight home together.”

There was no way. We hadn’t seen each other in five years. Why would he all of a sudden take a detour to Montana and escort me to Seattle when he had to know I had no intentions of going back there?

I couldn’t.

Words once again clamored against one another, fighting to be released, but I strangled them down. Behind me, chairs were scraping against the floor, voices murmuring and footsteps approaching. My two worlds were about to collide, and I was powerless to stop it.

“Sam? Everything okay?” Harry appeared at my shoulder, his stormy gaze locked on Jordan like he was an enemy Harry could protect me from.

I wished he could.

Jordan’s eyes moved from me to Harry, curiosity flickering across his face.

“I’m Jordan,” he said, extending his hand to Harry. “Sam’s brother.”

Harry shook it once, brief and firm. “Gordy.”

“He’s one of my roommates,” I managed, finding my voice somewhere in the wreckage of my composure.

Jordan nodded slowly, his gaze sweeping past us to the hallway where the others had gathered. I could feel them behind me—Abby’s quiet concern, Liam’s curiosity, Drew’s protective energy. My found family, meeting my real one for the first time.

This wasn’t supposed to happen. These worlds were supposed to stay separate.

“I didn’t realize you lived with...” Jordan trailed off, clearly recalibrating whatever assumptions he’d made about my life here.

“Hockey players,” I supplied flatly. “I live with hockey players.”

“Right.” A small smile tugged at his mouth—genuine, if a little sad. “Sounds like you. Always did like being surrounded by chaos.”

The teasing in his voice made my chest ache. He said it like he still knew me. As if five years of silence hadn’t turned us into strangers.

“Look, Sam,” he said, shoving his hands in his coat pockets. The gesture made him look younger, more like how I remembered him and less like the polished businessman he’d clearly grown up to be. Had he taken over Dad’s business? Or had he gone off on his own? “I know this is unexpected. I should have called first.”

“Yes, you should have.”

He huffed out a breath that was almost a laugh. “Would you have answered?”

The question hung between us, and we both knew the answer.

No.

I wouldn't have. I would have let it go to voicemail, and then never bothered to return it.

"We really want you home this year," Jordan said quietly. "And I figured if I showed up in person, you couldn't just"—he gave me a knowing look—"escape to Aunt Lauren's."

My face flushed. He acted as if they'd tried so hard to get me to come home, when the reality was he sent me one, maybe two, texts a year and about the same number of phone calls. They didn't check on me for over a year after I moved to San Diego with Aunt Lauren. I hadn't escaped.

I'd been exiled.

As if reading the thoughts in my mind, his small smile fell. "Sam." His voice was gentle but firm. "It's time to come home."

Home.

Did he really believe that Seattle was home anymore? That it could *ever* be home again after...

No.

I couldn't think about it.

Which was why I couldn't go back.

"Why now?"

Something painful crossed Jordan's face. "We thought..." He stopped, shaking his head. "We thought eventually you'd be ready to come back on your own. But it's been five years, Sammy. And I'm tired of waiting."

Sammy. The nickname hit me right in the chest. He used to call me that when we were kids, before everything went wrong.

"I miss you," Jordan said simply. "We all do. And I know things are complicated. But I'm not leaving Montana without you. So you can either get on that plane with me tomorrow, or I can camp out on your porch until you change your mind." He glanced at the worn welcome mat beneath his feet. "Fair warning, I'm not above guilt-tripping you with how cold it is out here."

Despite everything, a surprised laugh escaped me. "You're such an asshole."

"I learned from the best." His smile widened, and for a second—just a second—it felt like no time had passed at all. Like we were still the Lowe kids, giving each other shit the way siblings do.

Then reality came crashing back.

Going home meant facing everything I'd spent five years running from. The memories. The guilt. The looks on my parents' faces that I couldn't bear to see.

"Jordan, I can't—"

"You can," he said. "You just don't want to. And I get it, okay? I do. But you can't keep avoiding us forever."

"It's worked out so far," I muttered.

"Sammy."

"Don't 'Sammy' me."

"Then don't make me be the annoying older brother who drags you home kicking and screaming." He raised an eyebrow. "Because I will. You know I will."

He would. That was the problem. Jordan had always been stubborn as hell, and apparently five years apart hadn't changed that.

"Maybe we could continue this inside?" Harry's voice cut through the tension, low and calm. "It's cold."

I'd almost forgotten he was there—which was insane, because Harry wasn't the kind of person you forgot about. But I'd been so focused on Jordan that everything else had faded to background noise.

Jordan glanced at Harry, then back at me, a question forming in his eyes.

"Yeah," I said, stepping aside. "Come in, I guess."

Jordan moved past me into the house, and I watched him take it all in—the mismatched furniture, the hockey gear by the door, the chaos that had become my home. He looked so out of place here, and yet...

He was trying. That was the part that made this so hard. He was *here*, asking me to come home, and I didn't know how to handle that.

Everyone was very obviously watching and eavesdropping, and I didn't bother to hide my eye roll.

"Jordan, this is everyone. Everyone, this is my brother Jordan."

He gave a little wave.

"You want us to set you a plate? We have plenty of food," Abby offered. But I spoke before he could. "He's not staying."

When my gaze met his again, my stomach knotted at the hurt in his eyes. All I seemed to do was hurt my family.

But then just as quickly, determination filled his gaze. "I wasn't playing around. I'm not leaving here without you. I've already bought us plane

tickets for a 2 p.m. flight out of Missoula tomorrow.”

“Jordan—”

“Sam, please. Two weeks. That’s all I’m asking. Come home, see Mom, Dad, and Eric, and if you still want nothing to do with us after that, I’ll back off. I promise.”

I wanted to say no. Every instinct I had was screaming at me to make an excuse, find an out, do anything but get on that plane.

But Jordan was looking at me with those eyes—the same blue eyes we’d both inherited from Dad—and I could see how much this was costing him. How much *I* had cost him, with all my running and hiding and pretending I could ever escape the pain I’d caused.

“I...” My voice cracked.

I couldn’t do this. He didn’t understand what he was asking of me. I couldn’t face my family. That was like wearing a dress made out of steaks and walking into the lion’s den. I’d never survive it.

“Okay, we’ll come.”

It took my brain a second to process that Harry’s voice had just spoken those words.

Jordan’s eyebrows rose. “We?”

“Sam and I.” Harry’s hand found the small of my back, warm and steady.

I turned to stare at him. What was he doing?

“You’re coming too? As her roommate?”

“As her boyfriend.”

What?

My brain short-circuited. Harry had just told my brother—my actual flesh-and-blood brother—that he was my boyfriend. And that he was coming home with me. For Christmas. To meet my parents.

The silence that followed was nuclear.

I felt the shockwave ripple through the room. Abby’s sharp intake of breath. Liam made a choked sound. Drew muttered “what the fuck” under his breath. Even Ava looked stunned, and she was usually unflappable.

But when I looked at Harry, I didn’t see someone making a joke or a mistake. I saw someone who had watched me drown for the past ten minutes and decided to throw me a lifeline. And he was standing beside me like this was the most natural thing in the world. Meanwhile, my brother was staring at us with an expression I couldn’t read.

"I thought you said he was your roommate," Jordan said carefully.

This was insane. This was absolutely, certifiably insane.

"Uh, yeah, he is."

"And I'm her boyfriend," Harry said. "Who'll be coming to Seattle with her."

Jordan's gaze darted between us, and I was certain it was only Harry's hand around my waist that kept me standing.

"You'll make sure she gets to the airport?" Jordan asked him.

"I'll take care of the seats since you'll need another one now that I'm coming."

"Alright. Give me your number and I'll text you the flight details," Jordan said, pulling out his phone. "We can all meet at the airport tomorrow." He paused, glancing at Harry with a glimmer of approval. "It's good that she has someone. I'm glad she's not... I'm glad she has you."

The words were clumsy, but they made me feel slightly less panicked about the prospect of seeing my family again. Jordan didn't want me to be miserable. He was glad I wasn't alone. That I hadn't been living in Montana punishing myself.

If only he knew the truth.

After he exchanged numbers with Harry, he said, "I should go." He headed for the door. "Let you guys finish dinner. But Sam?" He looked back at me, and his expression softened. "I really am glad I came. Even if you're pissed at me."

"I'm not pissed," I said quietly. "I'm just..."

Terrified. Overwhelmed. Completely unprepared for any of this.

"I know," he said. "I know. But it's going to be okay. I promise."

He left before I could respond, the door clicking shut behind him.

For a minute, nobody moved.

Then Drew's voice shattered the silence.

"Okay, someone needs to explain what the *fuck* just happened, because I feel like I blacked out and missed an entire season of this show."

"You two are dating?!" Liam said, sounding genuinely bewildered. "Since when?"

"Oh, please, I saw this coming from a mile away," Ava said before taking a drink of her wine.

Harry's hand was still on my back. Steady and warm and reassuring.

"We should probably talk," he said quietly, just to me.

Yeah. We probably should.

Because in the span of ten minutes, my quiet, under-the-radar, fake-it-till-you-make-it life had just exploded. And now I was going home with a fake boyfriend who looked at me like he could see every crack in my armor.

What could possibly go wrong?

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TWO

Sam

I'd gotten so good at pretending everything was fine that sometimes I almost believed it myself. But Jordan showing up tonight had threatened to send my very carefully built house of cards careening around me.

My hands moved on autopilot, pulling clothes from my closet and tossing them into the open suitcase on my bed. It didn't matter what I packed—I just needed to do *something* with my hands before I completely unraveled.

Harry stood near the door, arms crossed over his broad chest, watching me with that infuriatingly calm expression. He hadn't said a word since we'd come upstairs, leaving the chaos of questions and confused looks behind us. Even now, his presence filled the small room like he belonged there, solid and steady while I felt like I was one wrong move from shattering.

Sometimes I was jealous of how sturdy he always was. Unflappable might've been a better word. Nothing ruffled his feathers, and unlike me, I didn't think it was an act.

It was just him.

I yanked a pair of leggings from a drawer with more force than necessary. "Why did you step in down there?" The question came out sharper than I intended. I didn't look at him—couldn't look at him—because if I did, I might actually have to confront what had just happened. "Aren't you supposed to go to Connecticut for Christmas?"

A huff of sound, almost a chuckle, escaped him. "I should be thanking you for getting me out of Christmas with my family."

That made me pause. I finally glanced over my shoulder, catching the slight lift at the corner of his mouth. Harry wasn't exactly known for his sense of humor, but there was something self-deprecating in his expression that I recognized.

I knew a deflection when I heard one. Takes one to know one, right?

"Well." I turned back to my suitcase, shoving in a pair of pajamas I didn't remember grabbing. "Glad my family trauma could be of service."

The joke landed flat, even to my own ears. Because it wasn't really a joke, was it? My family trauma was the whole reason we were in this mess. Except he didn't know the extent of the trauma or what he was actually walking into.

What was I thinking, agreeing to this?

What was *he* thinking?

I abandoned the suitcase and walked to my window, staring out into the dark, the twinkle of stars faint in the sky. My heart felt like it was beating so hard I was sure he could hear it.

"I don't know if I can do this." The admission slipped out before I could stop it. I met his eyes in his reflection on the window.

Harry's gaze sharpened. He didn't move immediately—that wasn't his style. He assessed, calculated, like he was reading a play on the ice. He was the best goalie Clark Fork University had ever had, and right now I felt like a puck in his crosshairs.

Then he was crossing the room, his footsteps barely audible on the carpet, until he stood right in front of me.

God, he was big.

I'd noticed it before, obviously—you didn't live with someone built like a Greek god and *not* notice—but having him this close, his broad shoulders blocking out everything else, made butterflies flutter low in my stomach. His body was strong and solid, radiating a kind of safety I didn't deserve to feel.

When he tilted my chin up with one finger, I forgot how to breathe.

"What's going on?" His voice was low, steady. Those gray eyes searched mine with an intensity that made me want to look away. "Why are you scared of seeing your family?"

Scared. Such a simple word for something that felt so much bigger. I wasn't scared—I was *terrified*. Of going back to Seattle. Of facing my

parents. Of seeing the empty chair at the table where Bryce should have been sitting.

Of them finally saying out loud what I'd known for five years—that it should have been me.

"I'm not as strong as you think I am." The whisper scraped against my throat like broken glass.

Harry's expression didn't change. "Let me be the judge of that." His thumb brushed along my jaw—barely a touch, but it sent sparks cascading down my spine. He'd never touched me like this, although I'd thought about it more times than I cared to count. But Harry was off-limits. We lived together. His best friend was dating my best friend. And I couldn't hide from him, not like I did with the other guys I dated. Harry would be able to see right to the heart of me if I let him get too close. I'd always known it. And yet like a moth to a flame, I was still drawn to him, still craved him.

"Do you trust me?" he asked.

"Yes." The word came out without hesitation, surprising us both. "I trust you."

It was true, even if I knew I should keep him at a distance. But I'd done that for the last year and a half, and it hadn't done anything to tone down this crazy attraction I had to him, or my desire that I might finally be able to tell someone my truth.

A flicker of warmth filled his eyes before he quickly banked it, but not before I caught it.

"Then let me help you carry this."

My throat tightened. He couldn't possibly know what those words did to me. How desperately I wanted to let him.

I wanted to tell him everything.

But the words wouldn't come. They'd been locked away for so long that I didn't know how to release them anymore. The lock had rusted over, and every time I tried to open it, the weight of everything I'd buried threatened to crush me.

Harry seemed to understand. Maybe he could read it in my silence or in the way my hands had started to shake. Because he didn't push, didn't ask me to explain. He just looked at me with those impossibly steady eyes, and then leaned forward.

His lips pressed against my forehead in a kiss so tender my eyes fluttered closed and the burn of tears threatened.

In all the months we'd lived together, Harry had never gotten this close. He wasn't the type. Physical affection wasn't really his thing, at least not that I'd ever witnessed. But now his mouth lingered against my skin, and it felt like my chest cracked open.

When he pulled back, I was pretty sure I'd stopped breathing entirely.

"I'm going with you," he said, his voice rougher than before. "And I'll be your boyfriend as long as you need me to."

"Fake boyfriend." My voice was a whisper.

Harry's dark eyes seemed to shine with challenge, the corners of his mouth twitching like he wanted to say something. But he didn't. He just held my gaze, letting the silence stretch between us until it felt like its own kind of conversation.

What was that supposed to mean?

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THREE

Gordy

My phone had been vibrating nonstop since I'd sent the text to my sister letting her know there was a change of plans and I wouldn't be coming home for Christmas.

I didn't need to look at it to know it was her. Vivienne had been hounding me for weeks about Christmas this year.

"Are you sure you don't need to get that?" Sam asked me as we waited to board our flight. Her brother was sitting on the other side of her on his phone. He'd been glued to her side since we got here, almost like he was afraid she'd find any excuse not to get on the plane.

"It's my sister."

Sam winced. "Is she upset you're not coming home?"

I pulled out my phone from my pocket and showed her my notifications.

I had seventeen unread text messages, twelve missed calls, and five voicemails that I had no doubt ranged from curious to furious.

The texts told the story clearly enough.

VIVIENNE

What do you mean you're not coming home?

Harrison.

HARRISON.

I swear to God if you're ignoring me

Mom is going to lose her mind

Dad is already in a mood about the Whitmore deal falling through

I cannot handle them alone for the holidays.

You promised you'd be here. Harrison, I need you here. This is important.

Sam's gaze grew worried, but I couldn't allow that. She was carrying enough stress over this visit with her family. I was here to support her, not add to it.

I opened the most recent text and typed out a response, keeping it brief. That was the only way to handle Viv when she was spiraling.

ME

Sorry Viv. I need to help a friend. Mom and Dad like you better anyway.

The three dots appeared immediately. Disappeared. Appeared again. I could practically hear her indignant scoff through the screen.

VIVIENNE

Maybe that would be true if I had a penis. We both know you're the one who's supposed to take over the family business when you graduate because you're the son.

I had to fight back an audible groan at that.

The family business. As if those three words didn't carry the weight of a thousand expectations I'd never asked for. I'd do whatever I could to put off taking over Gordon Holdings for as long as possible. I had no desire to become another shallow businessman.

"My sister, Viv, knows more about our family business and all its subsidiaries than most of the people who actually work for the company. She might sound like she's freaking out, but trust me, she can handle herself."

"I shouldn't have pulled you away from your family."

She still didn't understand, but maybe she would after this trip.

There was nothing I wouldn't do for her.

Not a single thing.

And this trip was going to finally satisfy some curiosity I'd had about Sam since the moment I met her.

She was vibrant, lively, and always the life of any party. She rarely had anything but a smile on her face. But I grew up in a world where everyone wore masks. I knew what one looked like.

And her eyes gave her away.

Every so often, I'd see a flicker of something I couldn't put my finger on in her gaze, but then she'd dazzle everyone with her smile and her curves. Now I would finally get my answers because I had no doubt whatever that look was, it had to do with her family.

VIVIENNE

Who's this "friend" anyway? Since when do you have friends important enough to skip Christmas?

I stared at that question longer than I should have.
Since when, indeed.

The truth was, I'd been pulled into Sam's orbit from the moment we met at a music festival back when Foster and Abby were still dancing around each other. She'd taken me completely by surprise because she was unlike anyone I'd ever met. She was drop-dead gorgeous—something she knew all too well—but more than that she was sharp, witty, clever. Strong.

But as Pop would say, she was a wild horse who needed freedom, so I'd watched her while she hooked up with other guys who I knew meant nothing to her. She was loyal to her friends but didn't date seriously. I'd been biding my time because I knew—I *knew*—that once I made my move, that was it.

She was it.

She just didn't know it yet.

She hadn't been ready, but maybe after this trip, she'd see she could let her guard down. And if she didn't...well, I wasn't going anywhere.

I could be patient.

I didn't know what she was hiding. Didn't know why the mention of her family made her shoulders tense or why she said she went home for breaks, but clearly hadn't gone *home*.

But I knew she was carrying something heavy, and I knew she was doing it alone.

And last night, when her brother had shown up like a ghost from whatever past she was running from, I'd seen the fear in her eyes. Real fear, the kind that bypassed all her defenses and left her exposed. I hadn't thought about what I was doing when I stepped forward—hadn't calculated the consequences or considered what it would mean to claim her in front of everyone. I'd just seen her drowning, and I'd reached.

I'm her boyfriend.

The words had come out before I could stop them. And the moment they did—the moment I saw the relief flood her face, the way her whole body seemed to exhale—I knew I'd do it again. A hundred times. A thousand.

Whatever she needed me to be, I'd be it.

VIVIENNE

Hello?? Harrison??

You're being very suspicious right now

Is this friend a GIRL friend??

I turned off my phone.

Viv would figure it out eventually. She always did. But I wasn't ready to share Sam with my family, not even my sister.

Boarding started and we all stood up. Jordan kept darting glances at us, and Sam looked paler than I'd ever seen her. Without thinking about it, I reached over and held her hand, giving it a squeeze.

Her bright blue eyes met mine, gratitude filling them as she squeezed my hand back.

Whatever waited in Seattle, she wasn't facing it alone.

I'd make sure of that.

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FOUR

Gordy

Sam Lowe was the best liar I'd ever met.

And I'd grown up surrounded by people who lied for a living—politicians, executives, socialites who smiled through their teeth while calculating how to use you. I'd watched my own mother host charity galas for causes she couldn't name, my father shake hands with men he'd privately called incompetent, and my sister charm investors while plotting their demise in her head because they were chauvinistic pigs. The Gordon family had turned deception into an art form.

But Sam? She was in a league of her own.

The transformation happened the moment she'd squeezed my hand and looked back at her brother. One second she'd been pale, her hand cold in mine. The next? She'd flipped some internal switch and become someone else entirely.

She'd tossed her hair over her shoulder with a flick I'd seen her do a hundred times, sauntered down the jet bridge like it was a runway at Fashion Week, and boarded the plane like she was royalty, moving to the window seat with the casual elegance of someone who flew first class every day of her life. Her smile was bright and her posture perfect. She would've given my own mother a run for her money, and my mom had been a debutante from one of the wealthiest families on the East Coast. If I didn't know better, I'd believe she was fine.

But I did know better.

That was the thing about being a hockey goalie—you learned to read people. You had to. In the crease, a split-second tell could mean the difference between a save and a goal. A slight shift in weight, a flicker of

the eyes, the tension in a shooter's grip. I'd trained myself to notice everything, process it instantly, and react without thinking.

And right now, every instinct I had was screaming that Sam was barely holding it together.

Her brother had taken a seat two rows behind us, earbuds already in, giving us space. I was grateful he'd been willing to switch seats with me so I could sit next to Sam. It meant I could focus entirely on her without an audience.

"You know," Sam said, her voice bright as she fiddled with the air vent above her, "I've always thought first class was overrated. Like, congratulations, you paid three times as much for an extra four inches of legroom and a warm towel. Revolutionary."

I fought back a grin. Even on the edge of falling apart, she was a spitfire. I admired that about her, even if it also worried me.

Her fingers were trembling slightly as she grabbed the safety manual from the seat pocket and flicked through it. "Although," she continued, filling the silence I refused to break, "the free drinks are nice. Maybe I'll get champagne. Feels like a champagne kind of day, right? Nothing like cheap airplane champagne at"—she glanced at her phone—"two ten in the afternoon, but eh, it's five o'clock somewhere, right?"

The flight attendant announced we'd be pushing back from the gate shortly and Sam's body froze. It was so subtle I might not have noticed it if I wasn't watching so closely.

Not likely, because I noticed everything about her, but another person might not have noticed.

"Harry." Her voice cracked on my name, just barely, and then she recovered and plastered on that fake smile that was starting to grate on my nerves. She could pull that shit with everyone else, but she had to know I saw through it. "You're being very quiet. Even for you. Which is saying something."

I reached over and covered her hand with mine. "You don't have to do that," I said quietly.

"Do what?"

"Pretend."

Something flickered in her eyes—that thing I'd been trying to name for months. Fear. Grief. Something deeper. But then she blinked and it was gone, replaced by her usual armor.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” She tried to pull her hand away. I didn’t let her. “I’m perfectly fine. Just peachy. Ready to go home and eat my body weight in Christmas cookies and make small talk with people who—”

The plane lurched as it began to taxi.

Sam’s whole body went rigid. Her breath caught, and for a split second I saw through every wall she’d ever built. Pure panic filled her features, the kind that bypassed logic and went straight to the primal part of the brain that screamed *danger, danger, danger*.

“Sam.” I kept my voice low and steady. “Look at me.”

She didn’t. Her eyes were fixed on the window, watching the terminal slide past, her chest rising and falling too fast.

“Sam.”

Still nothing. Her hand had gone cold under mine, and I could feel the fine tremors running through her entire body now.

The plane turned onto the runway.

I shifted as best I could with the seat belt on to face her fully. Then I did something I’d been wanting to do for longer than I cared to admit.

I reached up and cradled her face in my hands, forcing her to face me.

Her skin was so incredibly soft under my palms. Her jaw fit perfectly into the curve of my fingers, like my hands had been made specifically for this purpose. To hold her.

To steady her.

She finally looked at me, those bright blue eyes wild with fear. Up close, the faint shadows under her eyes were obvious. She hadn’t slept last night; I’d bet anything on it. Her pupils were dilated, like her body was flooded with adrenaline that had nowhere to go.

“Breathe,” I told her. “With me. In.”

I inhaled slowly, deliberately, holding her gaze. Willing her to focus on me and nothing else. Not on anything happening in the cabin and definitely not on whatever ghosts were chasing her.

She tried. It was shaky, stuttered—barely a breath at all.

“Out.”

She exhaled with me.

“Again. In.”

The engines roared as the plane began to accelerate, pressing us back into our seats. Sam’s fingers flew up and wrapped around my wrists,

holding on like I was the only solid thing in her universe.

God, she had no idea what I'd give to be the man she clung to during life's storms.

Her grip was strong—stronger than I would have expected—and I welcomed it. I'd be whatever she needed to hold on to. An anchor. A lifeline. Anything.

"Out," I said, exhaling. "Slow. You're okay."

"I'm not—" Her voice broke. "Harry, I can't—"

"You can." I brushed my thumb across her cheekbone, wiping away moisture that made my heart clench painfully in my chest. "You're safe. I've got you."

The plane lifted off the ground and Sam squeezed her eyes shut. A small sound escaped her throat—not quite a whimper, but close.

"Look at me," I urged.

She opened her eyes again, her gaze locking on mine. I kept breathing with her. In. Out. Steady and slow. My hands stayed on her face, anchoring her, and gradually the tension in her shoulders began to ease. Her grip on my wrists loosened from desperate to simply holding. Her breaths started to match mine.

The seatbelt sign dinged off.

But I didn't move. Neither did she.

We stayed like that as the plane steadied at altitude, the flight attendants began moving through the cabin, and the world below became a patchwork of clouds and distant earth. I didn't care if anyone was watching.

All I cared about was the color slowly returning to Sam's cheeks. The way her breathing had steadied and her gaze on mine had filled with longing instead of panic.

"Thanks," she whispered.

I let my hands fall from her face but didn't pull away entirely. I held her hand on the armrest, maintaining contact as much for her as for me. She needed to know I wasn't going anywhere. And I needed to know she wasn't going to shut me out.

"You don't have to thank me every time I show up for you."

She let out a shaky laugh. "It's called being polite, Harry."

"It's called deflecting." I held her gaze. "Trust me, I want to be here."

A weighted beat passed between us, and the air practically sizzled with tension before I broke our gaze.

“Now...” I glanced toward the aisle, then back at her. “Is this about the plane or your family?”

I already suspected the answer, but I wanted to see if she’d tell me the truth.

Something shuttered behind her eyes. That wall again, slamming back into place. But slower this time, like she was tired of holding it up.

She turned her head slightly, looking back toward where Jordan sat. I followed her gaze. Her brother had his eyes closed, head tipped back against the seat, earbuds firmly in place. He was either sleeping or pretending to.

“There are things you don’t know,” Sam said quietly. She turned back to face me, and for once, she didn’t try to smile or deflect. “Things about my family. About why I haven’t been home. And I don’t know if I’m ready to talk about it, even though...” She swallowed. “Even though I know you deserve to know what you’re walking into.”

I thought about all the questions I’d stored up over the past year. I’d been patient this long. I could be patient a little longer.

“I’ll handle whatever it is,” I said. “You don’t have to tell me if you’re not ready. But I’m here when you are.”

She stared at me for a moment. Like she was searching for a catch or some hidden agenda. I let her look. I had nothing to hide. Not from her.

Whatever she found must have satisfied her, because her expression relaxed and the tension she’d carried in her shoulders dropped.

Then she leaned over and rested her head against my shoulder.

I’d stared down breakaways and penalty shots without blinking. I’d stood my ground in boardrooms my father dragged me into over winter breaks, surrounded by executives twice my age who thought they could intimidate me with their corner offices and their condescending smiles. I’d spent the last year watching the woman I was in love with bring home men who didn’t deserve her and never said a word.

But Sam Lowe resting her head on my shoulder?

That undid me completely.

I stayed perfectly still, afraid that any movement might break whatever spell had allowed her to let her guard down. Afraid she’d remember herself, remember who she was supposed to be, and pull away with some quip about not needing anyone. The warmth of her seeped through my shirt, and the scent of her shampoo—floral and sweet—wrapped around me.

Peace.

That was the only word for what I felt. This bone-deep sense of rightness, like everything in my life had been building to this moment. Not the plane, not Seattle, not whatever waited for us when we landed. Not the family business I was running from or the expectations I'd never live up to. Just this. Her. The weight of her trust settling onto my shoulder like it belonged there.

My grandfather used to talk about finding his peace. He'd walked away from Gordon Holdings in his fifties, moved back to Big Sky, Montana, near where he'd grown up, and now spent his days fishing, cooking, and being happy in a way I'd never seen anyone else in my family manage. I'd always wondered what that felt like—finding the thing that made everything else quiet.

Now I knew.

For my grandfather, it was Montana.

For me, it was her.

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FIVE

Sam

There's a special kind of torture in walking toward someone you've been running from for five years.

I spotted my dad before he spotted me.

The SeaTac arrivals terminal was chaos—families reuniting, couples embracing, kids sprinting toward grandparents with their arms outstretched. Everyone around me was experiencing some version of joy, and I was walking through it all like a woman approaching her own execution.

Dad stood near the baggage claim, hands shoved in the pockets of his old Seahawks jacket—he'd joked once that we'd have to bury him in that thing. His hair had gone grayer at the temples, and there were lines around his eyes that hadn't been there before. Five years had aged him in ways that made my chest ache.

God, I'd missed him.

I'd spent so long convincing myself I was fine, that distance was better, and staying away was protecting everyone—including me—from having to face what I'd done. But seeing him standing there, looking older, tired, and yet so painfully familiar, cracked me wide open.

Harry's hand found the small of my back, and his touch instantly steadied me, grounded me in his warmth and safety. His touch was the reminder I needed. I wasn't alone, even if I feared how this trip would change the way he saw me.

But there was no going back now.

"You okay?" His voice was low, meant only for me.

"No." The word slipped out before I could stop it. "But I don't really have a choice, do I?"

Jordan was already moving ahead of us, raising a hand to catch our dad's attention. Dad's face split into a smile when he saw his eldest son—and my gut clenched at the familiar easy smile he'd always directed at his kids. That smile used to make me feel ten feet tall.

Then his gaze shifted.

And landed on me.

For one suspended moment, everything else faded away. There was just me and my dad, separated by twenty feet of scuffed linoleum and five years of silence.

His easy smile deflated, and pain streaked across his gaze like lightning. There and gone in a flash, but I saw it.

I saw the exact moment his gaze slid away from mine, unable to hold it. Unable to look at me without seeing everything we'd lost.

My heart cracked clean in half, the pain almost crippling.

I'd known. On some level, I'd always known this would be his reaction to me. But knowing something and having it confirmed were two very different kinds of agony.

He still blamed me.

Five years, and nothing had changed. He still couldn't look at me without thinking about Bryce. Without remembering that his son was dead and his daughter was the reason why.

Harry's hand wrapped around my hip, holding me against him, and I belatedly realized I'd stopped walking. My feet had frozen to the floor like it had suddenly iced over, and I couldn't make myself move forward.

Why on earth would they want me home if this was how he looked at me?

"Sam." Harry's voice was still quiet, but there was an edge of concern to it now. "Breathe."

Right. Breathing. That was a thing people did.

I forced air into my lungs, but it felt like inhaling through a straw. My vision had gone slightly fuzzy at the edges, and my hands were shaking inside my coat pockets where no one could see them.

This was a mistake. Coming here was a mistake. I wasn't strong enough for this.

In Montana, I could pretend. Pretend to be happy and carefree and confident, like nothing could touch me.

But not here. Not in the face of my family and everything I'd destroyed because I wasn't the good person I'd been pretending to be in Montana. I was selfish and destroyed lives.

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Jordan hugged Dad and then pulled back as they murmured something to each other. Then Jordan turned back toward me, his expression expectant. Like he couldn't understand why I wasn't running into our father's arms the way he had.

Because I knew those arms wouldn't want me. Not anymore. His face had already given him away, and I couldn't stand to hug him now.

But I could get closer. I wasn't alone. Harry's steady presence at my side gave me the strength to put one foot in front of the other until I was standing in front of the man who I used to idolize.

"Hi, Dad." My voice came out steadier than I expected. I guess five years of pretending had been useful after all.

Dad's gaze finally met mine again, and even though he was smiling, there was still pain in his eyes that he couldn't quite hide from me.

"Sammy." He said my name like it was rusty, a word he hadn't muttered in years. "You look good."

He didn't move to hug me.

I tried not to let that destroy me, but I was struggling to hold it together. My throat burned with the effort of holding back tears, and I dug my nails into my palms hard enough to leave marks.

"You too," I managed. I couldn't say anymore or my voice would break and the tears I was biting back would come pouring out.

Jordan cleared his throat. "Dad, this is Harrison Gordon. Sam's, uh, boyfriend."

Harry stepped forward, offering his hand. "Mr. Lowe. It's nice to meet you. You can call me Gordy."

Dad's eyebrows rose slightly as he took in Harry's size and the protective way he positioned himself at my side.

"Gordy," Dad repeated, shaking Harry's hand. "Nice to meet you."

We stood there for a beat, the awkwardness feeling almost oppressive. Dad wasn't acting like someone who'd been expecting me. I glanced at Jordan and didn't miss the guilty expression he'd shot me.

Had he kept this a secret from my parents?

"Well." Dad nodded once. "Car's this way."

He turned and started walking toward the exit without waiting for us to follow.

Jordan fell into step beside him, leaving Harry and me trailing behind. I watched my father's back as he walked—shoulders slightly hunched, gait a little slower than I remembered—and felt the distance between us like a canyon I didn't know how to cross.

"Hey." Harry's voice was soft. He tugged on my hand, pulling me to a stop while Jordan and Dad moved ahead, oblivious. "Look at me."

I didn't want to. If I looked at him, he'd see everything I was trying so hard to hide. The devastation. The grief. The bone-deep certainty that I didn't belong here, that I should never have come.

But Harry was patient. He stood there, solid and immovable, waiting me out until I finally lifted my gaze to meet his.

"You're doing great," he said.

A broken laugh escaped me. "Liar."

"I'm not." His gray eyes were steady, certain. "You showed up. That's the hard part."

"Is it?" My voice cracked. "Because it feels like the hard part is going to be surviving the next two weeks."

"Then we'll survive them together." His thumb traced circles on the back of my hand, the touch impossibly gentle for someone so large. "You're not in this alone, remember?"

I wanted to believe him. God, I wanted to.

But I'd seen my father's face. I'd watched him look away from me like I was too painful to see. If he was looking at me like that, then it wasn't going to be any easier to face my mom. And I didn't know how I was supposed to be under the same roof with them for two weeks, pretending everything was fine, when we all knew the truth.

It should have been me.

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SIX

Gordy

I'd known Sam for well over a year now. I'd watched her command every room she walked into with untouchable confidence and a sharp wit that could cut a man down at the knees while making him thank her for the privilege. I'd memorized the way she laughed—loud and unapologetic—and the way she tilted her head when she was about to say something devastating. I'd catalogued every smile, every eye roll, every moment when her mask slipped just enough to show the real woman underneath.

The woman sitting next to me in the backseat of her dad's SUV was none of those things.

She was quiet. And Sam had never been quiet for as long as I'd known her. And certainly never like this. This was the kind of silence that made the hair on the back of my neck stand up. The kind that felt like watching someone disappear in slow motion while you reached for them through fog.

I hated it, but more than that I was worried.

Her father, Greg, navigated the rain-slicked Seattle streets while Jordan rode shotgun and talked about the Seahawks. It seemed like normal conversation between family members.

But Sam hadn't said a word since we'd gotten in the car, and worst of all, neither her dad nor her brother had made any attempt to engage her in conversation since we'd started driving.

Sam stared out the window, quiet and still as a statue, while I used every skill in my arsenal to try and read the room.

She'd been right about one thing; I hadn't fully understood what I was walking into. Something big had happened in this family, but I didn't like how the weight of it seemed to settle heaviest on Sam's shoulders.

Every few minutes, Greg's eyes would flick to the rearview mirror to look at Sam.

And every single time, something in his gaze made my hackles rise.

It wasn't anger. It wasn't even coldness. It was like a mix between grief, hurt, and maybe even a little guilt. Like looking at her physically pained him in ways he couldn't control. His eyes would find her, and then slide away just as quickly, as if the sight of her was too much to bear.

I couldn't stand it anymore. I reached over and covered her hand with mine.

She didn't look at me. But she rotated her hand, threading her fingers with mine, holding me tighter, and I watched her take a deep breath and let it out slowly, just like we had on the plane.

I'd always known Sam was strong, but I was starting to realize she was strong by necessity, not by nature.



Her parents' house was a two-story colonial style in a nice neighborhood with holiday lights strung along the roofline and a big wreath on the front door. It was the kind of home you'd see in a Christmas movie—cozy, welcoming, and picture-perfect.

The driveway was already occupied by another car, and as soon as we parked, Jordan got out and walked back to the trunk to grab the luggage. Greg moved to help him, and I watched Sam take a breath—steeling herself—before she opened her door.

I followed her out, staying close.

Once we all had our luggage, we followed Greg and Jordan through a side door into the kitchen.

A woman was stirring something at the stove, but her voice was bright and happy as she said, “Hey, sweetie. I’m just finishing up dinner. Come give your mama a kiss.”

She turned around with a wide smile as Jordan pulled her into a hug. “Hey, Mom.” This was a woman who loved her son and was genuinely happy to see him.

“He brought us a surprise,” Greg added, his voice cautious.

That got her attention and she finally looked beyond him.

The transformation was immediate. And brutal.

Her smile didn't just fade. It collapsed. Like someone had reached inside her and ripped out whatever joy had been there moments before. Her face went pale, then tight, her eyes filling with pain. No, more than pain. Anguish.

It was worse than Greg's reaction at the airport. So much worse.

Greg had looked away from Sam like it hurt to see her. Sam's mom looked at her daughter like seeing her was a wound being torn open all over again.

"Samantha." Her voice came out flat. Hollow. "I didn't realize you were coming."

Sam held herself tall, but I had no doubt it took everything she had for her to accomplish it. I moved closer to her, placing my hand against the base of her back, my silent way of telling her—reminding her—she wasn't facing this alone. I didn't need to know what *this* was to know she needed me.

"Jordan brought me," Sam said quietly. "I thought you knew."

Her mom's jaw tightened. She shot a look at Jordan—sharp and accusatory—before smoothing her expression into one that was probably supposed to be neutral but landed closer to cold.

"Well." She stepped back, not quite meeting Sam's eyes. "You're here now. Come in."

No hug. No *it's good to see you*. No warmth at all. Certainly none of the warmth her brother had gotten.

Sam's dad cleared his throat. "Gordy, this is my wife, Sally. Sally, this is Sam's boyfriend, Harrison Gordon."

"Everyone calls me Gordy," I added.

Sally gave me a stiff smile. "Nice to meet you." I suspected there wasn't an ounce of her that actually thought it was nice to meet me at all.

Now that she was facing us, I could see the resemblance. She had Sam's blonde hair, though hers was shorter and threaded with gray, and there were deep lines around her eyes that spoke of years of grief.

Without another word, Sam walked past her mother into the house, and I followed close behind, my hand still on the small of her back. She was trembling, but her mask was perfectly in place—not the same one she'd clearly worn in Montana, but a new one that kept her standing tall.

We rounded the corner toward the stairs and nearly bumped into another person.

“Sam?”

He was taller than she was and had an athletic build. His hair was also blond like everyone else’s, but his eyes were a deeper blue than Sam’s. This must be another brother. She once said she had three.

“Sam, it’s really you.”

Before she could speak, he’d wrapped her up in a tight hug, his eyes closed and relief filling his face.

Her parents might not be happy to see her, but it was clear her brothers wanted her here.

Sam was stiff for a moment before her arms wrapped around his waist and she seemed to melt into the hug. “Hey, Eric.”

“I’ve fucking missed you.”

She huffed out a laugh and for that alone, I liked him. He was the first one to make her smile since we got on the plane. “Don’t let Mom hear you swear.”

He pulled away just enough to look at her again, as if to make sure he wasn’t hallucinating. “God, it’s good to see you.”

She looked down at the floor. “You might be the only one who thinks so.”

His gaze moved from her to me to where we’d just come from, and his jaw clenched. Then he focused back on Sam.

“Need help with your bags?”

She smiled at him again.

Yeah, I liked him better than anyone else in the Lowe family so far.

“No, we’ve got it. But thanks.”

Eric finally looked at me and lifted his chin. “Who’s this?”

Sam glanced back at me. “This is Harry. My...boyfriend.”

I extended my hand. “Everyone calls me Gordy.”

Eric arched a brow but didn’t ask why “everyone” called me one name but Sam had introduced me as another. The truth was Sam was the only one allowed to call me Harry.

Not because I didn’t like it.

But because it was hers.

Eric glanced back up the stairs and then at our luggage before arching a brow again. “Does Mom realize you’re going to be sleeping in the same

room?”

“If she does, she didn’t say anything and I doubt she will.”

Eric’s jaw clenched again. “Don’t worry about her.” He grabbed her arms, gently squeezing. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“Thanks, Eric.” Her voice was whisper soft, and I knew she was reaching her breaking point. I was amazed she hadn’t already.

“We’ll be back down for dinner.”

Eric took the hint and stepped aside, letting us pass. I followed Sam quietly up the stairs. Along the wall hung photos of the family, so many I couldn’t count. Sam paused halfway up and stared at a frame on the wall. It looked like a recent picture of Jordan holding ski poles. She started looking all over the wall, her face growing paler than I thought possible.

“Sam?”

She shook her head and practically ran up the rest of the stairs. I was hot on her heels, following her until she stopped in front of a closed door at the end of the hall.

Her hand hovered over the handle like she couldn’t decide whether to open it or run. Her breathing had gone shallow, and I could see a minor tremor in her shoulders.

“Sam.”

She flinched at my voice but didn’t turn around.

I moved closer, stopping just behind her. Close enough that she could feel my presence, but not crowding her. Not pushing. The same way I’d approach a spooked animal—slow and steady, letting her know I was there without making her feel trapped.

“You don’t have to go in there,” I said quietly. “I can book us a hotel if you need me to. We don’t have to stay here.”

She shook her head, the movement jerky. “No. It’s fine. I’m fine.”

She wasn’t fine. We both knew it. But before I could say anything else, she pushed the door open and walked inside.

I followed.

The room was clearly Sam’s old bedroom, preserved like a time capsule. There was a purple comforter on a full-sized bed, and posters covered the walls, but they weren’t posters of boy bands like I would’ve expected. They were figure skaters.

There was a corkboard above the desk, still pinned with photos and ticket stubs and what looked like a competition schedule from years ago.

Trophies and medals lined a shelf near the window. Gold and silver mostly, all for figure skating with Sam's name on them.

Sam was a figure skater? Why had she never said anything?

"Sam."

She finally turned to look at me, and the devastation in her eyes nearly brought me to my knees. This wasn't the confident, sharp-tongued woman I'd fallen for. This was someone drowning, and I was the only lifeline in reach.

"I can't do this, Harry." Her voice cracked on my name. "I thought I could, but I can't. They can't even *look* at me. My own parents can't—" She broke off, pressing her hands to her eyes as if covering them would stop the tears that were coming.

I crossed the room in two strides and pulled her into my arms.

She didn't fight it. For once, she didn't put up walls or deflect with humor or pretend everything was okay. She just collapsed against my chest, her fingers fisting in the back of my shirt, and let me hold her.

I tightened my grip, holding her tight like I could take whatever pain was tearing her apart and carry it myself. But all I could do was stand here and hold her. I'd never felt so helpless.

I pressed my lips to the top of her head and held on tight.

I didn't know what kind of minefield I'd walked into, but two things were becoming painfully clear—Jordan had ambushed his own family with Sam's visit. And Sally Lowe had not wanted her daughter here at all.

SEVEN

Gordy

Minutes passed while we stood there in her childhood bedroom surrounded by relics of a life I knew nothing about, and I let her fall apart in my arms. I didn't say anything—didn't try to fix it or offer empty platitudes. I just held on and let her know she wasn't alone.

Eventually, her breathing evened out. The death grip she had on the back of my shirt loosened, and she pulled back just enough to swipe at her eyes with the heel of her hand.

"Sorry," she muttered, not meeting my gaze.

"Don't." I caught her chin gently, tilting her face up until those red-rimmed blue eyes met mine. "Don't ever apologize for being human."

She let out a shaky laugh. "Is that what we're calling my breakdown?"

She moved to step away, and I reluctantly let her go. The distance felt wrong after finally getting to hold her so close, but if space was what she needed right now, then I'd give it to her.

My gaze swept around the room again, taking in the details I'd first noticed when we walked in. I walked over to the nearest shelf of trophies.

"You were a figure skater."

It wasn't a question. The evidence was right in front of me, impossible to deny.

Impossible for *her* to deny.

"Not anymore." Her voice was flat. Empty. "That was a long time ago."

I could've sworn I heard her whisper "another lifetime" under her breath.

I turned back to look at her and found her sitting on the edge of the bed, a picture frame clutched in her hands. Her eyes had gone glassy again, but

she wasn't crying. She looked broken in a way I'd never imagined was possible for her.

She was always so bright, but it was becoming clear there were ghosts here that she'd been avoiding.

I crossed the room and sat down beside her, close enough that our arms almost touched but not quite. Close enough to remind her I was here without crowding her.

She needed quiet strength right now. Not questions. She'd tell me when she was ready.

The silence stretched between us, but it wasn't uncomfortable. It was the kind of silence that said more than words could—the kind that acknowledged pain without trying to minimize it.

After a few minutes, she leaned her head against my shoulder.

My chest tightened at the gesture. I was quickly growing addicted to her leaning on me. I wished she'd let me carry more of the weight she'd been hiding from us. I wondered if Abby even knew about what was going on here.

As she leaned against me, I took the chance to look at the photo in her hand.

Four kids stood in a row, laughing at the camera with ice cream cones dripping in the summer heat. Sam was easy to spot as the only girl. She looked to be maybe thirteen or fourteen but with that same bright smile that could light up a room. Jordan was next to her, lanky and awkward in the way teenage boys often were. Eric stood beside him, Jordan's arm draped over his shoulders. The third boy stood on Sam's other side. He looked younger than Jordan but older than Sam with the same blond hair and blue eyes. His smile was the widest of them all.

This must be the brother I hadn't met yet.

Sam's thumb traced over the glass, hovering over his face.

"That's Bryce," she said softly, like she'd read my mind. Or maybe she just knew where my attention had gone. "He was my favorite."

Was.

Past tense. The word hung in the air between us, heavy with implications I wasn't going to ask her to explain yet.

She huffed out a humorless laugh. "He was everyone's favorite. We all knew it, but none of us cared because Bryce was larger than life. It was nearly impossible to be mad at him ever, which was so annoying. But

mostly, no one cared because Bryce made everything better. It was just who he was.”

She set the picture frame down on the nightstand beside the bed, positioning it carefully so it faced outward. So she could see it when she woke up.

“Harry?”

“Yeah?”

“Will you hold me?”

She had no idea the things I’d do for her. The lengths I’d go. The mountains I’d move.

Holding her was only the tip of the iceberg.

“Yeah,” I said instead.

We lay back on the bed together, and she curled into me like she’d done it a thousand times before. Her head found that space where my shoulder met my chest—the spot that seemed made specifically for her—and her hand came to rest over my heart.

I wrapped my arms around her and stared at the ceiling, trying not to think about how right this felt. How perfectly she fit against me. How I’d dreamed about having her in my arms like this, but never under these circumstances. Never with her breaking apart at the seams.

“I’m not going to thank you,” she murmured against my chest. “Because you told me not to.”

The corner of my mouth twitched. Even when she was falling apart, she found ways to be stubborn. “Okay.”

“But I am going to tell you that I really needed this.” Her voice was barely above a whisper. “Today has been harder than I expected, and I already expected it to be pretty hard.”

My arms tightened around her. I didn’t have words for what I was feeling—the protectiveness, the fury at her family for making her feel this way, the desperate wish that I could absorb her pain into myself so she didn’t have to carry it.

“You don’t come home for breaks, do you?”

The question slipped out before I could stop it. I felt her tense in my arms and immediately wished I could take it back. But then she relaxed again, her fingers curling into the fabric of my shirt.

“No.” A beat of silence. “I go stay with my aunt in California.”

That tracked. Sam had always been vague about her family, and now I understood why. But something still didn't add up.

"How come you never told us?"

She shrugged. "It was easier to leave Seattle behind and not think about it. I wanted to be someone new. Montana was my fresh start."

A fresh start.

I understood that better than she probably knew.

"I get it. More than you'd think."

She shifted, tilting her head back to look at me. Those blue eyes, still red-rimmed and puffy, searched my face. "Yeah?"

"I started helping out at Pop's ranch in Big Sky when I was sixteen." The memory surfaced easily. I'd thought about that summer enough times. It had been the turning point in my life when I finally discovered who *I* was and not the person I'd been raised to be. "It was like taking a breath of fresh air for the first time in my life."

Her hand flattened against my chest, right over my heartbeat. "Will you tell me about it?"

I'd tell her anything she wanted.

I told her about my grandfather—how he'd grown up poor in rural Montana outside of one of the wealthiest parts of the state, the son of a ranch hand who worked someone else's land. How he'd scraped, fought, and clawed his way to the East Coast, building an empire from nothing but grit and determination. He'd always said his Montana roots made him more resilient than some of his counterparts because Montanans knew how to survive and be scrappy when they needed to be. They could survive the harshest winters and poor crops. They knew how to build community and value history—maybe not the politicians but the locals, the people who'd built Montana. But he didn't want to ever worry about money again. He wanted the Gordon name to mean something, not just being someone who works the land, but someone who owns, who leads, who creates. And he accomplished it. The Gordon name meant something now. It meant money and power and influence, the kind of legacy that should have made me proud. Should've made him proud.

But it didn't.

"Pop built something incredible," I said, staring at the ceiling as Sam listened quietly. "But the older he got, the more jaded he became. He

looked around at what he'd created—the business, the empire, his family—and he didn't like what he saw.”

“What did he see?”

It was my turn to huff out a humorless laugh. “Spoiled, selfish sons who cared more about the doors the Gordon name could open for them than about being decent people. My dad and his brother grew up with every advantage Pop never had, and instead of making them grateful, it made them entitled. They expected success. Expected wealth. Expected the world to bow down because of who they were. But entitlement doesn't breed loyalty. It only breeds greed, selfishness, and more privilege.”

Sam's thumb traced absent patterns against my chest. “That sounds lonely.”

It was such a simple observation, but it hit me right in the chest because that's exactly how it had been. “Yeah. It was.”

I told her how Pop had finally had enough. How he'd stepped down from the company, handed the reins to his sons, and walked away from everything he'd built. Most people thought he was crazy. My father certainly did.

But Pop had taken his considerable wealth and moved back to Montana—not to the trailer he'd grown up in, but to a small ranch in Big Sky that he bought. He'd hired local hands, sure, but he worked right alongside them. Said it kept him honest. Kept him remembering where he came from. The guys who worked for him have been there for years—he treated them like family, paid them more than any other ranch in the county, and half of them had ownership stakes in the operation now.

“He always says it's hard work,” I said. “Harder than anything he'd ever done to build his Fortune 500 company. But he also says it's more fulfilling, in a way business never was for him.”

“He found peace,” Sam murmured.

“Yeah. He found peace in the mountains. And when I was sixteen, he invited me to spend the summer at the ranch, and I found it too.”

“Is that why you chose CFU?”

I couldn't help the small smile that tugged at my lips. “My parents wanted me to go to Yale. Expected it, actually. They'd already made donations, pulled strings, done everything short of bribing the admissions committee to guarantee my acceptance. Then I broke the news to them that

I was going to Clark Fork University to play hockey. I hadn't even submitted my application to Yale."

Sam let out a surprised laugh, and warmth practically flowed through my bloodstream at the sound. There was my Sam. "I bet that went over well."

"They were furious." The memory still brought me a petty sense of satisfaction. "But the money for my college came from Pop, not them. So they really didn't have a say."

"Harry Gordon." She said my name like she was tasting it, rolling it around in her mouth. "Rebel heir to a business empire, hiding out in Montana to escape his family legacy."

"Something like that."

She shifted closer, burrowing into my side and making me feel larger than life. "We're quite the pair, aren't we?"

I pressed my lips to the top of her head. "Yeah. I guess we are."

"I'm glad you came to Montana."

I breathed in the scent of her shampoo and felt my muscles relax. "Me too."

Because if I hadn't, I never would've met her.

EIGHT

Sam

I woke up slowly, wrapped in strong, muscled arms, and for a few blissful seconds I forgot where I was. I felt safe in a way I hadn't felt in years—maybe ever. Then reality crashed back in, and I remembered everything.

Seattle.

My parents.

The way my mom had looked at me like I was a ghost she wished would disappear.

I kept my eyes closed, not ready to face the day. Not ready to leave this cocoon of warmth and pretend to be okay again. The blankets were pulled up over us now, though I didn't remember that happening. I didn't remember falling asleep at all, actually. Just Harry's arms around me and the steady rhythm of his breathing which was soothing against my frayed nerves. I remembered us going down to a very silent and tense dinner before quickly excusing ourselves to come back upstairs. We'd stayed in my room the rest of the night.

I tilted my head slightly, just enough to look at him without moving too much. He was still asleep, his face relaxed and peaceful. His dark lashes fanned against his cheekbones, and his black hair was slightly mussed. He was still fully dressed, and I noticed smudged mascara on his shirt, probably from yesterday when I'd cried all over him like a complete disaster of a human being.

But that little blemish on his shirt didn't at all detract from how handsome he was. I'd always thought so, from the moment we'd met at that music festival when I'd decided to call him Harry just to see if I could get a reaction out of the stoic hockey goalie with mysterious eyes.

Most guys were easy to read—their intentions written all over their faces and their desires predictable and boring. But Harry had been different. Quiet. Watchful. Like he saw everything and said nothing, filing it all away behind those gray eyes.

I'd been drawn to him immediately. To his quiet strength and the way he didn't try to fill silence with meaningless words. Loyalty ran through him like bedrock—solid and unwavering and so goddamn attractive it made my heart race. Living with him had been delicious torture because I knew I could never have him.

If I believed I deserved love after what I'd done, I'd let myself fall for him completely.

It would be so easy. Too easy.

I'd been doing it a little since we met, if I was being honest with myself. It got harder to deny my feelings every time he showed up without being asked. Every time he noticed something was wrong before I said a word. Every time he looked at me like he could see past all my bullshit to the mess underneath—and didn't run.

But here, in this house full of memories, grief, and the weight of everything I'd destroyed, I was reminded exactly why I couldn't let my guard down.

I'd been trying to atone for my sins for five years. Five years of being the friend everyone could count on. Five years of making sure Abby never felt alone after her mom died. Five years of being the life of the party, the shoulder to cry on, the girl who had her shit together even when the world was falling apart.

But it would never be enough. I was starting to accept that it would never be possible to forgive myself for what I'd done.

Some sins were too big for absolution.

Harry stirred beneath me, and his breathing changed. His hand, which had been resting on my hip, started trailing slowly up and down my back. Lazy and gentle. Like he wasn't fully awake yet but still wanted to touch me.

God, his touch was addicting. I was going to miss it when we went back to Montana and went back to being just friends.

"How'd you sleep?" His voice was gravelly and warm, and my body reacted the way it always did around him. My nipples tightened, heat pooled low in my belly, and that familiar ache between my thighs flared to

life. I'd been trying to ignore the way his voice brought my body to life since I moved in with him. I was usually excellent at ignoring things I wanted. I'd had years of practice. But being this close to him was making it next to impossible.

"Really good, actually." I tilted my head back to look at him properly. His gray eyes were heavy-lidded, still soft with sleep, and there was a small smile playing at the corner of his mouth. "You make a good pillow."

He laughed—low and deep, the sound rumbling through his chest and vibrating against my body. It only made the heat worse. Made me want to press closer instead of pulling away. It made me want to trace my fingers along that strong jaw of his and see what other sounds I could pull from him.

Down, girl.

This was Harry. My *fake* boyfriend. My friend. But most importantly, the guy who'd dropped everything to fly home with me because I was too much of a coward to face my family alone.

He wasn't mine to want. And even if he was, I didn't get to have him. Not with what I'd done. Not with who I really was underneath all the confidence and curves and carefully constructed armor.

But God, it was harder to fight the attraction when he was this close. When I could feel every breath he took. When his hand was still moving up and down my spine in a rhythm that was making my brain short-circuit.

We'd never been like this before. Sure, there had been moments—loaded glances, accidental touches that lingered slightly too long, the way he always seemed to know exactly where I was in a room. But we'd never snuggled. Never woken up tangled together like this was something we did all the time.

I liked it. More than I should.

I'd never felt this safe with a man before. Not even close.

"Ready to face your family again?"

The question was like being doused with a bucket of ice water, drowning all that pleasant heat in an instant. I groaned and buried my face in his chest, hiding from the reality waiting outside this room.

"No," I mumbled against his shirt. "Can we just stay here forever? We can survive on whatever snacks are in my old desk drawers. I think there might be some ancient Halloween candy in there somewhere."

His chest shook with silent laughter. Then he pressed a kiss to the top of my head—soft and sweet and so tender it made my eyes sting.

I squeezed them shut, refusing to let the tears fall. I'd cried enough yesterday. I wasn't going to start the day the same way.

"I'll be right by your side," he said quietly. "Whatever happens today, you're not alone."

That's what I'm afraid of.

Because while I was grateful he wasn't letting me face them alone, if he was by my side, then he'd be right there when the truth came out—about the accident, about Bryce, about the girl I used to be before I killed my brother and destroyed everything.

He'd hear all of it. And then he'd know.

He'd know that the confident, vivacious Sam he thought he knew was a lie. A character I'd been playing for five years because the real Sam was too broken and guilty to show to anyone.

He'd know I was a fake.

How would he look at me then?

Would he look at me the way my parents did—like seeing me was a wound that never healed? Would he pull away, unable to touch me without thinking about what I'd done?

Or worse—would he stay? Would he look at me with pity, that awful sympathetic gaze that made me want to claw out of my own skin? Would he treat me like someone fragile and damaged, someone less than the woman he'd thought I was?

I didn't know which would be harder to bear.

Harry's arms tightened around me, like he could sense the spiral happening inside my head. Maybe he could. He'd always been too perceptive for his own good.

"Hey." His voice was gentle but firm. "Whatever you're thinking right now—stop."

A watery laugh escaped me. "Mind reader."

"I don't have to read minds. I know you." His hand came up to cup the back of my head, holding me against his chest like I was something precious. Something worth protecting.

If only he knew how wrong he was.

"We should probably get up," I said, even though every fiber of my being was screaming to stay exactly where I was. "Before someone comes

looking for us.”

“Probably,” he agreed, but neither of us moved.

We lay there for another minute, maybe two, wrapped up in each other while the gray Seattle morning light filtered through the curtains. In this moment, I could almost pretend everything was okay. That I was just a girl in the arms of a boy she was falling for—even if she could never really have him. That my past wasn’t waiting downstairs, ready to swallow me whole.

But we couldn’t hide up here forever.

So I took a breath, pressed one last moment of his warmth into my memory, and pulled away.

Time to face another day in hell.

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NINE

Gordy

I thought I knew what uncomfortable silence felt like. I'd grown up in the Gordon household, after all, where dinner conversations were more like board meetings and affection came with conditions attached. I'd sat through enough meals where the only sounds were silverware on china and the occasional pointed comment steeped in passive aggression.

But sitting at dinner last night and now breakfast this morning with the Lowe family made those Gordon dinners feel like a party.

The kitchen was bright and cheerful—canary yellow walls, white cabinets, and a window above the sink that let in the gray Seattle morning light. There were Christmas decorations everywhere, including a small ceramic tree on the counter, a wreath of dried oranges and cinnamon sticks hanging on the pantry door, lights around the window, not to mention all the little snowman and Santa figurines placed around the room. It was the kind of kitchen you'd see in a home design magazine, something right out of Martha Stewart.

The people sitting in it, however, were anything but.

When Sam and I had come downstairs, we'd followed voices into the kitchen. Then we'd walked in and it was like someone had hit a mute button. The conversation didn't just pause—it evaporated. Sally's face went carefully neutral as she turned back to the stove. Greg suddenly became very interested in the newspaper. Even Jordan, who'd been the cause of this whole visit, seemed to struggle for something to say, and with a small nod, grabbed another piece of the paper and started reading.

Only Eric had smiled wide at Sam and gestured for her to come sit by him.

Now we sat around the table with plates of eggs, bacon, and toast that no one seemed to have much appetite for. The scrape of forks against plates sounded deafening in the quiet. Someone moved slightly and the leg of their chair scraped across the floor.

I'd never wanted to fill a silence so badly in my life, and I was a man who appreciated silence.

Sam sat next to me, her posture perfect and her expression blank. She looked like a statue, but that wasn't quite right either because even art sculptures emoted more than she was right now.

I wanted to reach for her, to thread my fingers through hers and remind her she wasn't alone. But something told me that would only make things worse. That any acknowledgment of her discomfort would shatter whatever fragile equilibrium was keeping this meal from imploding.

So I watched instead. It was what I did best. And right now I felt like I'd been thrown into a game that I didn't know the rules to and couldn't possibly win if I didn't figure out how to outmaneuver the opponent soon.

Sally eventually left her safety at the stove and sat at the table once everyone else had a plate. But she never once looked directly at Sam. Her gaze would slide past her daughter, landing on absolutely anyone else except the daughter sitting three feet away from her.

Greg was only slightly better. Every so often I caught him stealing glances at Sam, just like he'd done in the car on the drive here. But just as quickly, he'd jerk his gaze away as if looking at her actually burned him.

I didn't understand it. Couldn't make sense of what would cause parents to treat their own child like something painful to look at. My own parents were cold, distant, and more interested in legacy than love—but even they acknowledged me. Even they could meet my eyes across a dinner table.

Whatever had happened in this family went deeper than anything I'd experienced. And it was clearly still raw, even after what I now knew had been years of distance.

I could guess based on what Sam had said about that photo in her bedroom that all of this had to do with her brother Bryce. The one who clearly had passed away based on her use of past tense. But why would losing a son make them look at their daughter this way? Wouldn't losing a child make you appreciate the ones you have left even more?

What was even stranger was that there seemed to be no photos of Bryce anywhere apart from the ones in Sam's room.

On our way downstairs, I'd glanced at the wall of photos again, looking for more of the siblings and starting to suspect that Sam's reaction yesterday had been to the absence of photos of Bryce. The wall was filled with Jordan and Eric mostly, with occasionally an older picture of Sam. But none of her missing brother.

Then Sally finally spoke.

"We'll be leaving for noon Mass in about an hour." She addressed the table at large, but her head tilted slightly in Sam's direction, even if her gaze didn't stray from her plate. "Samantha, I assume you'll be joining us."

It wasn't really a question.

Sam's fork stilled against her plate. "Actually, I was thinking I'd show Harry around the neighborhood, maybe take a walk down to the shops."

The silence that followed was different from the earlier awkwardness. This one had teeth.

Sally's expression tightened almost imperceptibly. "It's Sunday. We always go to church on Sundays."

"I'm not stopping you, but I won't be going."

Frustration flickered across Sally's face, but it was there and gone so fast I might have imagined it. "Fine."

Sally busied herself by clearing the plates off the table. Greg took a long drink of coffee. Jordan stared at his plate like it held the answers to the universe, and Eric looked like he wanted to say something but couldn't find the words.

The silence stretched on, thick and suffocating.

My jaw clenched. I wanted to say something—to defend her and demand they at least pretend she mattered to them. But this wasn't my battle to fight. Not yet. Not unless she asked me to.

So I swallowed the anger building in my chest and stayed quiet. Under the table, I gave in to the urge, found her hand, and squeezed.

She gave a small squeeze back, and some of my anger faded.

"Well," Jordan said, his voice too bright. "Eric and I were thinking of doing some Christmas shopping this afternoon anyway, after Mass. Maybe we could all meet up later? Get dinner somewhere?"

"That sounds nice," Sam said, her voice quiet. I hated how her family seemed to zap her confidence to nothing.

Sam stood from the table, her plate already cleared by her mom even though she'd hardly eaten. "Come on, Harry. Let me show you around."

We walked out of the kitchen followed by silence.

I didn't know what had happened between them, but I was starting to understand why she'd stayed away for five years. Some silences told you more than words ever could. And this family's silence was deafening.

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TEN

Sam

Anger was easier than grief. I'd learned that lesson a long time ago.

My feet ate up the sidewalk like it had personally offended me, my strides long and furious as I put distance between myself and that house. Harry walked beside me, silent and steady as always, matching my pace without complaint. He hadn't said a word since we'd left, and I was grateful for it. If he'd tried to talk to me right now, I might have exploded. And he didn't deserve my anger or frustration.

Fine. One word. That's all my mother had offered when I said I wasn't going to Mass. Not disappointment, not an argument, not even the pretense of wanting me there. Just *fine*—like my presence didn't matter enough to fight for.

She didn't even wonder why I didn't go to church anymore.

As if I could sit in those pews and pray to a God who'd let me survive when Bryce hadn't. As if I could listen to sermons about forgiveness when I knew—*knew*—that some sins were too big to be forgiven. My parents had made that all too clear in the brief time I'd been home.

I wasn't the only one who couldn't forgive me for the role I played in Bryce's death.

Five years.

Five goddamn years I'd stayed away, trying to give them space, trying to let them heal without having to look at the daughter who'd destroyed everything. And when I finally came back—when Jordan practically *dragged* me back, the little weasel—they couldn't even pretend to want me there.

The worst part? I wasn't even surprised. I'd known this was how it would be. I'd told myself a thousand times that coming home would be a mistake, that my parents would never be able to look at me without seeing Bryce's ghost standing in my place.

But some stupid, masochistic part of me had hoped.

God, I was such an idiot.

The suburban streets gradually gave way to a small shopping district I'd spent more time at than I could count in my youth. Boutiques lined the sidewalk, their windows decorated with twinkling lights and holiday displays.

I should have paid more attention to where I was going and been more careful about which streets I turned down, which memories I was walking toward.

But I wasn't thinking. I was just *feeling*—all that rage and hurt churning inside me like a storm, driving me forward without direction or purpose.

So when I finally stopped, when my feet planted themselves on the sidewalk and refused to move another inch, it took me a moment to understand why.

The coffee shop sat on the corner, its familiar green awning faded but still cheerful. *The Daily Grind*. The name was painted in curling white letters on the window, surrounded by hand-drawn coffee cups and steam swirls. A chalkboard sign on the sidewalk announced the day's specials in colorful writing.

It looked exactly the same as it had five years ago.

The anger drained out of me so fast it left me dizzy. One second I was burning with fury, and the next I was hollow, empty, my rage pooling somewhere around my feet and evaporating into nothing.

Because this was Bryce's place.

He used to drag me here every Saturday morning, back when we were both in high school and he was dating Mira Solis, who was a barista here. He'd order the same thing every time—a caramel macchiato with extra whipped cream—and he'd sit at the corner table by the window, pretending to study while really just watching Mira work.

"*She's going to think you're a stalker,*" I'd told him once, rolling my eyes over my hot chocolate.

"*I'm devoted,*" he'd corrected, grinning that stupid, infectious grin of his. "*There's a difference, Sammy.*"

He'd been so sure she was the one, and even talked about marrying her someday. They had their whole lives planned out. They'd only been nineteen when he died, but I knew he'd bought a ring for her. He'd told me when you know, you know, and he didn't care if people thought he was too young. Life was too short not to love with your whole heart.

My eyes burned at the memory and my throat closed up. I couldn't breathe, couldn't think, couldn't do anything but stand there on the sidewalk and stare at the coffee shop where my dead brother used to dream about his future.

Why had I come here? Why had my stupid, traitorous body led me to this exact spot when there were a thousand other places in Seattle I could have walked to? Some sick part of my subconscious must have wanted this—wanted the punishment, the reminder, the knife twisting in the wound.

The memories were everywhere now, rushing in like water through a broken dam. Bryce's laugh. His terrible jokes. The way he used to ruffle my hair and call me Ladybug. The proud look on his face when I landed my first triple lutz. The sound of his voice the last time I ever heard it—

A sob tore out of my throat before I could stop it.

Harry's hand closed around mine. I barely registered the touch before he was pulling me sideways, away from the main street, into a narrow alley between two buildings where no one would see us.

My back hit brick and then Harry stepped into my space, so close I could feel the heat radiating off his body, his broad shoulders blocking out the rest of the world. The alley smelled like dirt and distant coffee, and the brick was rough against my jacket, grounding me in something real when everything else felt like it was spinning out of control.

"Sam." His voice was low and calm. "Look at me."

I couldn't. My vision was blurry with tears, my chest heaving with shallow breaths. The panic was rising now, that familiar black wave that threatened to drag me under.

"Sam." His hands cupped my face, tilting it up until I had no choice but to meet his eyes. Those gray eyes that always seemed to see too much. "Breathe with me."

Just like on the plane. Just like he'd done when the panic had first started to claw its way up my throat and I'd been too stubborn to admit I was drowning.

He took a slow, purposeful breath, his chest expanding against mine. I tried to match it, but it was too shallow.

“In,” he murmured, always endlessly patient with me. “Hold. Out.”

In. Hold. Out.

His thumbs stroked gently along my cheekbones, anchoring me to the present. To him. To the rough brick at my back and the cold December air and the distant sounds of traffic beyond our hidden spot.

“Again.”

In. Hold. Out.

The panic receded slowly, like a tide pulling back from the shore. My heartbeat steadied. My breathing evened out. The black edges at the corners of my vision faded until all I could see was Harry—his face inches from mine, his expression so focused and intent it made my chest ache.

But with the panic gone, there was nothing left to hold back the tears.

They spilled over silently, tracking hot paths down my cheeks. I hated crying in front of people. Hated showing weakness and letting anyone see the broken mess underneath all my carefully constructed armor. But I couldn't stop it. I couldn't do anything but stand there in Harry's arms and fall apart.

I waited for the pity. For all those empty platitudes people offered when they didn't know what else to say. I'd heard them all before, in the weeks and months after the accident, and each one had felt like salt in an open wound.

But Harry didn't offer platitudes.

And what I saw in his eyes wasn't pity at all.

It looked almost like longing, mixed with a fierce protectiveness that made my breath catch. He looked at me like he wished I would let him in. Like he wanted to take every ounce of pain I was carrying and shoulder it himself, if only I would let him.

But I couldn't. I *couldn't*.

If I let him in—if I told him the truth about what happened, about what I did—he'd never look at me like this again.

His thumb brushed across my cheek, catching a tear before it could reach my jaw. The touch was so gentle, so unbearably tender, that my eyes fluttered closed of their own accord. A shiver ran through me that had nothing to do with the cold.

Even now, in my weakest moment, he made me feel safe. Like my pain couldn't really touch me as long as he was here. Like he wouldn't *let* it touch me.

And God, how I wished that were true.

I'd spent five years building walls so high that no one could climb them. Five years making sure no one ever saw the real me—the broken, guilty, grief-stricken mess hiding behind the confident smiles and the sharp wit. I'd become an expert at keeping people at arm's length, close enough to care about but never close enough to truly know the real me.

Not even Abby who I loved like a sister. Because she'd had her own burdens to carry and I would never add more to her load.

But somehow, Harry had gotten under my defenses without even trying. He was here. Being my rock even when I hadn't asked because I didn't know how.

How did he do that? How did this quiet, steady man make me feel more protected than anyone ever had?

His gaze dropped to my lips for just a second—barely a heartbeat—before snapping back up to meet mine.

My heart stuttered.

I opened my mouth to say something. I didn't even know what—maybe *thank you*, maybe *I'm sorry*, maybe something far more dangerous like *please don't ever stop looking at me like that*.

But before I could get a single word out, footsteps sounded at the mouth of the alley. Someone walked past—a woman, moving quickly—and then she stopped. Backtracked.

Recognition dawned on her face and her eyes went wide with shock as she stared at me like she was seeing a ghost.

"Sam? Is that really you?"

ELEVEN

Sam

My heart dropped straight to my stomach.

Mira stood at the mouth of the alley, her dark hair pulled back in a messy bun and a short black apron tied around her waist. She looked like she'd walked straight out of a memory from five years ago when Bryce and I would sit at the coffee shop and he'd watch her like she'd hung the moon.

She still worked here. After all this time, she still worked here.

I hadn't considered for even a second that she might still be at The Daily Grind. I thought for sure she would've gone off to college or done anything besides still working here.

Mira took a tentative step into the alley, moving slowly like I was a skittish animal that might bolt at any sudden movement. Which, honestly, wasn't far from the truth. Every instinct I had was screaming at me to run—to turn and flee before she could say whatever accusation was surely forming behind those dark eyes.

I wanted to be back in Montana where I wasn't this pathetic version of myself. Where I could go back to pretending.

But I couldn't move. My back was still pressed against the brick wall, Harry's hard body still standing protectively against mine, and I was frozen in place like my feet had grown roots.

I braced myself for the hatred. For the anger and blame I'd been carrying for five years, finally reflected back at me from someone who had every right to feel it. Mira had lost him too. She'd lost the boy who was going to marry her, the future they'd planned together, all because I'd insisted on going to that damn competition.

But when my gaze finally met hers, there was no hatred on her face.

Her eyes were swimming with tears, but she was smiling. Her lips quivered slightly as her smile widened.

She looked *relieved* to see me.

And that look broke me open worse than anything else had since we arrived in this godforsaken place.

“Sam,” she breathed again, and then she was rushing forward, closing the distance between us in three quick strides.

Harry stepped back just in time for Mira to crash into me, her arms wrapping around my body in a hug so tight it drove the air from my lungs. She was shorter than me, but she held on like she was trying to physically keep me from disappearing again.

My hands hovered uselessly at my sides for a moment. I didn’t know what to do with them. I didn’t know what to do with any of this—the embrace, the tears, the complete absence of the condemnation I’d been bracing for.

But the longer she hugged me, the tighter her arms got around me, the more I relaxed into it, and without thought my arms wrapped around her until I was hugging her back just as fiercely.

My lips trembled and my eyes flooded with fresh tears that spilled over before I could even think about stopping them.

“Hey, Mira,” I managed, my voice cracking on her name.

She pulled back but didn’t let go completely, her hands gripping my upper arms like she was afraid I’d vanish if she released me. Tears were streaming down her face now, but her smile had gotten wider. Brighter. Like seeing me was the best thing that had happened to her in a long time.

“Samantha Lowe, as I live and breathe.” She laughed—a wet, watery sound that was half-sob and half-joy. “Where the *fuck* have you been?”

A startled laugh escaped me. Mira had never been the type to curse much. Hearing that word come out of her mouth was just as surprising as her apparent joy at seeing me.

“Montana,” I said, like that one word could explain five years of absence.

Mira shook her head, still smiling through her tears. “Montana,” she repeated. “You just up and disappeared.”

“I know. I’m sorry, I—”

“Shh.” She reached up and brushed the tears from my cheeks with gentle fingers, her touch so familiar it made my chest ache. Mira had a

maternal streak a mile wide. “We can talk about all that inside. I want to hear everything.”

Her gaze slid past me then, landing on Harry where he stood a few feet back, giving us space. Her expression shifted from curiosity to approval as she took in his height, his broad shoulders, the protective way he was hovering just close enough to intervene if I needed him.

“And you can bring your boyfriend too,” she added, her lips curving into a knowing smile.

She leaned closer to me but didn’t bother lowering her voice. “I’ve got to make sure he’s good enough for you. Bryce would never forgive me if I didn’t.”

My heart stuttered in my chest.

Bryce would never forgive me.

She said his name so easily. Like it was the most natural thing in the world, like speaking about him didn’t require bracing yourself first.

Then the realization knocked all the wind out of me; this was the first time I’d heard anyone else say his name since I’d woken up in the hospital and found out he died.

My parents had all but erased him. In the time I’d been gone, they’d taken down his photos from the walls, scrubbed his existence from their home like acknowledging he’d ever lived was too painful to bear. I hadn’t had the courage to look to see if his room was the same. Everything had been when I left five years ago to finish my recovery with Aunt Lauren. I couldn’t believe they would remove him like he’d never existed at all.

Even with all the guilt I carried, I still kept photos of him on my phone that I’d looked at when I felt brave enough.

I think I was angrier that my parents had removed any trace of him than the fact that they could barely look at me. I understood their reaction to me, but I couldn’t fathom their actions when it came to Bryce’s memory.

But Mira said his name like remembering him was an honor, not a burden. Like he’d just stepped away for a minute and would be right back.

I wondered if my parents even talked to her anymore. Somehow, I doubted it.

“Come on.” Mira tugged gently at my arm, already steering me toward the mouth of the alley. “You’re coming inside and having a cup of coffee and telling me about this Montana life of yours. I want to know *everything*.”

“Mira, you don’t have to—”

“I’m not asking.” She had that familiar stubborn set to her jaw that I remembered from a hundred different arguments with Bryce. He never could win against her when she got that look. “I’ve got another barista coming to cover in twenty minutes anyway. You can wait, and then we’re going to sit down and catch up properly.”

I glanced back at Harry, who was watching the exchange carefully. He gave me the smallest nod, letting me know if I wanted an out, he’d give me one. And if I wanted to stay, he’d be there too.

God, I was doomed when it came to him, wasn’t I?

There was no way I’d survive this trip without falling for him, whether I deserved him or not.

Honestly, I didn’t deserve any of this—not Mira’s kindness or Harry’s steadiness or the way neither of them seemed to blame me for any of it. But maybe, just this once, I could pretend I did.

“Okay,” I said quietly. “We’ll stay and catch up.”

Mira’s smile widened, and she looped her arm through mine like no time had passed at all.

“Good.” She patted my hand. “Now introduce me to your man properly. He looks like he could bench press a car, which I approve of, but I need to know if he treats you right.”

Despite the tears still drying on my cheeks and the ache in my chest, the corner of my mouth twitched as a smile threatened to escape.

“Harry,” I said, reaching back to grab his hand and pull him forward, “this is Mira. Mira, this is Harry.”

“Harrison Gordon,” he said. “It’s nice to meet you.”

Mira studied his face with an intensity that would have made a lesser man squirm. But Harry just met her gaze as his quiet calm radiated off him like warmth from a fire.

“Harrison,” she repeated thoughtfully. “But she calls you Harry?”

“She’s the only one who does. Everyone else calls me Gordy.”

She hummed and gave me a knowing smile. She didn’t seem upset at the idea of me being in a relationship even though it was my fault she’d lost the love of her life.

She opened the door to the coffee shop and gestured for us to go ahead of her. Harry’s hand found the small of my back in a gesture that I was coming to rely on far too much for strength.

I took a deep breath and walked through the door of The Daily Grind.

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TWELVE

Gordy

Growing up a Gordon meant mastering the art of controlled expression before you could ride a bike. It meant a father who considered visible emotion a liability, dinner tables where children were seen and not heard, and the unspoken rule that Gordons didn't crack—not in public, not in private, not ever.

By the time I got to CFU, my poker face wasn't just a skill—it was armor. Teammates joked that I had the emotional range of a brick wall, and I let them, because the alternative was letting people see what was underneath.

Right now, that armor was the only thing keeping me upright from the truth that had been slapping me in the face since we landed in Seattle. It turned out I wasn't the only one who'd mastered the art of masking your true feelings. The bright light that Sam exuded in Montana was a mask for the pain and grief she'd been hiding underneath, and I was ashamed that I hadn't seen it sooner—that she'd had to suffer quietly for so long without support.

The Daily Grind was warm and smelled like roasted coffee beans. It was a small space with maybe a dozen tables and a few cushioned chairs in the corner. The white walls were covered in local art and light wooden accents. It felt cozy and welcoming. There were a few customers scattered around with laptops and mugs, but none of them were paying attention to us.

Mira weaved between tables like she could navigate the space blindfolded, and based on what I'd picked up so far, she'd probably been working here for a long time.

“I bought the place a few years ago,” she said over her shoulder, straightening a chair as she passed it. “The previous owner, Tom, wanted to retire. He’d been talking about it for ages, and when he finally pulled the trigger, I couldn’t let it go to someone who’d turn it into one of those soulless chain cafés.” She glanced back at us with a small, proud smile. “So I scraped together every penny I had and made him an offer. It’s mine now.”

“He made the right call,” I said. “Selling it to you. You can feel it when a place is run by someone who actually cares.”

And I meant it. There was something about the place that felt cared for in a way that went beyond business. This place was filled with warmth. It made you want to settle in and stay a while instead of feeling like a chain coffee shop might.

I glanced at Sam, who’d been quiet since we’d walked through the door. Her eyes were shining as she glanced around the space, and they almost seemed distant, like she wasn’t actually here, but remembering another time in this same spot. It was clear it was taking her an enormous amount of effort to hold herself together, but I was attuned to her now, more than I’d ever been before. Her shoulders were tense and her body stiff as we walked farther into the place like she was bracing for a hit—or experiencing one in her mind that she didn’t know how to fight.

“I need to use the restroom,” she said suddenly, her voice only wavering slightly. “Excuse me.”

She didn’t wait for a response before disappearing down the narrow hallway toward the back.

Mira and I watched her go. The warmth on Mira’s face dimmed and was replaced by concern.

When she finally turned to me, tears shimmered in her dark eyes. “She’s still blaming herself for the accident, isn’t she?”

The question landed like a sucker punch. I opened my mouth—to say what, I had no idea—but Mira was already shaking her head. She turned toward the window, her gaze going distant, unfocused, like she’d slipped into a memory I couldn’t follow. Just like Sam had.

“It wasn’t her fault. No matter what she’s told you.” Her voice was quiet but sure. “It was a patch of black ice. There was nothing anyone could’ve done to save him.”

She finally looked back at me, and I was thankful—grateful down to my bones—for every cold dinner with my parents and every lesson I’d learned

during my childhood about keeping my face still. Because inside, I was reeling.

Her brother died in a car accident. And Sam blamed herself. So many puzzle pieces slammed into place, but there were two questions that I still had no answers for.

Why did she blame herself? And maybe more importantly, why did her family?

Mira gestured toward an empty table by the window and we sat. She folded her hands in front of her, her thumbs tracing slow circles against each other like a nervous habit, or a soothing one.

“Bryce loved her.” Her lips curved into a smile that was equal parts joy and sadness. “She was his favorite. I know everyone says Bryce was *everyone’s* favorite—and he was—but Sam was his. He lit up whenever he talked about her. She was his Ladybug—that’s what he used to call her. And *no one* was more excited about her figure skating dreams than he was.” She huffed a small laugh before glancing back at the hallway that led to the bathrooms. Her smile faded. “He’d hate this. He’d hate that she’s carrying so much guilt over his death. He only ever wanted her to be happy, and knowing she’s carried his death on her shoulders these last five years would break him.” She scoffed. “And don’t even get me started on how he’d react to the way his family has treated her. I don’t blame her for being away for so long. I can’t imagine what it must be like in that house now.”

Her gaze drifted toward the hallway again.

“I almost didn’t believe my eyes when I looked out the window and saw her standing on the sidewalk,” she continued. “After so long, I’d started to wonder if she’d ever come back.” She paused, pressing her lips together. “But I’m glad she did. And I’m glad she has you here with her. Bryce had this uncanny ability to always make things better, but since he died, his family just fell apart.”

“Do you still talk to Sam’s parents?”

She shook her head. “I tried...after the funeral. And then a few months later, but Sally changed after Bryce died. From what I’ve heard, she pushed a lot of people away. I think Eric would’ve left the house too if he’d been old enough. Jordan stayed because he felt it was his responsibility as the oldest to try to hold everything together. He’s stopped by every so often to check on me, but I don’t talk to Sally or Greg anymore unfortunately.”

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Once again, she looked in the direction of the bathrooms, her thoughts clearly turning to Sam. “I think about her a lot, you know. More than she’d probably believe. I always hoped she was out there somewhere building a life for herself, not just...running from this one. Even if it’s hard, I hope she’ll find a way to start forgiving herself while she’s here. No one—”

She stopped and looked down at the table, her jaw working like she was choosing her next words very carefully. When she looked up again, her expression was a mix of guarded and protective.

“I don’t blame her.”

I didn’t miss the emphasis. Mira didn’t blame her, but she couldn’t say that *no one* did.

Because that wasn’t true, was it?

Someone did blame her. Her parents. The people who were supposed to love her unconditionally—the ones who should’ve held her tighter after losing Bryce, but instead had pushed her away.

And just like that, Mira had put another puzzle piece into place for me.

I thought about Greg’s eyes in the rearview mirror on our drive from the airport, unable to hold his daughter’s gaze for more than a second before flinching away. The way Sally had been so warm with Jordan, but had turned cold and distant when she’d seen Sam.

The silence whenever Sam was in the room.

The way no one looked at her.

The way Sam sat there and *took it*, poker-faced and stiff, like she believed she deserved it.

Because she *did* believe it, didn’t she? That was why the breakdown in the alley. The fear in her eyes when we’d been back in Montana and she’d only been thinking about coming back here.

The anger that surged through me was staggering. White-hot and immediate, flooding my veins like adrenaline before a game, except there was no puck to stop and no net to defend. There was just Sam, somewhere in the back of this coffee shop, pulling herself together in a bathroom

because the girl who'd been punishing herself for half a decade still couldn't let anyone see her break.

I thought my family was dysfunctional, especially with how cold and transactional they were and how they were more concerned with protecting the family name than the family itself. But at least my parents' neglect was impersonal. It came from indifference, not from looking at their child and seeing a ghost.

Sam's family had taken their grief and aimed it like a weapon at the one person who was already destroying herself with guilt. And the worst part was that she'd let them. She'd internalized all of her family's slights against her since Bryce's death and turned it into proof that she was exactly what she feared—the reason her brother was dead.

I wanted to go find her, to pull her into my arms and tell her that she was the bravest, strongest, most infuriatingly stubborn woman I'd ever known, and that whatever happened five years ago was not her fault. I didn't need to know all the details to know that was the truth. I knew Sam—maybe not as well as I'd thought, but I knew how loyal she was to her friends, how she'd stepped up for Abby over and over, how she'd upended her own living situation and moved into the hockey house just to make life easier on Abby. She never complained when Drew's daughter didn't sleep through the night. She was always putting others first.

Sam's heart was pure goodness. She'd never hurt someone she loved. I knew that as certainly as I knew my own name.

But I couldn't do any of that because *she* hadn't told me any of this. She'd trusted me enough to bring me here, and I wasn't going to betray that by revealing what Mira had shared before Sam was ready.

So I sat across from Mira and kept my face perfectly, painfully still.

"Thank you," I said. "For helping me get a better grasp of the situation."

Mira studied me across the table with that same searching look she'd given me in the alley, like she wanted to make sure I was truly on Sam's side. I could guarantee she wouldn't find someone more devoted to Sam than I was.

"She deserves someone in her corner," she said. "Someone who isn't going to run when it gets hard."

"I'm not going anywhere."

This might be "fake" for Sam, but it had never been for me, not since a certain music festival when she'd first insisted on calling me Harry.

“Good.” She straightened in her chair, and we both turned as Sam came back into view, her eyes a little redder than before but her face composed.

Nothing I’d learned today changed how I felt about her. If anything, it just made me more determined to be exactly what she needed. Because now I understood everything she’d been carrying — and I had no intention of letting her carry it alone anymore.

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THIRTEEN

Sam

I used to think that if I just kept giving enough of myself to the people I loved, it would eventually make up for what I'd taken.

That had been my playbook for five years—be the ultimate best friend, the first one to show up, the last one to leave, the girl who held everyone else together so they never had to feel the way I did. If I could just be *enough* for the people still here, maybe it would offset the life I'd stolen from the person who wasn't.

It never worked. But I kept trying because the alternative was sitting still long enough to feel the weight of everything I was running from.

But sitting across from Mira while she caught me up on the five years I'd missed, I couldn't lie to myself anymore. Because the truth was right there in the warmth of her smile and the easy way she laughed and the fact that she looked at me like I was someone worth being happy to see.

I didn't deserve it. But God, I soaked it in like sunlight after a long winter.

“—and the repair guy literally told me I'd be better off buying a new one, but you know me.” Mira rolled her eyes and gestured toward the espresso machine behind the counter. “I watched about forty YouTube videos and fixed it myself.”

“Bryce would've loved that,” I said with a slight smile before I could stop myself.

The words hung in the air between us. I braced for the flinch, the flash of pain, or worse, the anger that my mom had looked at me with when I'd first mentioned him after the accident.

But Mira just smiled wide. “He absolutely would have. He probably would’ve filmed the whole thing and narrated it like a nature documentary. *And here we see the wild barista in her natural habitat, armed with nothing but a wrench and sheer stubbornness.*”

We both laughed, and it felt so good, not just to laugh, but to laugh about something Bryce totally would’ve done with someone who’d loved him just as much as I had. Harry’s hand found my knee under the table, warm and steady, and gave it a little squeeze. I didn’t look at him because I knew if I did—if I saw whatever impossibly tender expression was on his face right now—I’d lose it again, and I’d already maxed out my crying-in-public quota for the day.

“He absolutely would’ve done that,” I said. “Complete with the British accent.”

“The *terrible* British accent,” Mira corrected, both of us laughing again, and it didn’t hurt the way I expected it to. It ached, but it was the kind of ache that reminded me he’d been real. He’d been loved.

He still was.

We stayed for a while longer. Mira brought us drinks—a lavender latte for me that she remembered I used to love, and a black coffee for Harry because she’d taken one look at him and somehow known. She asked about Montana and what I was studying at Clark Fork University, and I answered without holding back because downplaying my life to Mira felt impossible.

Every so often she’d get pulled away to help the barista, and she’d squeeze my hand before she left like she was afraid I’d disappear while her back was turned. I couldn’t blame her. I’d disappeared on her once already.

Harry was quiet through most of it, but never once seemed bored or like he wanted to leave. He’d ask questions every so often, but mostly he just let Mira and me catch up. But even when he wasn’t talking, his presence was always felt. He didn’t try to fill the space—just existed in it beside me like something solid I could anchor to, and I didn’t have to pretend to be okay because he already knew I wasn’t.

After a few hours of catching up, I hit a wall. I didn’t know how else to describe it—one second I was fine, and then I took a breath and I knew if I stayed much longer, I was going to unravel. When there was a natural lull in our conversation, I told Mira we needed to head back home, even though home was the last place I wanted to go.

“You have to come back before you head back to Montana,” she said. It wasn’t a question. “Promise me, Sam. I’m not...” She pressed her lips together, and for the first time since we’d arrived, her composure cracked. “I don’t want to lose you again. Not after today.”

I opened my mouth to say something noncommittal, but the words died in my throat. Because this was Mira, who had loved my brother with her whole heart and yet she didn’t blame me for his death—she’d made that crystal clear.

“I promise,” I said, and meant it. No matter what, I’d come back and visit her before we left.

She hugged me again at the door, tighter than the first time, and whispered something in my ear that I’d carry with me for the rest of my life. “He’d be so proud of you.”

Tears gathered in my eyes as I squeezed her back, my throat too tight with emotions to say anything else. But when we pulled apart, she could see the gratitude in my eyes.

When Harry and I stepped outside, I took a long pull of the cold Seattle air. It was warmer here than in Montana, and the air didn’t feel quite as clean and crisp as in Dunridge, but it was enough to help clear the emotions that had clogged my throat.

We walked in silence for a few blocks. I didn’t really have a destination in mind, but Harry matched my pace without question, his presence once again solid and grounding beside me. My gaze scanned the area, and I quickly realized we were nearing one of my favorite parks when I was a kid. There weren’t any people here right now—probably too cold and the weather looked ominous like it was about to rain—but that worked just fine for me. There was a bench that overlooked a stretch of empty grass and I sat down. Harry sat beside me, resting his arm along the back of the bench behind me.

For a few minutes, neither of us said anything. Then I leaned sideways until my head rested against his shoulder, and his arm wrapped around me instead of resting on the bench. He was warm despite the cold, and so solid despite everything in my world feeling like it was made of sand.

And God, it felt so good to just *be* for a minute. To not have to perform or deflect or pretend I was fine.

I’d gotten good at it, but it didn’t mean it was never exhausting.

It had been a long time since I'd been able to just exist next to someone who didn't need me to be anything other than what I was right now.

Even if right now I felt like a mess.

The thing about carrying a secret for five years is that it becomes part of you. It fuses to your bones and wraps around your organs until you forget where the secret ends and you begin. Telling the secret feels less like sharing information and more like peeling your own skin back and showing someone what's underneath.

But Harry had walked into my family's house without blinking. He'd held me in an alley while I fell apart. He'd sat across from Mira and been exactly what I'd needed without me having to ask. He'd done all of that without knowing *why* everything was such a disaster.

He deserved to know. And more than that, I *wanted* him to know. I was so tired of carrying this alone.

"I started figure skating when I was four," I said, figuring I should start at the very beginning so he could truly understand the weight of it all.

Harry turned his head, his gaze burning into the side of my face, but I couldn't look at him if I was going to get all this out.

"I was good." I huffed a hollow laugh. "Like, *really* good. I'm not saying that to brag—it's just a fact. By the time I was twelve, my coaches were talking about me going to the Olympics someday like it was a real possibility, not just a pipe dream. Junior Grand Prix, qualifying events, the whole track, and I wanted it more than I'd ever wanted anything."

The memories I'd kept buried rushed in—the cold bite of rink air, the sound of blades on ice, the feeling of leaving the ground in a triple lutz and hanging suspended for one perfect, weightless moment before landing clean. The roar of a crowd. The weight of a medal around my neck. God, I'd lived for those moments.

"Bryce was two years older than me," I continued, and my voice wavered on his name but I pressed on. "He was my biggest cheerleader and came to almost every competition. He'd sit in the stands with this ridiculous homemade sign—" I had to stop and swallow hard. "He'd scream so loud that my coaches used to joke they could hear him over the music."

Harry's thumb rubbed circles along my arm as I took a breath, fighting against the urge to stop talking. I had to get this out.

"There was a competition I wanted to go to." My voice dropped. "I was seventeen. It was a crucial event for Olympic qualifying and I *needed* to be

there. But there was a bad storm rolling in, and my parents wanted me to pull out because they didn't think it was s-safe." My throat nearly closed as I stuttered out the last word, staring at the grass in front of us and remembering the fight I'd had with them like it was yesterday.

It's not safe, Samantha. There will be other competitions. My parents had been dead set, despite even my coach telling them this competition could be the difference in whether or not I qualified for the Olympics. I'd been seventeen, stubborn, and so goddamn sure I was invincible and that they were just trying to ruin my life.

"Bryce offered to drive me," I choked out, pushing through the emotions building in my throat and the tears burning in my eyes. "I'd threatened to go alone if no one would take me, because that's the kind of selfish teenager I was. So Bryce said he'd do it. My parents didn't agree, but they caved because..." My voice cracked. "Because Bryce had a way of making everyone feel like things would be okay. Like if he said it would be fine, it would be fine. And no one, not even my parents, could say no to Bryce. He was the favorite."

I closed my eyes, grounding myself, focusing on the coldness of the bench beneath me, the warmth radiating from Harry's body as he held me slightly tighter against him, and the quiet surrounding us. No one was here but us to hear my greatest shame. To hear how I'd ruined everyone's life and killed my brother.

"I placed first." The words tasted like ash. "I skated the best program of my life that night. I remember being so happy when they read the scores that I cried. Bryce was in the stands going absolutely insane." I closed my eyes. "And afterward we drove home."

Harry's arm tightened around me like he knew what was coming.

"We hit a patch of black ice." My voice had gone flat. I knew from experience that flat was the only way I could get through this part. If I let myself feel it while I said the words, I'd never finish. "The car spun out and went off the road. I don't remember the impact but I remember the sound—this horrible crunching, screeching sound—and then nothing. When I woke up I was in the hospital."

I took a breath. And then another. And then I said the thing I'd never said out loud to anyone who didn't already know.

"And that's when I found out that Bryce had died instantly."

Tears were now streaming silently down my face. I couldn't have stopped them even if I'd tried. The memories were rushing back now, painful and fierce like they were trying to flay me open to pay for my selfishness with blood.

"For a long time after—" My throat closed. I had to take another breath before I could force the words through it. "For a long time, I wished I'd died with him."

Harry's other arm came up, and he wrapped me up in a tight hug as I buried my face in his chest, soaking in his warmth. He hadn't said anything and I was so grateful. He wasn't telling me it was okay or he was sorry or any of the other empty platitudes so many people said at this kind of story. He just held me, and it was the exact thing I needed in this moment. It was what gave me strength to tell him the rest.

"I was in the hospital for months. The damage to my legs was... extensive. You'd never know it to look at me—whatever small scars are left have faded to almost nothing—but internally it was bad. Even after multiple surgeries and physical therapy." I stared down at my lap. "They told me I'd never be able to figure skate competitively again. And I remember the doctor saying it like it was supposed to be this devastating blow, but all I could think was *good*. I didn't care. I didn't care about skating or the Olympics or any of it. Bryce was dead and it was my fault because I'd been too stubborn and selfish about a *stupid* competition. So never being able to skate competitively again felt like the least that I deserved."

I clamped my jaw shut and breathed through my nose until I trusted myself to keep going.

"My parents blamed me." I said it simply, like a fact, because to me it was. Hell, I'm sure everything made sense to Harry now about their reactions to me. "They never said the exact words—not to my face—but they didn't have to. I could see it every time they looked at me. Or didn't look at me. My brothers, too, although it was less obvious with them. Eric was only fourteen. Jordan tried to hold everything together because that's what Jordan does. But I could feel it. The whole house felt like a...like a tomb. And I was the ghost haunting it.

"So when the hospital was getting ready to release me after another surgery, I called my aunt in San Diego. Got my rehab referrals transferred. Packed the stuff that mattered into two suitcases and left."

The cold air stung my eyes, but I didn't blink.

“I haven’t been home to Seattle since.”

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FOURTEEN

Gordy

She'd handed me every jagged piece of herself, and all I wanted to do was hold them until she was ready to put them back together.

The silence after Sam finished was heavy with the weight of everything she'd just trusted me with. I'd admired her and been attracted to her from the moment I met her, but finally knowing the full truth of her only made me more devoted to her. She'd carried this blame and guilt like it was her burden to bear, and no one had ever taken the weight of it off her shoulders. It seemed to me like her family had never even tried.

Her face was still buried in my chest, and the dampness of her tears soaked through my shirt as her breath hitched every few seconds like her body was still catching up to what she'd said out loud. My arms stayed locked around her because letting go wasn't an option.

Not now.

Maybe not ever.

I already knew most of it; Mira had filled in the broad strokes back at the coffee shop. But hearing it from Sam—hearing her voice crack on Bryce's name and the flat, detached way she'd described the accident like she had to remove herself from the story just to survive telling it—was something else entirely.

It was trust in its purest form. And she'd given it to *me*.

I held her tighter, wishing I could slay the demons she'd carried silently for so long. But now that I knew, there was no way in hell she'd be carrying them alone anymore.

When her breathing finally steadied, she pulled back just enough to wipe her eyes with the sleeve of her jacket. Her nose was red from the cold

and the crying, her eyes swollen, and she looked so far from the untouchable Sam Lowe that everyone at CFU knew—and somehow, impossibly, even more beautiful.

“Does Abby know?” The question came out before I could think about whether it was the right one to ask. But it had been circling my mind since the coffee shop, since I’d started connecting the dots between the Sam I knew in Montana and the girl who’d survived this horrible tragedy.

Sam shook her head. “Montana was my fresh start. A clean slate.” She stared at the empty park in front of us, her voice steadier now but still weaker than what was normal for her. “I didn’t have to be the broken girl who destroyed her family. I could be someone new. Someone confident and happy who only brought positivity and support to the people around her.”

And just like that, every single thing I thought I knew about Sam Lowe rearranged itself.

Everything suddenly made sense. All the questions I’d wondered about, her relentless positivity, the way she was always the first person to show up and the last to leave—whether it was helping Harper move furniture or staying up with Drew when Rory wouldn’t sleep.

Even her relationship with Abby made more sense. We’d all learned about how Abby’s mom died freshman year, and then we’d all been there for her when her grams died last year, but Sam had been the one holding her together the whole time. She’d been the one keeping Abby above water when she’d felt like drowning. But she’d never once taken the credit. It was Abby who’d made it clear how important Sam was, whereas Sam simply made it clear she wouldn’t let anyone hurt Abby after the hurt she’d already experienced.

Meanwhile, Sam had been hiding her own hurt the whole time.

She’d moved her entire life around to be what Abby needed—first as a roommate, then as a housemate when she moved into the hockey house so Foster could take Sam’s spot on their lease and live with Abby and her brother, Mason. Sam had done it without complaint or hesitation, like it was the most natural thing in the world.

Because she knew exactly what that kind of loss felt like. She’d been living inside it for years.

Sam had taken her own devastation and turned it into fuel to make sure no one around her ever felt as alone as she had. She’d built an entire identity around being the person who made other people’s lives better,

brighter, easier—because somewhere deep down, she believed she owed the world that much. That it was the only way to justify still being here when Bryce wasn't.

Everyone on campus thought Sam was Miss Happy Positivity, but it had all been a front for the pain she carried by herself, never wanting to burden anyone else.

"I should've told you before we got here," she said quietly, still not looking at me. Her fingers were knotted together in her lap, twisting and untwisting. "It wasn't fair to bring you into this without—"

"Sam." I reached over and wrapped my hand around both of hers, stilling the nervous movement. She didn't look up. I squeezed gently, then again, until those beautiful blue eyes of hers finally lifted to mine. They were red-rimmed and glassy, but worst of all they were guarded, like she was braced for me to say or do something that would confirm every fear she had about letting someone in.

"You don't owe me any explanations." I held her gaze and meant every word with everything I had. "I'm here for you. Always. The why never mattered."

Her guard dropped, like she'd been bracing for impact and the blow never came. She'd been waiting for me to flinch, to pull away, or to look at her differently, and instead I was still right here, caring about her more than I'd ever been brave enough to say. She hadn't been ready before and I wasn't sure she was ready now. But I'd let my actions do the talking until she was ready to hear the words.

She shook her head, and her teeth sank into her lower lip like she wanted to say something but the words wouldn't come. Or maybe she didn't trust them. Maybe she didn't trust that whatever she wanted to say wouldn't change things between us in a way she wasn't ready for.

I watched the war play out across her face—the wanting and the fear, tangled together so tightly I wasn't sure even she could tell them apart. And my gaze snagged on her mouth. On the way her teeth dragged slowly across her bottom lip before releasing it, leaving it flushed and full, and every rational thought I had went quiet.

God, I wanted to kiss her.

The urge hit me so hard it stole the breath from my lungs. I wanted to close the distance between us and press my mouth to hers and pour everything I couldn't say into the space between us. I wanted to take every

ounce of her pain and self-doubt and hold her until she felt whole. I wanted to show her that the woman sitting next to me—broken pieces and all—was the most extraordinary person I'd ever known, and nothing she'd just told me had changed that. If anything, it had only confirmed what I'd known since the night she'd first called me Harry and refused to take no for an answer.

She was *everything*.

Her eyes dropped to my mouth. Just for a second—so fast that someone who wasn't watching as closely as I was might have missed it. But I noticed everything, especially when it came to her. And I definitely noticed the way her lips parted slightly, the way her breath caught, the way she swayed just barely toward me like gravity was making the decision her brain wouldn't let her.

The air between us went electric. Every nerve in my body was attuned to her—the warmth of her hands still wrapped in mine, the faint smell of lavender from the latte she'd had at Mira's, how the cold had turned her cheeks pink in a way that made her look impossibly soft.

For one charged, endless moment, we just looked at each other.

Then she blinked and the spell shattered. She straightened, pulling her hands from mine to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear in a gesture that was so perfectly casual, it hurt to watch. Because I knew it was her mask sliding back into place. The armor going up.

She still thought this was fake. She still believed that whatever was between us had an expiration date, that I was here as a favor and nothing more. And I couldn't correct her. Not now. Not when she was this vulnerable and barely holding it together. If I told her the truth about how I felt right now, she'd think it was pity. She'd think I was only saying it because of what she'd just told me, and she'd never believe it was real.

So I swallowed down the words I wanted to say and the kiss I wanted to give her and the future I'd been building in my head that had her in every moment for the rest of my life.

"We should head back," Sam said, and her voice was almost normal again. Almost. "Before my mom sends a search party. Or, more likely, changes the locks."

The joke was weak but she was trying, and that was so fundamentally Sam that it made my chest ache. Even now, even after everything, she was

reaching for humor. Reaching for lightness. Trying to make *me* comfortable after she'd just bared her soul.

"Whatever you want to do, I'm here," I said, standing and offering her my hand.

Her expression flickered and her smile faltered. She could try to make this moment light again, but I wasn't about to let her think I wasn't very serious about doing and being whatever she needed. She looked at my outstretched hand for a beat, then up at me, and I watched her throat work as she swallowed whatever quip she'd been loading.

She took my hand and let me pull her to her feet, and when she was standing, she didn't let go right away.

Neither did I.

We walked back toward her parents' house with our fingers intertwined. She didn't lean into me the way she had on the way to the park, but she held my hand like it was the only thing keeping her tethered to solid ground.

For now, that was enough.

But when the timing was right—when she wasn't convinced she was undeserving of anything good—I was going to tell Samantha Lowe exactly how I felt about her.

And I wasn't going to let her run from it.

FIFTEEN

Sam

I'd been awake for at least an hour before I heard my family start moving around the house, making their way downstairs—every single person stepping on that creaky third step—and the familiar sounds of the coffee maker starting followed by the low murmurs of my dad's deep baritone voice and my mom's lighter one.

The idea of getting up and facing them again made my body feel weighted to the bed. Every second I spent in this house felt like being reminded of another life lived by someone else. Like the house itself remembered every version of me that had ever lived inside it, and none of those versions were someone I particularly wanted to be right now, maybe weren't even someone I *could* be anymore.

Harry was fast asleep beside me. I was still shocked my mom hadn't said anything about him sleeping in my room. She was a firm believer in not sharing rooms when you weren't married—sex before marriage being a sin and all that. I couldn't decide if her silence was because she was giving me grace, or because she just didn't care enough about me anymore to bother.

I glanced over, my gaze tracing over Harry's strong body that I'd rarely let myself admire. He was on his back with one arm thrown across his eyes, and his breathing was slow and even. He was wearing his matching navy pajama set that I always teased him about, although I'd seen him enough times in the middle of the night to know he didn't normally sleep with the shirt on. Too many nights, we'd all woken up to help Drew with his baby daughter, Rory, and the times when Gordy had held that sweet tiny baby

while wearing only the navy pajama bottoms were burned into my memory. That man was going to be a sexy-as-fuck DILF.

A familiar ache radiated from my chest, and I turned away to stare back at the ceiling. I couldn't think about him like that. He was one of my best friends, but that was all. We couldn't be anything more than that.

I didn't deserve it.

I watched the ceiling until I couldn't anymore, and then I got up. I couldn't stay in this room until Harry woke up. I needed to be able to face my family without him standing beside me giving me his strength all the time.

I pulled on the first thing I found—my black leggings and Harry's hoodie from where it was sitting in the chair in the corner—and made myself go downstairs.

When I stepped off the last step, I stared at the living room that had been pristine last night but was now full of boxes.

I stopped in the doorway and just looked at them for a second. They were stacked three and four high, labeled in my mom's handwriting. *LIGHTS. NATIVITY. GARLANDS.* God, I'd almost forgotten about these boxes, and the sight of them again after so long had my eyes burning. They were filled with thirty years of Christmas, organized, categorized, and packed away in the dark for eleven months, waiting to be needed again. As a kid, I'd loved helping my mom sort through them all. Christmas had been my favorite time of year.

My mom was already in the middle of it, unwrapping ornaments from tissue paper. She looked up when she heard me, and while her lips pulled up into a smile, it was a little too forced and unnatural looking, similar to when a photo is taken a half second too late and captures everyone mid-blink with slipping smiles.

"Good morning," she said.

"Morning. Are you decorating today?" It felt like a stupid question to ask because that's obviously what was happening, but I wasn't sure what else to say to her.

Before my mom could answer, Eric came around the corner from the kitchen with a bowl of cereal, pointing his spoon at me.

"Don't tell me you forgot about the twelve days of Christmas." He was so much taller than when I'd left. Broader too. He wasn't the awkward little brother I'd loved to tease anymore, but he still had that playful twinkle in

his eyes, and right now that felt like a lifeline I was all too eager to grab on to. “Today is tree decorating while drinking hot cocoa and watching Christmas movies all day. Tomorrow is Snowflake Lane.” He gestured toward the kitchen. “The full schedule is on the fridge. Mom laminated it.”

The memories washed over me so quickly it felt like I was being swept away by a tsunami. The annual twelve days of Christmas tradition that my parents had been doing my whole life. Every day was filled with something festive that we were all expected to participate in.

“Eric, don’t eat in the living room,” my mom said, without looking up from the ornament she was unwrapping.

He took one pointed bite of cereal and then set the bowl on the coffee table anyway, and my mom pressed her lips together, choosing not to fight it. Well, at least some things didn’t change. Eric was still getting away with breaking all the house rules because he was the baby.

The sound of the stairs creaking caught my attention, and I turned to see Harry dressed in jeans and a long-sleeved shirt, running his hand through his black hair as he stepped off the last step. His eyes darkened with something I couldn’t quite name as he stared at me for a beat too long. My cheeks heated when I realized he was staring at *his* sweatshirt that I’d commandeered this morning. I nibbled my lip and gave him a little shrug and a shy smile. He closed the distance between us and leaned forward, placing a tender kiss on my forehead that had my breath catching in my lungs.

“Want some coffee?” His voice was still a little rough with sleep, and it made tingles break out all over my body.

“Yes, please.”

He kissed my head again and then walked toward the kitchen. I watched him for a moment longer, letting myself for just the tiniest second believe this could be real, before I remembered that he would never really be mine. He deserved so much more than I could give him.

He deserved better than me.

I focused back on the boxes and thought about the ornaments inside them. Some were generic balls you’d get from the store, but most were handmade ones we’d made as kids. Those were my mom’s favorites.

Or at least they used to be.

Harry materialized beside me with two mugs of coffee. I took mine without looking at him and wrapped both hands around it like it was the

only warm thing in the room. But that wasn't entirely true because Harry's warmth emanated from his body, making me feel stronger than I'd felt when I stood here alone.

"So," Eric said, around a mouthful of cereal. "I'll do the lights and then we can all do the ornaments together. Jordan should be here by then."

"I thought Dad always did lights," I said.

"Nope. He hauls in the tree and I'm in charge of lights now." He was already pulling a tangled strand from the nearest box with both hands, holding it up to assess the damage. "Things change, Sammy."

He wasn't wrong about that.

A few minutes later, my dad carried in the tree they'd apparently picked out when Harry and I had been visiting with Mira yesterday. Jordan showed up while Eric still wrestled with the lights, refusing anyone's help because he "had a system" or so he claimed.

I reached for the ornament box closest to me, and Harry and I started sorting through them, while Jordan grabbed his own box and Mom went through another. The tension that had been prevalent since the moment we arrived seemed to disappear for a while as we all worked together. *It's a Wonderful Life* played on the TV with the sound down low, and Eric made commentary about everything. But his comments also seemed to have the magical ability to make the room feel lighter, to the point I wasn't even forcing my smile anymore.

It had been so long since I'd been able to tease and smile with my brothers, and it felt like coming home was supposed to. Like comfort, acceptance, safety.

And then Eric was telling Harry about why we don't use tinsel anymore. He turned to Mom. "Back me up—" His words cut off as his smile slipped, and we all turned to look at her.

She was holding an ornament that I recognized instantly. It was one of the small clay handprint ornaments that we'd each made in third grade because it was Mrs. Callahan's favorite Christmas-themed project. But only one person ever made my mom look that sad and broken. Which meant that she was holding Bryce's handprint ornament.

Nobody moved.

Eric's tinsel story died in his throat. Jordan went very still. And my dad's jaw tightened as he looked down at the floor.

Harry's warm, steady hand found my back like he knew I needed his strength.

I still remembered how proud he was of that ornament. Bryce had pressed his hand in crooked the first time because he'd been in a hurry, so Mrs. Callahan had let him start over. He'd been so proud of the second attempt. He'd even carried it home in both hands because he didn't want it to get broken in his backpack. The second we walked in the house, he'd shown it to everyone before my mom even had a chance to hang it up.

My throat felt like it was closing.

My mom stared at it like if she stared long enough, it might bring him back. Her thumb moved slowly over the surface of it, over the ridges where his small fingers had pressed into the clay, and her lip quivered as a tear slipped down her cheek. Grief filled the room like a specter taunting us. Mom's anguish spilled down her cheeks now in rivulets that felt like bullets straight to my gut.

I was the reason she was feeling this pain.

I did this.

It was all my fault.

Did she cry like this every year, or was it worse because her son's killer was sitting in the room with them? Because that's what I was to her now. Not her daughter. The person who was—and would always be—responsible for the death of her beloved son.

I couldn't breathe.

The grief and guilt swirled through my body, trying to suffocate me until there was warmth wrapping around my hip, pulling me closer. Harry. He squeezed me closer to him and leaned down to brush another kiss to my head, like no matter what had happened, he didn't blame me.

He might've been the only person in this house who didn't.

But it was enough. I took a deep breath, and then another.

And then my mom looked up, her gaze meeting mine, and it was filled with everything I'd always feared. Anger, pain, and maybe even a little hatred. She wasn't looking at me like I was her daughter. She was looking at me like I was her cross to bear.

Then her gaze moved to the tree, and she reached up and hung the ornament on one of the branches near the center.

"Jordan," she said, her voice completely even. "Can you check if we have enough hooks? There should be a bunch of them in the second box on

the right.”

Jordan moved. Eric didn’t say anything, which might have been the most alarming thing that had happened all morning because he’d been chattering nonstop.

Everyone went on with their tasks like the moment had never happened, and I wondered how many times they’d done this over the years, not just with Christmas memories, but *any* memory of Bryce. Was this why his pictures were no longer on the wall by the stairs?

If everyone else was going to pretend like it never happened, then I would too. I turned back to the box in front of me. I picked up the small ceramic snowflake and hung it on the nearest branch without really seeing it. Harry stayed beside me, his presence the only thing keeping me from shutting down completely.

My mom started unwrapping ornaments again. My dad said something to Jordan about the hooks. Eric found his voice and went back to telling another story.

Maybe I wasn’t the only one who’d spent five years pretending. Because right now it was clear that every single member of my family was pretending.

Pretending we weren’t broken.

Pretending there wasn’t an obvious void in the room.

Pretending I still belonged here when that couldn’t be further from the truth.

SIXTEEN

Gordy

I didn't know what I'd expected Snowflake Lane to be, but it wasn't this. The entire street had been shut down and transformed into something that didn't look real. Every storefront was covered in lights and not just a strand or two, but thousands of them. Lampposts wrapped in garland and ribbon lined both sides of the sidewalk, and between them stood life-sized toy soldiers in red and gold uniforms, painted grins frozen on their wooden faces. Vendors sold hot chocolate and roasted chestnuts from carts that looked like they'd been pulled out of a Dickens novel. And above all of it, mounted on wires strung between the rooftops, machines pumped a steady fall of fake snow down onto the crowd below.

I'd grown up around holiday displays, but nothing like this. The Gordon family Christmas party was a black-tie event at the country club with ice sculptures, a string quartet, and enough champagne to fill a swimming pool. But those displays were designed to impress. Christmas with the Gordons wasn't about family. It was about maintaining status.

Snowflake Lane was designed to make people smile. This was what the spirit of Christmas was supposed to be about. People were smiling at strangers and holding doors to the local businesses open for others. My parents would've scoffed if they were brought here. I could practically hear my father calling it too pedestrian for the likes of a Gordon, but I got the joy of it. There was something a little magical about being bombarded with Christmas lights and giant toy soldiers.

"Pretty wild, right," Eric said, appearing beside me with a drink tray holding four cups of hot chocolate. He handed me one and gave another one to Sam. "You look like you've never seen fake snow before."

I smiled. Eric reminded me a little of a golden retriever trapped in a nineteen-year-old's body. "I grew up in Connecticut, so no need for fake snow when we often had the real thing."

Eric let out a sigh. "Man, I'd love to experience a white Christmas. We're lucky if we get *any* snow in December. Usually we have, like, one storm in February and it's more ice than snow." He took a sip of his hot chocolate. "But even if it's fake, this place is pretty cool, huh?"

Eric had been talking about Snowflake Lane since yesterday, when we'd finally finished decorating the tree and he'd announced the next item on Sally's twelve days of Christmas itinerary. The drive from the house to Bellevue had only taken about twenty minutes, with Greg and Sally driving in their car while Jordan drove the rest of us in his. Sam and I had sat in the back while Eric claimed shotgun. She'd surprised me when she came down for breakfast wearing my CFU hoodie again. Sitting beside her in the car while she'd been wearing my clothes was fucking with my head worse than anything else.

There was only so much a man could take.

And apparently Sam in my clothes was bringing me dangerously close to my breaking point.

Sam had been quiet all day. Quieter than the already-too-quiet version of herself that had existed since we'd arrived in Seattle, which was saying something. No one had acknowledged the heaviness that had settled over the house after the moment with the ornament yesterday. They'd all just pretended like everything was fine when it was very obviously not.

I'd truly thought my parents were excellent at faking it, but I had to give the Lowe family credit where credit was due. These people knew how to pretend better than some of the elites I'd grown up around.

I glanced to where Sam was standing next to me, her face tilted up toward the falling fake snow, and the look on her face made my gut tighten. Her blue eyes sparkled and her lips were lifted in a subtle smile that transformed her entire face and only punctuated how little she'd smiled since we arrived in Seattle.

Fuck, she was gorgeous.

Even with the weight from these past few days that had settled on her shoulders, she still held herself with grace and poise. She was still the brightest light in every room she walked into.

At least she always was for me.

The family started moving down the block together, drifting with the crowd. Eric fell into step beside Jordan and started giving him a hard time about how Jordan's coat looked like it belonged to a middle-aged accountant. Jordan told him to grow up. Eric told him to loosen up.

Ahead of them, Sally had slowed near a vendor stall selling scarves, and Greg stopped beside her with his hands in his pockets, waiting patiently like he'd learned decades ago that browsing was nonnegotiable.

Beside me, Sam's pace slowed, and I matched mine to hers until her family was several feet ahead of us in the crowd.

She didn't say anything or even look at me. But she leaned into me—just barely, just enough that I could feel the heat of her through my coat—and the contact was so different from every other time she'd done it this trip that it made my pulse stutter.

Because her family wasn't looking. They were way ahead of us, absorbed in their own conversations, and Sam had no reason to lean into me. No one to perform for. No role to play.

She did it anyway.

I let out a slow breath. There it was again—that bone-deep quiet that only ever happened around her. The rest of the world didn't disappear, but it stopped mattering. The noise, the crowd, the lights all faded to nothing against the warmth of her pressed against my arm.

"We used to come here every year," she said after a while. "All six of us, plus Mira once Bryce started dating her. Bryce hated it when we were teenagers." A small smile crossed her face, sad, but real. "Thought it was cheesy. He'd complain the whole drive and then spend the entire night taking pictures of Mira in the snow because he thought she was the most beautiful thing he'd ever seen."

I could understand that. I was having a very similar thought about Sam right now. The lights almost gave the street a romantic ambiance, and despite the stress I knew this trip had made Sam feel, she was still breathtakingly beautiful.

"Has your mom always done this Twelve Days of Christmas tradition?"

"Yeah."

"What was your favorite event? Or do they change every year?"

"They're mostly the same every year although some things change every so often. Snowflake Lane has always been part of it and the tree decorating. I didn't look at the list, so I'm not sure if they still do all the

other events we used to do, but usually making gingerbread houses and decorating cookies is on there somewhere.”

“So, which event was your favorite?” I pressed, not missing that she hadn’t answered that particular question.

She hooked her hand into my elbow, leaning a little closer, like she needed my strength. “We’d go ice skating,” she said, her voice low and filled with a mix of sadness and what almost sounded like longing.

I couldn’t imagine what it must’ve been like to lose figure skating when she’d been so talented. To think you had your whole life figured out and then lose the thing you were most passionate about. I loved hockey, but cooking was where my real passion lay. And still, if I lost either of those, I’d be gutted.

We walked a few more steps. The fake snow was lighter here, away from the main machines, drifting down in scattered flakes that caught the glow of the string lights.

“I keep waiting for it to stop hurting,” she said quietly.

I thought about Pop. About the way he still set two coffee mugs on the counter every morning, fifteen years after my grandmother passed. He didn’t do it on purpose. He’d told me once that his hands just remembered and he’d long given up on fighting it.

“I don’t think it stops,” I said. “I think it just changes shape.”

She considered that for a minute, her eyes on the street ahead of us. Then she slipped her hand down my arm until her hand slid into mine, our fingers interlacing.

Again, my heart picked up the pace. Her family wasn’t around to see our show. There was no audience to convince that we were a real couple.

It was just us.

And she’d still reached for me.

My thumb traced a slow circle against the back of her hand, and she didn’t pull away.

We stopped near the end of the block where the crowd had thinned. A string of white lights hung low between two lampposts, and somewhere behind us a choir had started singing.

Sam turned to face me, her eyes filled with a twinkle I hadn’t seen the entire time we’d been in Washington. “Thank you, Harry. For being here, for being my rock. You don’t even know how much I’ve needed—”

“I told you, there’s no need to thank me. I want to be here.”

She shook her head. “But you gave up Christmas with your family to come play pretend with mine. That’s not—”

“Sam.” I stepped closer. The fake snow kept falling between us, catching in her hair and on the shoulders of my hoodie that she’d claimed as her own. “Nothing about this has been pretend for me.”

The words came out before I could stop them or decide if the timing was right or calculate the risk. They just fell out of me, and once they were in the open, I couldn’t take them back.

I didn’t want to.

Her lips parted. Those blue eyes went wide, searching my face for a crack or some sign that I was playing a part.

She wouldn’t find one. If anything, this moment was a long time coming.

“What?” Her voice was barely a whisper.

I reached up with the hand not holding hers and brushed a fake snowflake from her hair. My fingers lingered against her temple for a beat longer than necessary, and her breath caught under my touch. Her eyes fluttered, just barely, and I watched the war I’d seen so many times play out across her face—the wanting and the fear, pulling her in opposite directions.

I wanted to kiss her. The urge was so strong it took everything I had to stay where I was. But I’d spent enough time reading Sam to know the difference between a wall coming down and a wall being tested. She was still testing. Still waiting for this to turn into something that would prove her right about not deserving it.

I wasn’t going to give her that proof.

So I did what I’d been doing since the music festival. Since the first time she’d called me Harry and I’d known, with the kind of certainty that doesn’t need evidence, that she was it for me.

I let my hand drop and gave her room to breathe.

“We should find your family,” I said, keeping my voice even.

Her expression cracked for just a second. Relief and disappointment and longing, all tangled up in a way that made my chest ache because I recognized it. I’d seen it in the park. In the alley outside Mira’s. Every time she got close to letting herself want this, she’d pull back because she was convinced she didn’t deserve it.

But she did. She deserved everything.

“Yeah,” she said softly. “We should.”

Then she squeezed my hand, turned, and we walked back toward her family. But unlike all the other times before, she didn't let go.

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SEVENTEEN

Sam

I didn't sleep much that night because my brain wouldn't shut off—replaying Harry's words over and over again. But I was sure what he'd said at Snowflake Lane—*nothing about this has been pretend for me*—didn't mean what my stupid, traitorous heart wanted it to mean. He was being a good friend. A dedicated fake boyfriend who'd committed to the bit so thoroughly that the lines had gotten a little blurry for him, which was understandable, because this trip was a lot. The emotional intensity, the family drama, me sobbing on him in alleys and parks and coffee shops—of course that would create a false sense of intimacy. That's all it was.

That's all it could be.

Because the alternative—that Harrison Gordon had actually meant those words, that the man currently sleeping three inches away from me with his arm thrown over his eyes and his navy pajama shirt stretched across his broad chest actually wanted this to be real—was something I couldn't afford to consider. Not even for a second. Because unlike the other guys I'd hooked up with, Harry meant something to me. He was, without fail, my best friend now, even surpassing Abby at this point. I knew I didn't deserve true love and happiness, which meant his words couldn't be true because I needed him in my life. And if I believed what he said then that would mean I'd have to let him go because I couldn't give him what he wanted or deserved, and I wasn't strong enough to let him go.

So. He was being a good friend. End of story.

By the time I'd gotten ready to face the day, I had my full armor back on. I'd successfully maintained a persona in Montana that I needed to embrace if I was going to survive this trip home. So I'd showered, put on

my favorite black leggings and a fitted cream sweater, and done my makeup to utter perfection including hiding the slight purple bags under my eyes that said *I definitely did not lie awake for three hours overthinking a single sentence.*

And then I'd stood in front of the bathroom mirror and given myself a very firm pep talk. *You are Sam Lowe. You are fine. This is fake. Act like it.*

Before I even reached the stairs, the scent of ginger and molasses wafted up to my nose, and when I reached the kitchen, my mom was already at the counter in her red apron, surrounded by cooling racks of gingerbread pieces. The sight hit my armor as a dozen memories of Christmases past washed over me—my mom standing here just like this wearing that very same apron while my brothers and I chased each other and tried to steal the candies before it was time to decorate. She'd always baked the gingerbread the morning of, refusing to use a kit because she said store-bought gingerbread was “an insult to the tradition.” That clearly hadn't changed.

Eric was perched on a stool wearing a Santa hat and eating what appeared to be a reject gingerbread wall piece. My mom was either ignoring this or hadn't noticed yet, but considering we'd been convinced as kids that she had eyes in the back of her head, I was sure she was fully aware and had given him permission.

“Morning,” I said, pouring myself coffee. “Is today the gingerbread house competition?”

“Yep.” Eric gestured with his broken gingerbread piece. “Be prepared to lose though. I'm the reigning champ four years running.”

I took a sip of my coffee and finally noticed Dad and Jordan sitting at the kitchen table. Jordan had his own apartment not far from here, but he'd clearly been here awhile based on the half-finished plate of eggs and toast in front of him. He was scrolling on his phone while my dad read the newspaper.

Harry appeared a few minutes later, and I did what any self-respecting fake girlfriend would do. I went to him.

“Hey, babe.” I rose on my toes and pressed a kiss to his jaw. Even this close, his lips were too much of a temptation, especially after what he'd said last night. But we'd never kissed and I wasn't about to cross that line when my armor already felt shaky when it came to him. His dark brow arched as he wrapped his strong arm around my waist, the heat of his hand

like a brand on the skin at my hip even through my clothes. My hand rested on his chest—casual, easy, the kind of touch that said we do this all the time. “How are your gingerbread house decorating skills because apparently we need to dethrone Eric.”

“Hey!” Eric said from his spot at the counter, acting truly affronted. Right here in this moment, he reminded me so much of the fourteen-year-old boy he’d been before the accident and not the nineteen-year-old he was now.

Harry’s eyes watched me closely, something shifting in them that I couldn’t quite catch before it was replaced with his usual steady expression. His hand tightened ever so slightly against me.

“Morning,” he said. His voice was low and a little rough, and my body responded before my brain could even catch up, my core throbbing and my pulse kicking up.

Nope. Not going there. I *couldn’t*.

I hooked my arm through his and pulled him toward the island, leaning into him the way a girlfriend would. I was just playing the part. That’s all this was. It was a performance, and I was going to perform the hell out of it because that was so much easier than examining why my skin buzzed every time he was close.

“Okay, here’s how this works,” Eric announced, and launched into his explanation of the rules with the enthusiasm of someone hosting the Great British Bake Off. You could work in teams or as an individual. Everyone got one hour to decorate, and the winner got out of dish duty until after Christmas, plus bragging rights.

Eric and Jordan decided to go as individuals, while Mom and Dad teamed up just like they always had when we were kids.

“Whaddya say, Harry? Wanna be my partner?” I smiled up at him.

His hand came up and his thumb brushed softly against my cheek, stilling the breath in my lungs while I was trapped in his gaze. His lips lifted subtly at the corners. “Always,” he murmured, and instantly my brain took it to mean he wasn’t talking about this competition at all. My stomach flipped. How had he managed to make one single word sound like an oath?

Performance. This is a performance.

It took every ounce of strength I had to finally look away. “Great, because we need to win this and take back my title from Eric.”

Mom set the timer and the kitchen erupted with activity. Everyone had their own work area and was building their houses and grabbing for decorative candy.

Harry picked up a gingerbread wall and examined it like he was assessing a construction blueprint.

“You ever built a gingerbread house before?” I asked.

If I wasn’t mistaken, there was a subtle red flush on his cheeks. “Not so much, but I can figure it out.”

“Wait, have you seriously never done this before?”

“Gingerbread construction isn’t exactly high on the Gordon family’s list of approved Christmas activities. Unless it earns us money or brings money to the charities my mom is in charge of, it doesn’t make the list.”

“Not even as a kid?” I couldn’t fathom the idea of not even getting to experience this at least once as a child.

Harry shook his head.

“That’s kinda sad, Harry.”

“I didn’t know any better to be sad about it, if that makes sense.” He bumped my shoulder with his. “Besides, getting to do it for the first time with you makes it pretty hard to feel like I missed out.”

Now it was my turn for my cheeks to flush, but he saved me from having to respond. “And I’ve got a lot of cooking experience these days, so how hard can it be to decorate this thing?”

I smiled. “Harder than you think.”

That turned out to be an understatement. While Harry was a genius in the kitchen, that skill set clearly didn’t transfer to decorating gingerbread houses. We managed to build the house itself, but when it came to the actual design of the candies, Harry was a lost cause. We spent more time laughing than putting actual candies on, and when the timer went off announcing our time was up, our house looked like it had been decorated by a five-year-old.

But I couldn’t be upset about it because it was the most fun I’d had since coming back home. Truthfully, I hadn’t paid any attention to my parents or brothers the whole time. It had felt like Harry and I were in our own little cocoon, and it was the first time I’d actually felt happy since we got here.

Dad did a slow lap around everyone’s gingerbread houses. He stopped at ours for a long beat, studying it and then arching a brow at me, but I couldn’t stifle my smile as I glanced at Harry. We were absolutely going to

lose, and I didn't even care the way I would've in the past because Harry was here, looking handsome as hell with frosting on his cheek—how did that even get there?—and his gray eyes shining with happiness when he looked at me.

"I hate to say it, but Eric wins again."

"Yes! Let's go. Five-time champ over here!" Eric continued to celebrate, but all the noise faded as Harry and I kept our gazes locked on each other. I couldn't look away even if I tried.

"Alright, everyone head to the living room for more Christmas movies," Mom called. She had barely acknowledged me, but it didn't sting like it had the last few days.

Harry grabbed my hand, leading the way toward the living room, but as soon as we got to the doorway of the kitchen, Eric hollered at us.

"Uh, Sammy?"

I turned. He was leaning against the wall with a shit-eating grin that was so similar to the one Bryce had when he was up to no good that it froze me to the spot. He pointed upward. "You two are under the mistletoe."

I looked up and sure enough, there was a small sprig tied with red ribbon, pinned to the doorframe directly above where Harry and I were standing. When the hell had my mom started putting mistletoe up?

"Hey, I don't make the rules," Eric said. He was grinning wide. "You gotta kiss."

I nibbled my lip and then glanced up at Harry. His gray eyes seemed slightly darker as his gaze locked on mine, and I swallowed thickly. This was fine. This was good, even. We were supposed to be boyfriend and girlfriend so of course we wouldn't have a problem kissing each other.

I'd kissed plenty of guys who meant nothing to me, so why was I even second-guessing this?

Because it was Harry.

I shoved that thought away. No, I could do this. It was just a kiss. It didn't mean anything.

"Okay, okay," I said, rolling my eyes at Eric with a lightness I didn't feel. I turned back to Harry. "Let's just—"

The rest of the sentence evaporated.

Because Harry was looking at me with an expression I'd never seen on him before—or maybe I had; maybe he'd been looking at me like this for over a year and I'd just refused to see it. His gray eyes were intent and so

goddamn *honest* that it made my breath catch. He was looking at me like I was the only thing in the room that mattered.

Nothing about this has been pretend for me.

My heart was hammering. I could do this. Just one quick kiss. Get it over with and move on with the day.

I put my hand on his chest and rose onto my toes, tilting my chin up. His hand reached up, cupping my cheek, his thumb once again brushing tenderly against my skin as he leaned forward and pressed his lips to mine and—

Oh.

Oh.

The plan had been a quick, simple kiss to shut up my brother. But the second my lips touched his, that plan disintegrated. There was nothing quick or simple about the way his lips brushed against mine, like he was seducing me with his mouth before his tongue darted out, softly gliding against my lips until they parted on a gasp and he deepened the kiss.

I'd never been kissed like this. Like my kiss gave him life. For a man as self-restrained as Harry usually was, his kiss was filled with sensuality and passion that took me by surprise and had my knees going weak.

I forgot about Eric, the mistletoe, and that this was supposed to be a performance for an audience. I forgot about all the excuses I'd given myself at three a.m. for why this couldn't be real.

Because this kiss didn't feel like pretend. It didn't feel like something I could rationalize or explain away. It felt like the first honest thing I'd done in five years.

My fingers curled into the fabric of his shirt and I felt him inhale—a slow, shaky breath through his nose—and somehow knowing he was affected too, that his steadiness had a crack in it that I'd put there, made my heart race even faster.

When we finally pulled apart, it was only by inches. His forehead rested against mine, his hand was still on my jaw, and I was breathing hard for someone who'd just had a five-second kiss.

Or a ten-second kiss.

Or however long it had been because I genuinely had no idea. Time had stopped being relevant the moment his mouth touched mine.

"...Okay, well," Eric said from somewhere behind me. His voice sounded far away and slightly strangled, like he'd expected a cute peck and

gotten something he wasn't prepared for. "That was, uh...yeah. You guys don't need mistletoe for that. Also that was a much more PG-13 kiss than the PG one you should've given in front of *Mom and Dad*."

Oh my God. I totally forgot about my parents watching.

I let out a breath that was supposed to be a laugh but came out a little too shaky as I stepped back, putting space between Harry and me because if I stayed close, I was afraid I might kiss him again.

"Sorry. Got a little carried away," I said, and my voice sounded almost normal. Almost.

Harry didn't say anything. He just watched me with those gray eyes that always saw too much, and this time I couldn't come up with a single lie to tell myself about what I saw looking back at me.

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EIGHTEEN

Gordy

I couldn't stop thinking about the kiss.

The details were seared in my mind now—her fingers curling into my shirt, the gasp when I'd deepened it, all of it replaying on a loop I couldn't shut off. But it was the look on her face afterward that kept pulling me back. Like she wanted me as much as I'd always wanted her but was terrified at the same time.

So I wasn't surprised that she'd spent the rest of yesterday pretending it never happened. This morning had been much of the same.

I'd be lying if I said it didn't cost me to watch her seal that wall back up and smile like it was easy. Because that kiss had meant everything to me, and she was acting like it was nothing. The distance between those two truths was becoming harder to swallow with every hour that passed.

But I was a patient man, and I knew the wait would be worth it.

She was worth it.

Today's Christmas event was helping at a charity toy drive at the local community center. Sally had organized the whole thing from collecting donations from local businesses to coordinating volunteers and setting up stations for wrapping and sorting. According to Eric, she'd been running this event for over a decade, and it was one of the biggest in the area.

The center was a wide-open space with fluorescent lighting and fold-out tables arranged in rows. Boxes of donated toys lined the walls, and a handful of volunteers were already sorting when we arrived. Someone had strung Christmas lights along the ceiling beams, and there was a table near the entrance with a large coffee carafe and a tray of cookies. Holiday music played low from a small speaker on the check-in table, loud enough to fill

the gaps in conversation, but low enough that people could still talk to each other without having to yell.

The whole thing was the polar opposite of the charity events my mother organized back in Connecticut. Those had valet parking, catered hors d'oeuvres, and name tags printed on cardstock with the Gordon Foundation logo embossed in gold. My mother's events raised six figures each and generated tax write-offs. Sally's event had homemade cookies and actually felt like it was about helping people. Although, after the last few days, my opinion of Sally Lowe was very similar to my opinion of my mother. I didn't like the way she treated Sam, and if things didn't turn around soon, I wasn't sure I'd be able to hold my tongue.

Sally moved through the room like a general surveying her troops, but unlike the last few days, she had a sincere smile on her face as she spoke to each of the volunteers. She was very different from how she'd been at the house, and I'd almost go so far as to say she was magnetic and the kind of organizer who made everything look effortless because she'd already done the hard work behind the scenes. It struck me that Sam had inherited that from her—the ability to walk into a room and make every person in it feel seen. But Sam didn't turn cold behind closed doors. She beat herself up—more than any of us had even known—but she wasn't a cold person by nature.

Sam's dad drifted toward the heavy lifting tasks, like moving boxes from the back storage room to the sorting area, and Jordan helped him. Eric stationed himself at the wrapping table and immediately started a competition with another volunteer over who could wrap faster.

Sam stood near the entrance for a moment, taking it all in with an expression I couldn't quite read. Then she squared her shoulders and headed toward the sorting station.

I followed her. I'd follow her anywhere at this point. That wasn't even a question anymore.

"You can sort by age range," one of the volunteers explained, a woman in her fifties with a Mrs. Claus sweater and reading glasses on a chain. "Infants, toddlers, five to eight, nine to twelve, teens. Tags go on each one with the age group."

Sam nodded and got to work. I settled in beside her and started pulling toys from the nearest box.

She was good at this too, which really shouldn't have surprised me since she was good at everything she tried. She made small talk with the volunteers while she sorted through the toys, complimenting Mrs. Claus Sweater on her earrings and then asking the other girl our age where she went to school and what she was studying. She even made a joke about a toy dinosaur that had everyone at the table laughing.

This was Sam in her element, and this was the closest she'd been to the woman I knew in Montana since her brother showed up on our doorstep. The woman who remembered everyone's coffee order, showed up at your door with food when you were sick, and ran her sorority's philanthropy events with the same effortless warmth that made every person in the room feel like the most important one there.

She laughed again at something the woman next to her said, and her laugh had an ease to it that had been absent since we'd landed in Seattle.

God, I loved her laugh.

A little girl who was maybe four or five wandered over to our table. She'd clearly gotten separated from whoever brought her and was staring at the pile of stuffed animals on the table with wide eyes.

"Hey there," Sam said, crouching down to the girl's level. "You looking for something?"

The girl pointed at a stuffed elephant near the top of the pile.

"That one? Good choice." Sam picked it up and held it out. "Elephants are the best. Did you know they're one of the only animals that can recognize themselves in a mirror?"

The little girl took the elephant and hugged it against her chest. "What's his name?"

"Well, that's up to you. He's yours now."

"Peanut," the girl said immediately, a bright smile lighting up her face.

Sam's expression softened into something so unguarded that it made my chest tight. "Peanut is a perfect name."

The girl's mother appeared a moment later, apologizing and scooping her daughter up. Sam waved it off with a smile, but she stood there a moment, watching the mother and daughter smile at each other as the mother listened intently to her daughter telling her about the new elephant. Sam's smile wavered as she watched before she looked down and smoothed her expression back to the happy, carefree one she'd been wearing most of the day.

She'd be an incredible mother someday. It wasn't the first time I'd had the thought. It had been impossible to keep it away when I'd seen her love on Drew's daughter. Sam carried an innate kindness and a huge heart filled with more love than she even gave herself credit for, and I had no doubt she'd love on her children with the fierceness of a lioness with her cubs. She'd be so warm and loving in a way I'd never experienced as a kid. The thought of her having kids with me was intoxicating, but it had no business being in my head when the woman in question was still pretending we hadn't kissed yesterday.

We'd been at it for about an hour when Sally came over to the sorting station with another woman who appeared to be in her mid-forties with dark hair. They were mid-conversation about something on Sally's clipboard when the woman's gaze landed on Sam and her eyes widened.

"Oh, Sally, is this your Samantha? The resemblance is striking."

Sally's hand found Sam's shoulder without missing a beat, like she'd been planning to introduce them all along. "It is. She's home from Montana for the holidays. Sam, this is Melissa Cross. She runs the family services division for the county."

The warmth in Sally's voice was so convincing that if I hadn't spent the last several days watching her freeze Sam out, I'd have believed it without question. It immediately put me on alert since this was the most attention she'd given Sam all day.

Sam's whole body softened, and she looked at her mom with the faintest hint of awe, like she was surprised by the pride in her mom's voice, but also eager for it. She looked at her mother like a kid who'd just been told maybe Christmas wasn't canceled after all, and the hope on her face was so unguarded that I had to grip the edge of the table to keep myself steady.

Because I knew this wasn't real. If there was one thing I'd recognized most about Sally Lowe, it was that she was a lot like my mom, and my mom would act any way she needed in public to save face.

"It's so nice to meet you," Sam said to Melissa, extending her hand.

"And you," Melissa said. "Your mother is a godsend to this community. We'd be lost without her. I can only imagine what a wonderful mother she is."

Sally smiled like the sweet and gracious woman she was pretending to be—every inch the devoted mother and community leader. "Oh, Melissa,

you are too kind.” Sally’s gaze moved to the other side of the room. “Oh, would you go over and help Mary Beth?”

Melissa glanced back to where Sally had looked and then touched Sally’s arm. “Of course. So nice meeting you, Samantha.”

And then she was gone.

And she took all of Sally’s warmth with her.

Sally’s hand slid off Sam’s shoulder, and she didn’t look at Sam as she scanned her clipboard. “I’ve got this station covered. Why don’t you go see if your dad needs any help with the boxes?” Her tone was back to being formal and stiff, and my jaw clenched as the now familiar tension returned to Sam’s shoulders.

“I can stay here,” Sam said. “I’m almost done with this batch and then I can help Melissa’s team with—”

“I’d rather you didn’t.”

Her tone wasn’t nearly as harsh as some of the other things she’d said and done to Sam, but it was dismissive, similar to how you might treat someone you barely knew, not your daughter.

Sam opened her mouth like she wanted to say something else, but then closed it. Hurt flashed across her eyes before she blinked it away.

“Sure,” she said. “I’ll go find Dad.”

She turned and walked toward the back of the room, her head held high and her shoulders back. You’d never know her mom had just broken her heart. And only Sam knew how many times this woman had done that to her since Bryce’s death.

I understood that Sally was hurting after the loss of her son, but I still couldn’t fathom how she could treat Sam with such disdain when it was obvious that Sam was hurting too. Not only that, but Sam was punishing herself more than anyone else ever could. And this woman continued to add to her pain and suffering. And Sam took it like she deserved it.

Anger surged through me. How dare she jerk Sam around like that and give her a false sense of hope?

Sally was already talking to another volunteer, her expression pleasant and engaged, completely untroubled. And I wanted to walk over there and tell her that her daughter—the one she’d just dismissed like she was an inconvenience—had put herself through hell to show up for this family even though they’d given her every reason not to. That the woman Sally

couldn't even look at was the most selfless, loyal, extraordinary person I'd ever known, and she deserved a mother who saw that.

She deserved a mother who would forgive her and recognize her pain.

But this wasn't my family. Sam hadn't asked me to intervene, and knowing her as well as I did, I knew she wouldn't want me to. So I did what I'd been trained to do since I was old enough to sit at a dinner table; I kept my face still and swallowed the words I wanted to say.

I set the toy I'd been holding into the nine-to-twelve bin and went to find Sam.

It didn't take long. She was in the back hallway, leaning against the wall between the storage room and the emergency exit. Her arms were crossed over her chest and she was staring at the floor, but when she heard my footsteps she looked up. The mask she'd been wearing all day was gone, replaced now with exhaustion and not just the kind from working hard, but the kind that came from spending so much energy holding yourself together that you didn't have anything left to give.

"I'm fine," she said, because of course she did. Even now with no one watching, her first instinct was to protect everyone else from having to worry about her.

I didn't answer. I just walked up to her and stopped close enough that she'd have to actively move away to avoid me. She didn't move.

"Harry, I'm—"

"I know."

Her eyes bounced between mine like she was trying to read my expression and see if I judged her as harshly as her mom did. She should know me better than that by now. Finally, her expression cracked and her eyes got glossy.

"She used to mean it," Sam said quietly. "When she'd introduce me to people. She used to actually be proud."

The hurt and resignation in her voice nearly undid me.

I reached for her, giving her enough time to pull away if she didn't want my touch, but she didn't move away. Instead, she leaned a little closer, and I took that as permission to slide my arms around her and pull her against my chest, one hand cradling the back of her head, the other pressing flat against her spine.

Her arms wrapped around my waist, and she dropped her forehead against my chest as she let out a breath that sounded like she'd been holding

it for the past few days, or maybe even longer.

I held her tighter and pressed my cheek against the top of her head, breathing her in. She didn't cry, but she didn't pretend, either, and that felt like more than she'd given anyone in a long time.

"I'm so tired, Harry," she whispered against my chest.

I pressed my lips to the top of her head and kept them there. My arms tightened around her because I didn't have the words for what I wanted to say. Or maybe I had too many of them—that she was the strongest person I'd ever met, that her mother was wrong, that I'd hold her in this hallway for as long as she needed. Tonight, tomorrow, for the rest of my life if she'd let me.

But Sam didn't need my words right now. She needed someone to just be here without asking her to explain or perform or pretend she was okay when she wasn't. She needed someone to hold her together while she was too tired to do it herself.

So that's what I would do. I would keep holding her, for as long as she needed.

NINETEEN

Gordy

The Sullivans' house was the kind of place my parents would've approved of. It was a sprawling mansion set back from the road with a circular driveway that had been lined with cars. A live band played jazz versions of Christmas classics from the corner of the main room, and a temporary dance floor had been laid out in front of them. Wait staff circulated with champagne flutes and hors d'oeuvres on silver trays. One of the Christmas trees that nearly touched the vaulted ceiling was on display in the main living room—because a house this size had more than one.

It reminded me so much of my parents' events you could've told me I was in Connecticut or New York and I would've wholeheartedly believed it.

Sam had her hand hooked into the crook of my elbow, and every few seconds I'd catch myself glancing at her because I still hadn't recovered from seeing her come down the stairs an hour ago. She'd appeared like a goddess at the top of the stairs in a fitted black dress that hugged her perfect curves. The bodice pushed up her breasts, giving me the most tantalizing view of her cleavage, but not in a way that was tawdry. Her long, blonde hair was styled in an updo, leaving a few tendrils loose. She was a vision and my mouth had gone dry as I'd stared at her in awe. I'd seen Sam dressed up for her sorority events, but for some reason it was this version of her, looking so strong and gorgeous even knowing the hell she'd been through, that had me more mesmerized than ever.

Even now, my mouth still felt a little dry, and I'd been stealing glances at her whenever I could.

"The Sullivans have been throwing this party since before I was born," she murmured, leaning closer so I could hear her over the music. "Caroline

Sullivan was my mom's college roommate. It's basically the social event of the season for this neighborhood."

I covered her hand with mine and her fingers pressed into my arm as she met my gaze and added, "I'm glad you're here."

My lips lifted in a smile. "There's nowhere else I'd rather be."

Her cheeks flushed a slight pink, but she didn't brush off my statement like she usually did which was a victory in my book.

Sam's brothers had already disappeared into the crowd, but her parents were talking to a man and woman dressed to the nines. Sally gestured toward us and we approached them, Sam's grip tightening on my arm.

"Caroline, you remember my daughter, Samantha. She's home from Montana this year."

Sally's performance voice dripped with maternal warmth that I knew was fake. I glanced at Sam to see if she was okay, but her face wasn't filled with hope like it had been when her mom pulled this same act at the toy drive yesterday. "And this is her boyfriend, Harrison Gordon."

Fuck, I could get used to hearing people call me her boyfriend in public.

"Samantha! Oh my goodness, look at you. All grown-up and positively gorgeous." Caroline took Sam's hands. "We've missed you at our parties these past few years."

Sam's smile was flawless. "Thank you, Mrs. Sullivan. Your home looks incredible."

Caroline turned her attention to me. "And a boyfriend as well! Sally's been holding out on me. I had no idea you were in a relationship. What a handsome couple."

I shook her hand. "Thank you for having us."

"Now, did I hear Sally say your last name was Gordon?" Her eyebrows lifted and I braced. "Any chance you're related to the Gordon Holdings Gordons?"

"In fact, I am. My grandfather started that company."

"Well." Caroline glanced at Sally with a look that was unmistakable and one I'd seen too many times. It was the look of someone who thought they'd caught a great white shark. "Aren't you full of surprises, Sal."

Sally's posture straightened and her eyes darted between me and Caroline. She hadn't made that connection before now, I was guessing. But now that it had been made, there was a tiny shine to her eyes—the kind of

look people got when they realized they were suddenly connected with the “right” people for social capital.

And that only pissed me off more where Sally was concerned. She didn’t care that Sam had a partner who would take a bullet for her. In fact, she’d hardly paid any attention to me at all since I arrived, but now that she’d realized my last name carried weight, she was interested in who I was.

Sam’s grip tightened on my arm. She’d noticed it too.

I squeezed her hand. I’d dealt with this kind of shit my whole life. Montana was the only place where it hadn’t followed me.

The band picked up the tempo on a swing rendition of “Jingle Bell Rock” and Eric appeared out of nowhere, grabbing Sam’s free hand.

“Come on, Sammy. Time to dance.”

She barely had time to let go of my arm before he pulled her onto the dance floor, but her face was lit up with a smile that had my breath catching.

My own lips pulled up into a grin as I watched her move with grace and fluidity. It shouldn’t have come as a surprise that Sam could dance. She’d shared that she’d been a competitive figure skater, which no doubt meant years of dance training. But knowing and witnessing it were two very different things.

She matched Eric step for step, letting him spin her and then improvising a move that made the people around them stop and watch. Eric was laughing and hamming it up, doing some exaggerated swing moves that made Sam throw her head back with a loud laugh that was as real as it came, and one I’d always loved hearing. For a few minutes, she looked free, unguarded, and most of all happy.

She danced the next song too, this time pulling a reluctant Jordan onto the floor. He was stiff and clearly uncomfortable, but Sam coached him through it, and by the end of the song, even he was smiling.

I stood near the edge of the room and watched her like I always did. I could’ve stood there all night, but it was my turn to dance with the woman who’d enchanted me from the moment we met.

Sam drifted back to me, slightly breathless, her cheeks flushed from dancing. A waiter walked by with a tray of champagne and she grabbed us each a glass.

“You’ve been holding out on me,” I said.

“What, the dancing?” She waved it off. “Twelve years of ballet and contemporary will do that to a girl. It was required for skating.” A flicker of pain flashed across her face before she blinked it away. “I didn’t know you were paying such close attention.”

“I’m always paying attention when it comes to you. You should know that by now.”

She held my gaze a beat too long, then took a sip of her champagne.

“Dance with me,” I said, setting my glass down on the table next to me and holding out my hand to her.

She set her champagne down next to mine without a second of hesitation and slid her hand into mine.

I led her onto the floor and pulled her close, my palm settling on the small of her back. Her hand came to my shoulder, our other hands linked between us, and she moved closer so our bodies were touching. Sam fit against me like she’d always belonged there, and the longing that I held so close to my chest felt like it was starting to overpower my resolve to be patient.

She tilted her face up, her eyes gazing into mine like she was searching for something. If she told me what it was, I’d give it to her.

Her gaze grew serious and her brows furrowed slightly. “I’m not as strong as I look, Harry.” Her voice was a cracked whisper like she was finally revealing the thing that had held her back for so long.

I stared down into her blue eyes so she’d know I was telling the truth when I spoke. “Yes, you are.”

She shook her head, jaw tight. “No. I’m not. I’ve been faking it for so long that everyone just believes it, and I—” Her voice splintered. She pressed her lips together, steadied herself. “No one has ever meant anything to me. None of the guys I’ve dated or hooked up with. Not a single one. I picked them because I knew I’d never let them get close enough to matter.”

I already knew that, but she’d never admitted it—not to me and maybe not even fully to herself.

“But you...” She nibbled her lip, her gaze unguarded but also a little scared. “You’ve always been different. You’ve always meant something to me. You always seemed to see right to the heart of me even if I didn’t want you to. I could never fully hide from you like I could from everyone else. You’ve become my best friend, Harry, and that scares me. I see the way you look at me. Hell, I even crave it a little bit because you *know* me and you

still look at me like you are right now. Like I'm the air you need to breathe and that's a heady feeling, but it's also terrifying because I already love you and if we cross the friends line, you could break what's left of my heart, and as loathe as I am to admit it, my heart is pretty fragile these days."

"That's not going to happen."

She sucked in a breath, her gaze searching mine, then shook her head. "You don't know that."

"Yes, I do."

"How? How can you be so sure?"

"Because I'm already yours. Do with me what you want, but I don't belong to anyone else and haven't since the moment we met."

The words came out the same way they'd lived inside me for the past year and a half—steady, certain, and unhurried. It felt like relief to finally speak the truth out loud.

Her lips parted in a silent gasp as she stared at me with hope and longing, and a little more disbelief than I would've liked. How could she still doubt after everything I'd said and done? I hadn't been with another woman since we met at that music festival right before junior year.

"What if I break your heart then?" she whispered.

"Then I'll hand you the pieces and let you decide what to do with them." I paused. "But you won't."

"How can you possibly know that?"

"Because I've watched you for a year and a half. Like you said, I know you, Sam. You have the biggest heart of anyone I've ever met and when you give people your love, you don't do it in half measures. When you're in, you're all in. Even if you know you can get hurt. You let yourself love your friends, me included, so why won't you let yourself love me as much as I love you?"

Tears shimmered in her eyes. "You love me?"

I tilted my head slightly. "Sam, have I not been transparent this whole time? It's always been you. It'll always *be* you. I've just been waiting for you to catch up."

She leaned in closer to me like she needed more contact.

"I don't know how to do this," she said. "I don't deserve to feel this way."

I released the hand holding hers and brushed a strand of hair from her face before cupping her cheek. "Bryce wouldn't want you to punish

yourself like this. I never met him, but anyone who loves you as much as he no doubt did wouldn't want you to suffer for the rest of your life. Even Mira doesn't want that for you."

She nibbled her lip again like she wanted to believe me but was terrified at the same time. I dropped my forehead, my gaze locked on hers. "I love you, Sam. I won't break your heart and you won't break mine. Take the leap with me. Let's stop pretending."

She stared at me for a long time. I could see the fight behind her eyes, the same push and pull I'd watched play out across her face a dozen times before. But this time the balance was different. This time she wasn't retreating.

"Okay," she breathed.

"Okay?"

"Let's stop pretending."

Joy ripped through me so fast, my knees nearly buckled. Before I could stop myself or think about our location, my lips were on hers, kissing her with everything I'd held back for so long.

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TWENTY

Sam

I'd spent five years choosing men I'd never have to feel anything for. So of course the one who finally undid me did it on a dance floor in front of a hundred people after telling me that he belonged to me.

How was a girl supposed to say no to a man who loved her, flaws and all? Whether I deserved happiness or not, I wanted it—with him.

After the kiss that had left me reeling, I'd grabbed Harry's hand and pulled out my phone to call an Uber. Screw this party. I didn't want to be surrounded by people who didn't know me or really care about me for that matter. After that moment on the dance floor, I needed to be alone with the only person who mattered.

The house was mostly dark when we got there since everyone else was still at the party. But this was just what I'd been hoping for—some time where we could be alone, especially now that we weren't pretending anymore. The only light came from the Christmas tree in the living room, casting a glow that managed to make this moment feel even more charged. His gray eyes were almost black in the low light, and the way he was looking at me—God, the way this man looked at me—was like he'd been stranded in the desert and I was his oasis.

"Hi," I whispered, because I suddenly didn't know what else to say. I'd had plenty of sex and barely felt a hint of nerves about it despite the Catholic guilt I'd been raised with. But I'd never had a real reason to be nervous. Sex was easy when it didn't mean anything. When the person on the other side of the bed was interchangeable with the last one and would be replaced by the next.

But this was Harry. There was no going back from this with him. I had a feeling that despite my fears, there would be no others after this.

And for the first time since my high school boyfriend and I fumbled through losing our virginity in the back of his car, I was about to sleep with someone I actually had feelings for. And my feelings for Harry were so much stronger than anything I'd ever felt before.

"Hi." His voice was low and rough, and it sent goose bumps skittering across my skin. He closed the distance between us and kissed me, his lips soft but demanding. Like he wanted to reassure me and own me at the same time.

When he pulled back, neither of us said a word as I reached for his hand and led him upstairs.

He'd been sleeping beside me every night since we arrived, and while every night had felt slightly charged, tonight the bed looked like a dare.

I turned to face him and his hand came up, cupping my jaw again as his thumb brushed across my cheekbone. I leaned into the touch before I could stop myself. I loved when he touched me like this. Like I was precious to him.

"We don't have to—"

"If you finish that sentence, I'm going to lose it," I said. "I want this. I want *you*." I meant every word and there was no way I wanted him to be a gentleman right now. He'd told me he was mine on that dance floor, and now I needed him to put his money where his mouth was. I needed to touch him, to feel him the way I'd craved for far longer than I cared to admit.

His eyes searched mine, and whatever he found must have been enough because his mouth was on me again—slower this time. He kissed me like we had all the time in the world, like there was nowhere else he needed to be, and my hands fisted in the front of his dress shirt as I pulled him closer.

His hands found the zipper at the back of my dress and he dragged it down leisurely, the barest hint of his skin against mine. The dress loosened and then his hand stroked up my spine with a tantalizing touch before he peeled the straps off my shoulders, his lips following the path of the thin strip of fabric. My head fell back as his mouth pressed against my collarbone, the curve of my shoulder, the hollow of my throat. Each kiss was tender and sweet. Thorough. Like he was memorizing me.

The dress pooled at my feet, and I stood in front of him in just my black strapless bra and matching underwear. His hot, hungry gaze swept down my

body and his jaw tightened. He looked at me like he couldn't believe I was real, and the reverence in his expression made my heart feel too big for my chest.

His gaze met mine, and the look in his eyes was pure adoration. "You are so fucking beautiful. Inside and out." His voice was barely above a whisper, and it wrecked me more than it probably should've, but Harry *knew* me. Better than anyone else ever had.

I reached for his shirt buttons but my fingers were trembling. When was the last time my hands had trembled touching a guy? I huffed out a disbelieving laugh at myself. "I don't know why I'm nervous. I've done this before. A lot."

Fuck, that made me sound like a slut. But I'd always been open about sex and very sex positive. Maybe it was growing up in a repressed Catholic household but I didn't think sex was anything to be ashamed of. It was a physical embodiment of passion and as natural as breathing.

He caught my hands in his and pressed his lips to my knuckles. "Not with me."

And there it was. The difference between every man I'd ever been with and the one standing in front of me. None of them had been Harry. None of them had ever looked at me the way he was looking at me right now—like I wasn't just a body he wanted but a person he'd chosen.

A person he loved. A person who was *deserving* of his love.

I swallowed the lump in my throat, and he let go of my hands so I could finish undoing his buttons. His shirt fell open, revealing the broad, muscled chest I'd tried very hard not to stare at all those times he'd walked around the hockey house shirtless. He wasn't as overt about it as Drew and Liam had been before they'd both fallen in love, but I'd caught him in only a towel more than once, and it had wreaked havoc on my lady bits.

Harry was unassuming in his hotness. He sometimes carried himself with a cool aloofness, but not in a way that made him cold. It was like he was always watching, observing the goings-on around him, and preferred not to draw extra attention to himself. But it was hard to miss his broad shoulders. And with his shirt now slipping down his arms and falling to the floor, it was impossible to miss his fit biceps and toned forearms. Or those abs.

Good Lord, the man was sin packaged like a saint.

I couldn't stop myself from sliding my fingers over his pecs and the hard ridges of his stomach, feeling a giddy little rush when the muscles contracted under my touch.

He slid a hand around my back, unhooking my bra and letting it fall to the floor. Then his hands slid to my waist, pulling me against him, until my bare skin was flush against his. We both sucked in a sharp breath at the contact and then his mouth found mine again while his hands explored my body like he was making a map of it. He cupped my full breast, his thumb brushing over the nipple and then pinching it just enough for a gasp to escape my mouth. My head fell back as heat pooled between my thighs, and he took advantage of the movement to press his lips to the column of my throat.

He walked us over to the bed, never removing his lips from my body until he lowered me onto the bed with a gentleness that made my eyes sting. No one had ever touched me like this. Had ever treated me like I was a gift. Truthfully, I wasn't sure I'd wanted them to. I never thought I deserved that. Sex was fine and pleasure was normal, but it had never felt like I was being worshipped.

But that's how it felt with Harry.

His mouth moved down my body—my neck, my collarbone, the swell of my breasts. He spent time there, his lips and tongue working my nipples until I was arching into him, my fingers dragging through his dark hair.

"Oh, God." I sucked in a breath as he bit down just hard enough on my nipple for the perfect mix of pleasure and pain. Fuck, it felt like I was going to combust and we'd barely started. Then he moved lower, his lips trailing down my stomach as his hands slid my underwear down my legs.

He settled between my thighs and looked up at me, his eyes practically black in the low lighting, but the hunger was unmistakable on his face. The sight of him there looking at me like I was a feast laid out for him had my breaths coming out in pants.

"I've thought about this more than you know," he said against my inner thigh, his breath hot on my skin. "What you would taste like. How you would smell." His gaze met mine. "How you'd scream my name as I made you come on my tongue."

Fuck me.

Then his mouth was on me and I stopped thinking altogether.

I'd always enjoyed oral sex, especially if a partner was enthusiastic about it, but it had never—*never*—felt like this.

Harry's tongue was magical, but more than the physicality of the act was the way it truly felt like he was worshipping my body and memorizing it at the same time.

He was savoring me like I was something he'd waited his whole life for, and that knowledge made every nerve ending in my body light up in a way I didn't know was possible.

My fingers tightened in his hair as he found a rhythm that made me see stars, one hand flat on my stomach holding me steady while the other gripped my thigh before sliding down to slip inside me. The pleasure built differently than it ever had, starting behind my ribs instead of just between my legs. Because it wasn't separate from what I felt for him. The pleasure and the emotions were fused together, amplifying each other until I couldn't tell where one ended and the other began.

Holy shit, this was what I'd been missing. What all those empty hookups hadn't had. Who knew that actually giving a damn about the person between your legs could make you feel like you were coming apart at the seams in the best way?

He thrust a second finger inside, hitting a spot that when combined with the way his mouth sucked on my clit had stars bursting across my vision. I cried out his name—the one that was only mine. "Harry, yes!" He groaned against me like hearing it was its own kind of pleasure.

When the aftershocks had subsided, he kissed his way back up my body while I lay there trying to remember how to breathe. His lips were on my neck, my jaw, then the corner of my mouth. I could taste myself on him when he kissed me, and that only made me want him more.

I wanted to feel everything with him.

I pushed at his shoulder until he rolled onto his back and I climbed over him, settling on his thighs. His hands went to my hips immediately, his grip firm, his chest rising and falling faster now. I unbuckled his belt and worked his pants open, and when I freed him, my breath caught. I'd seen him shirtless and only in a towel before, but I'd never seen this.

Harrison fucking Gordon was hung.

His cock was a fucking sight to behold—hard and thick and long enough that I knew he'd feel amazing but not so long it would be painful.

When I wrapped my hand around him, his eyes fluttered closed and a low groan rumbled through his chest.

I kissed down his stomach, taking my time the way he had with me, and when I took him into my mouth, his hand found the back of my head and his fingers threaded into my hair.

“Sam.” His voice was completely wrecked and ragged. “God, your mouth feels good.”

I took him deeper, my tongue sliding along the underside of his cock as my cheeks hollowed while I sucked. His hips flexed involuntarily as a rough curse fell from his lips—one of the rare ones that told me exactly how far gone he was. I’d always enjoyed giving head, but sucking on Harry was something else. He was so responsive as I licked and sucked and used my hand where my mouth couldn’t go. I took him as far as I could until he hit the back of my throat, and that’s when his hands tightened in my hair and he pulled me up gently.

“Stop,” he breathed. “I need to stop you.”

I looked up at him, lips swollen, and the expression on his face made my heart stutter. He looked almost pained.

“Why?” I knew he’d liked that, so why was he stopping me?

He sat up, pulling me into his lap so I was straddling him. His forehead pressed against mine and his hand cupped my neck, holding me close. “Because I’ve waited for you for over a year, and I’m not coming anywhere but inside you.”

The air seemed to thin at his confession, and all the things he’d said to me before and during this trip clicked into place in a way they hadn’t before.

He’d *waited* for me.

Harry hadn’t been with anyone since we met. He’d spent a year and a half watching me waste my time with man after man, and he’d never wavered.

Never looked at someone else.

Never gave up on what he wanted most.

He’d chosen me long before I’d ever chosen him.

My hand pressed against his chest, right over his heart, and I felt it pounding against my palm. “You really haven’t been with anyone since we met?”

“No.” He didn’t even hesitate.

I kissed him because I didn't have words big enough for what I was feeling. He kissed me back, his hands everywhere—my back, my thighs, my hair—but when he reached toward his pants on the floor, he stopped.

"I don't have a condom," he said, frustration clear in his voice. "I haven't exactly needed one, and there was no way I could've predicted this would happen on this trip."

I arched an eyebrow. "Really? Our sexual tension trapped together for two weeks and you didn't think there was even the slimmest chance we'd crack?"

I almost laughed at the absurdity of it—two people who wanted each other this badly, and neither of us were prepared.

"Well, do *you* have one?" he challenged. See, this was the problem with hooking up with a guy who knew you so well because he'd heard me give the speech to several of my sorority sisters since I moved into the hockey house—the importance of never relying on a guy to supply the rubber.

And now here I was eating my own words.

Lovely.

He pressed his forehead against mine again, his breathing ragged. I could feel how hard he was against me, and the thought of stopping made me want to scream.

"I'm on birth control," I said. "And I'm clear. I got tested after my last..." I didn't need to finish that sentence. "I'm good on that front."

"So am I." His thumb traced my jawline. "I was clear at my last physical."

I searched his eyes. "So are we agreeing to carry on, sans a rubber?"

His smile lit up his face. "God, you're romantic, you know that."

A giggle escaped as I slapped his chest. "Shut up. This is serious business."

"Oh, I know," he said, leaning in to kiss me. And that kiss was like striking a match. Instantly, we both groaned as the kiss deepened, and I rocked my wet core against his hard, throbbing cock.

"God, I want you inside me."

"You sure?"

"I've never been more sure of anything."

Maybe a year ago I would've called that reckless. But as the woman who'd spent five years punishing herself for wanting things and was now finally allowing herself to have the one person she'd wanted for so long, I

wasn't going to second-guess it. I trusted Harry. But more than that, I loved him.

I rocked against him once more, until his cock was shining with my juices, and then I gripped his heft and positioned him at my core, sliding down slowly until he was sheathed inside me.

"Oh my God," I breathed, because the sensation of him with nothing between us was overwhelming. I felt every inch of him, the heat of his skin against mine in the most intimate way possible, and my body clenched around him involuntarily. But it was the way he was looking at me while he was inside me that nearly broke me apart. Those gray eyes held mine with so much love, certainty, and awe that I had to fight the urge to look away.

But I was done running from what he made me feel. Instead, I just wanted to feel it all. The pleasure, the joy, the love. All of it.

My nails dug into his shoulders as I found a rhythm, rolling my hips as I moved up and down. God, his cock was so fucking good.

He shuddered and groaned underneath me, his hips thrusting up to meet mine as his eyes grew hooded. "Better than I ever imagined," he breathed.

I don't know how he did it, but he made me feel like a goddess.

I looked down between us to watch him disappear inside me as I took him all the way in, the sight so fucking hot.

"Look at me." His voice was a low command, and my gaze locked on to his. "Stay with me."

I clutched at his neck, holding him the way he'd held me earlier. "I'm not going anywhere. You've got me now, Harry."

His arms tightened around me. "You're fucking right about that."

And then he flipped us so I was on my back, and he thrust into me so powerfully, my body trembled as pleasure rippled through me.

"Fuck, Harry, yes."

I wrapped my legs around his waist, pulling him deeper, and he let out a low, desperate groan that vibrated through his chest into mine. His pace quickened, and I moved with him, meeting him thrust for thrust because our bodies were made for each other.

"You feel incredible. You've ruined me, you know that? I'm yours now," he murmured against my lips. I could feel his restraint fraying and his hips snapped harder, losing some of the controlled rhythm he'd had before. His grip on me tightened, and pleasure coiled low in my belly, building faster than I expected because my body couldn't separate what I felt for him

from what he was doing to me. The two were tangled together, each one feeding the other, and the result was a kind of pleasure I hadn't known existed.

"Fuck, Harry, I'm close—" My voice broke on his name.

"I've got you," he said, his voice ragged but sure. "Come for me, Sam. Give me everything."

Those words were my undoing. My orgasm tore through me like nothing I'd ever experienced, crashing over me in waves that pulled sounds from my throat I didn't recognize. With two more thrusts, he followed me, releasing a deep groan as he buried his face in my neck and his hips pressed flush against mine.

The weight of his body over me, both of us breathing hard, and his cock still semi-hard inside me felt like coming home in a way nothing ever had before. I hadn't had to be anyone but myself with him, not just in this moment together, but ever.

I wrapped my arms around him tighter, tears pricking at my eyes as a coil of fear knotted in my belly. I couldn't lose him, not now. Not after I'd felt this.

He repositioned us so he could hold me tighter, and for a long time we just lay there, holding each other, not saying a word.

But we didn't need to. We'd done enough talking tonight, and our bodies had said the rest.

TWENTY-ONE

Gordy

I woke up with Sam's head on my chest, her arm draped across my stomach, and her leg hooked over mine. She was still naked since neither of us had bothered to get dressed after we'd had sex. It was the first morning where I'd woken up before her, and I was still struggling to wrap my head around the fact that she was here, in my arms, naked and more gorgeous than ever with her long, blonde hair a disheveled mess from my hands. My fingers skimmed along her shoulder, touching her the way I'd craved for far too long.

This was real. The wait was over.

I didn't move and barely breathed as I let myself soak up the feel of her body snuggled up next to mine. If she needed sleep, I'd lie here until my arm went numb and never say a word about it. The fact she was still asleep at all was a miracle. I knew she hadn't been sleeping well this whole trip. Back at home, she was rarely the first one awake, and yet here, she'd been up before me every morning.

Eventually she stirred, her body stretching against mine before she tilted her face up and found me watching her. A sleepy smile spread across her face, and my chest filled with so much love I thought I might explode from it.

"Hi."

"Hi." My voice came out rough.

"How long have you been awake?"

"A while."

Her fingers started tracing invisible patterns on my chest. "Why didn't you wake me?"

“You looked too peaceful, and you needed sleep.”

She studied me with those blue eyes that had always felt like they saw right through me. Then she pressed a kiss to my chest and settled back against me like there was nowhere else she wanted to be.

Her fingers made their way down my stomach, and there was no way to hide the effect her touch had on my body. “So, last night was...” She didn’t finish her sentence but she didn’t need to. I knew what she meant.

It was life-changing.

“Yeah.” I pressed my lips to the top of her head. “It was.”

Her hand slid lower, moving under the sheet that was covering my waist, and gripped my hard cock. My eyes closed in bliss at the pleasure her touch invoked.

Fuck.

My breath grew ragged as she tightened her grip, moving up and down at the most tantalizing pace.

Her lips brushed a kiss against my chest, and then she was kissing her way down my body until she was sitting naked between my legs, her eyes sparking with mischief and hunger as she watched my face while she dipped down and licked the head of my cock.

“Sam,” I groaned.

God, nothing had ever felt as good as what she did to me.

“Has anyone ever told you that you’ve got a gorgeous cock?”

I shook my head and she hummed in her throat like that was disappointing—like it was a travesty that no one had ever complimented my dick before.

Her gaze stayed locked on my face as she swirled her tongue around the tip before taking my cock into her mouth, her tongue now sliding against the underside of my dick and the sensitive nerves there. My eyes were hooded, but I refused to look away. I’d dreamed of this moment far too many times to not watch every second and memorize it.

I slid my hands through her hair, pulling it together into a makeshift ponytail and then wrapping it around one hand. The way her eyes darkened and she moaned with my cock in her mouth had my hips inadvertently thrusting upward.

This woman was going to be my undoing.

And I’d never wanted anything more.

Her cheeks hollowed as she took me deeper, and the sound she made—this low, satisfied hum like she was enjoying this as much as I was—sent a jolt of pleasure straight through me that had my grip tightening in her hair.

“Fuck, Sam.” The curse slipped out rough and unfiltered, but I didn’t care. Not with her mouth on me like that. Not with those blue eyes watching me like my unraveling was her favorite thing she’d ever witnessed.

She pulled back just enough to run her tongue along the underside of my cock, her hand working the base with a grip that was firm and sure and absolutely devastating. Then she took me deep again—deeper than before—and my head fell back against the pillow as a groan tore out of my chest. I was being too loud, but I couldn’t find it in me to care.

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Goddamn, her mouth was heaven.

I’d imagined this more times than I could count, and yet every single fantasy fell short of the reality.

Sam was a goddess, and I would happily worship at her altar for the rest of my life.

She pulled off just long enough to speak. “I love watching you like this.” Her voice was a little breathless, her lips were swollen, and the look on her face was pure, unapologetic hunger. “You’re always so controlled. So steady.” She licked a slow stripe up my cock and I shuddered. “I want to wreck you, Harry.”

Mission accomplished.

She took me back into her mouth, and I stopped being able to think in complete sentences.

There were only her lips.

Her tongue.

Her hand.

And so much pleasure it was blinding.

Her rhythm was relentless, and too soon, pressure built at the base of my spine until my whole body was strung tight. My hips moved on their own, thrusting up to meet her, while my hand tightened on her hair, controlling her movements more and more. She moaned around me like that was exactly what she wanted.

“Sam...” My voice was barely recognizable. “I’m going to come.”

She didn’t pull back or slow down. Instead, her gaze was demanding and the message was clear. Her hand gripped my thigh, holding me in place, and she took me as deep as she could.

I came with her name on my lips and my hand fisted in her hair. She swallowed every drop of me like I was something she’d been starving for. My body shook through my release, and when I finally sagged against the bed, my breath was ragged and my body languid.

She kissed her way back up my stomach, my chest, the side of my neck, and then she was lying on top of me with her chin propped on her hands and a smile that could only be described as smug.

“It’s so rare to hear you curse and yet you did it multiple times in the span of like fifteen minutes,” she said. “That might be a record for you.”

I stared at the ceiling, wanting to respond, but it felt like my brain was still offline. “Give me a minute.”

She laughed, the sound so bright and happy, and then pressed a kiss to my jaw. “Take your time. I’ve got nowhere to be. Besides, this is a pretty great way to start the morning.”

I grunted in agreement because words were too hard right now.

We stayed like that for a while with her draped across my chest, my hand tracing lazy patterns on her bare back, neither of us in any rush to move.

Until we finally heard the sounds of her family moving around downstairs.

Sam pressed a kiss to my chest and looked up at me with a kind of lazy contentment I’d never seen on her face before. “I guess we should probably go downstairs and be social.”

“Probably.”

Neither of us moved.

She grinned and then buried her face in my chest before pressing a kiss there and then getting up. We showered and then got dressed while stealing

glances at each other, and her smile made my heart race every time she threw it my way.

“What’s on your family’s agenda for today?”

She looked up at the ceiling like she was trying to remember. “I think it’s the Argosy Christmas Ship Festival tonight. It’s one of the Twelve Days things Mom always does, and it’s pretty with the boats all decorated in lights sailing across the Sound. It won’t be until tonight, so we probably have most of the day to do whatever we want.”

“Want to grab some coffee at Mira’s place?”

She looked up at me with a hint of surprise followed by another one of those smiles I was a sucker for on her face.

“Sounds like a date to me.”

It was about damn time.

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TWENTY-TWO

Sam

The next night I was walking through the Bellevue Botanical Garden with thousands of LED lights turning the trees and pathways into something out of a fairy tale, with my hand interlaced with Harry's. As terrifying as it was to admit, I felt happy, truly happy, for the first time in longer than I could remember, which was so far from what I'd expected to feel when I'd first agreed to come home for Christmas.

Every few steps I'd catch myself sinking into the moment—the cold air on my face, his thumb brushing across my knuckles, the way the lights shifted from blue to gold as we passed under a canopy of illuminated branches—and then some part of my brain would tense up and brace. Like happiness was a setup for pain and punishment. Five years of conditioning didn't just evaporate because a man you thought was far too good for you told you he loved you.

But I was trying. That had to count for something.

Harry glanced down at me. "You okay?"

"Yeah. I'm just..." I searched for the right word. "Adjusting."

"To what?"

I leaned into him, resting my head on his shoulder. "To being happy."

He squeezed my hand but didn't push for more, and I loved him for that. He never tried to talk me out of what I was feeling or rush me through it. He just stayed. He'd been my rock for longer than he probably knew. But considering his confession the other night, maybe it had all been on purpose. Harry saw everything—it's probably what made him such a killer goalie—so maybe he knew I needed someone who was stronger and steadier than I was.

Maybe Harry and I had been inevitable from the very beginning and I'd been kidding myself thinking I could stay away.

Eric was a few yards ahead, photographing a massive LED dragonfly with wings that shifted between blue and green. Jordan and Dad had wandered toward a tunnel of arched lights, Jordan with his hands in his pockets and Dad pointing out something on the map. Jordan hadn't talked to me much on this trip, but I suspected that was because Dad had chewed him out for springing this on Mom. Every so often, I'd catch Jordan looking at me, and he'd always give me a small, almost apologetic smile, like this had turned out worse than I'd warned him it would. Mom was walking behind Dad and Jordan, but I wasn't sure she was actually paying attention to the light designs.

This part of our annual holiday tradition had always been one of Bryce's favorites.

Harry pulled me to a stop in front of a cluster of LED herons standing in a garden pond, their reflections shimmering on the water's surface. "These are incredible."

"They go all out every year. This was always one of my favorite Twelve Days events when I was a kid." A memory surfaced before I could stop it—Bryce hoisting me onto his shoulders so I could see the top of a light sculpture I'd been too short to appreciate from the ground. I blinked it away. "Eric used to try to touch them and Mom would lose her mind."

Harry's lips twitched. "That tracks."

We kept walking, and I could've stayed in this moment for hours. Maybe coming home hadn't been the worst idea.

Eric found me when Harry stepped away to grab us drinks from the small coffee stand. He appeared at my side with his hands shoved in his pockets and his nose red from the cold. I was still having a hard time adjusting to how grown-up he was now. Sometimes I'd look at him and still see the kid who used to follow me around the house stickhandling a tennis ball through the kitchen and asking if I'd watch.

"You seem different," he said, staring at a display of light-wrapped trees.

"Different how?"

"Less guarded." He glanced at me. "I don't know, you just seem like you're actually having a good time now." He glanced at me. "It's nice."

"Thanks, Eric."

He bumped my shoulder with his. "I haven't seen you like this in a long time. And I don't think it's just because of Gordy, even though the guy is clearly stupid in love with you."

My chest warmed at that, but I didn't let myself linger on it because I could feel the shift in his tone. The golden retriever energy had dimmed, which had always been a signal that he had something else on his mind. It was almost a relief to realize that even after so long, I still knew my little brother.

"Can I tell you something?" he asked. "About Mom?"

My stomach tightened. I wrapped my arms around myself against the cold, or maybe against what was coming. "Go ahead."

He was quiet for a few seconds, his jaw working like he was choosing his words carefully. Eric was the baby of the family, the peacekeeper, the one who smoothed things over with a joke or a well-timed change of subject. But right now he looked older than I'd ever seen him.

"After you left, she was really bad." He kept his eyes on the lights. "Like, not-getting-out-of-bed bad. And it lasted for months. Dad had to take over everything from cooking, bills, to making sure Jordan and I were keeping up with school. She didn't even get out of bed for my birthday. We were all grieving, but she was...broken. The mom I'd always known had disappeared, and none of us talked about it. Dad just kept us moving and Jordan covered where he could, but no one would talk to me, and you know I've always been someone who has to talk it out to process."

"I remember." My voice was hoarse, and I gripped my elbows, holding myself tighter. I hadn't known that about Mom. I'd tried calling a few times at first, but Dad had been so grim on the phone that I couldn't stand to hear his voice anymore. Mom had never answered, and I guess now I knew why.

"The version of Mom that put herself back together isn't the same person she was before." He turned to look at me. "I'm not making excuses for how she treats you. I don't agree with it, but I think losing Bryce broke something irreparable in her."

I felt numb, the happiness I'd carried slipping away through my feet.

Eric's hand on my arm pulled my gaze back to him. "But none of this is your fault, Sammy. Not what happened to Bryce and not how Mom handled it or who she turned into after. And no matter what, I'm glad you came back. I missed my sister."

I nibbled my lip, hating the burn in my nose and behind my eyes. I really did *not* want to cry right now.

Before I could say anything, Eric wrapped his arms around me, squeezing me tight. “I missed you, Sam. And no matter what happens with Mom and Dad, you’ve always got me in your corner, okay?”

I nodded because emotion was clogging my throat too much for me to talk.

Harry appeared at the edge of my vision holding two cups, but he stopped when he saw Eric and me. He read the scene instantly—he always did—and gave us space without being asked.

God, I loved that man.

When Eric wandered off to find Jordan and Dad, Harry returned to my side and handed me the warm cup. I wrapped my hands around it and looked at him. The lights reflected in his gray eyes, and the slight wind had messed up his dark hair, but even a little messy he was still so steady, so unflinchingly present, that I almost felt undeserving of his attention, let alone his love.

“I love you,” I said. It was only the second time I’d said it, and the words still felt fragile in my mouth, like they might shatter if I held them too tightly.

He set his cup down on the edge of a planter and cupped my face with both hands. “I love you too. For forever and a day.”

If nothing else, I would leave Seattle with this man and knowing at least my brothers still loved me.

TWENTY-THREE

Sam

I knew the ice rink was on my mom's itinerary. I'd seen it on the laminated schedule on the fridge, sandwiched between the neighborhood light walk we'd done last night and Christmas Eve dinner. But knowing about it didn't stop me from dreading it.

I hadn't been on the ice in five years. Not once. Not even a public skate at the rink in Dunridge where the hockey guys played. Skating had been my whole identity for over twelve years. It was the first thing I was ever great at, the thing that made me feel like I could do anything. Figure skating had been as important as breathing to me. I lived for the feel of the cool ice in my lungs as my blades cut across the ice. I loved perfecting a move so it looked fluid and easy on the ice even if it was anything but. I'd lived for the rush of landing my spins and pushing my body further and faster while feeling the music to my very core.

But it was also the reason Bryce was dead.

Those two truths lived inside me side by side, and I'd never figured out how to reconcile them. So I'd just amputated the whole thing and cut skating out of my life like a tumor while trying to pretend it had never been part of me at all. The thing that had once brought me so much joy had been the thing that had ruined my life.

And it was easier to forget that I'd ever loved it at all if I avoided the ice.

Going to hockey games to support the CFU guys hadn't bothered me like I'd worried it would—maybe because they were playing hockey and apart from them both happening on ice, they weren't even close to the same.

But tonight would be different. Tonight would be about skating. And I wasn't sure I could do it.

The rink my mom had chosen was an outdoor one in a park near the waterfront. It was surrounded by trees wrapped in white lights, and there was a small warming hut off to one side selling hot chocolate and renting skates. Holiday music played from speakers mounted on wooden posts, and the ice gleamed under the glow of string lights crisscrossing overhead. It was charming and festive and the sight of it made my stomach turn.

Eric was lacing up his hockey skates, while Mom, Dad, and Jordan were grabbing rentals since they only skated once a year during this event.

Why Mom even still had ice skating on the list of Twelve Days events was beyond me.

But here we were.

Harry stood beside me, close enough that I could feel his warmth through my coat. He hadn't said anything since we'd arrived, but he hadn't needed to. He could read me well enough by now to know what this was costing me just to be here.

"You don't have to skate," he said quietly.

"I know."

"We can watch. Or leave. Whatever you need."

I stared at the rink, emotions slamming into me faster than I could handle them. A handful of other families were already on the ice—kids wobbling on their ankles, parents holding their hands, a teenage couple attempting to skate together and laughing every time one of them stumbled. It was joyful and innocent. I didn't think I'd ever be able to admit it out loud, but I *missed* it.

I missed the feeling of the wind in my hair as I skated across the ice. The weightless half second at the top of a jump before gravity pulled me back down.

I missed knowing who I was with a certainty and confidence that I'd faked for the last five years when it had come as easy as breathing before the accident.

"I want to try," I said.

Harry looked at me, his gaze trying to see through me to gauge if I was sincere. Then he nodded. "Okay. Whatever you want."

We rented skates and sat on the bench to lace them up. My fingers moved through the motions automatically—cross, loop, pull tight, tuck. The

familiarity of it nearly made my eyes sting.

Eric had already launched himself onto the ice with his huge contagious grin. “Sam! Gordy! Get out here! I need someone to race.”

“You couldn’t keep up with me on your best day,” I called back, and the trash talk came so naturally it almost made me smile.

Almost.

Harry finished lacing his skates and stood, offering me his hand. “Ready?”

No.

But I needed to try.

I stared at the ice from the edge of the rink. It was maybe three steps away. Three steps and I’d be back on the surface that had defined my entire adolescence. The surface that had defined so much of my identity.

My knees wobbled slightly. I couldn’t do jumps or skate competitively, but there was nothing physically stopping me from stepping on the ice and skating right now.

And yet, my legs wouldn’t move.

The distance between the rubber mat and the ice might as well have been a canyon. Every memory I’d buried came rushing back—the sound of my blades carving clean edges, the roar of a competition crowd, the feeling of a perfect layback spin where the world blurred and the only thing that existed was the music, my body, and the ice beneath me. Then the screech of tires and the shatter of glass.

Harry stepped onto the ice first and turned to face me. He held out both hands, palms up, those gray eyes locked on mine.

“I’ve got you.”

Three words. The same three words he’d said to me in bed the first time we’d slept together, with the same steadiness, like an unshakable promise that whatever happened next, he’d be there.

It was enough to get my legs to move. I put my hands in his and stepped onto the ice.

The first thing I felt was the glide. That frictionless slide of blade across the surface, and my lungs filled with cold air as I took a deep, steadying breath. Harry held my hands and skated backward, guiding me forward, giving me time to find my footing. My ankles ached almost immediately. Five years off the ice combined with the damage the accident had done to my legs meant that even this, just gliding in a straight line, took more effort

than it should have. My left knee twinged a little and my balance was off. The muscles that used to hold me steady without conscious thought were working overtime to compensate for everything I'd lost.

But I was on the ice. And underneath the ache and the fear, a flicker of a dangerous emotion stirred.

"You're shaking," he said.

"I'm fine. Just give me a second."

I'd forgotten this. The pure joy of just being on the ice. The feel of the air sliding through my hair as I skated forward.

Harry kept hold of my hands and didn't rush me as I found my glide. It was impossible to be on the ice and not think about Bryce. About him always in the stands with some ridiculous sign, screaming over the music, and embarrassing me in the best possible way.

He would've loved this. He would've been out here with Eric, racing and talking shit and cheering too loud.

I didn't deserve to be here without him.

I didn't deserve to feel the joy that was surging through me at being on the ice again.

I almost pulled my hands from Harry's and went back to the bench where it was safe, where I didn't have to feel any of this. But Harry's grip was steady, and he held me as we moved forward.

We skated in slow laps around the rink, and around the third or fourth loop, I stopped thinking about my legs or even noticing the ache. The pain faded to background noise and was replaced with the thrill of it all.

Harry's gaze caught mine as he moved in front of me again, skating backward so he could watch me.

Knowing he wouldn't let me fall, I closed my eyes and soaked it all in.

The feel of the wind hitting my cheeks and through my hair, the glide of my blades beneath me, cutting through the ice, feeling muscles I hadn't noticed in years.

Under it all was still the guilt and the grief, but it wasn't the focus. I wasn't serving penance in this moment.

I was living.

I was alive and being held by someone who wasn't going to let me fall.

When I opened my eyes, I was crying, but they weren't sad tears.

I laughed at Harry's worried face, his brow furrowed, and before he could even ask, I said, "I'm fine. It's just a lot, but it's good, I think."

Harry slowed us to a stop near the boards and pulled me into a hug. I easily wrapped my arms around him, holding him tight. "Thank you."

"What did I say about thanking me?"

I smiled against his chest before looking up and meeting his gaze. "How about I thank you later?" The heat in my gaze no doubt told him exactly what I had in mind. And whether he wanted me to say it or not, I needed him to know how much gratitude I had where he was concerned. I was grateful Abby had fallen in love with Harry's best friend and we'd met at that music festival when those two were still figuring each other out. I was happy circumstances had made us roommates and friends long before I'd realized how far I'd fallen for him.

For the rest of my life, I would be thankful for him.

Eric skated past us in a blur. "You two are disgustingly cute. Just so you know."

"Go away, Eric."

"I'm just saying! The hand-holding, the gazing—it's like a Hallmark movie out here."

"I will end you."

He cackled and took off toward the far end of the rink, and despite everything, it made me smile.

We skated a few more laps after that, slow and easy, my hand in Harry's. I didn't try anything ambitious or push my body past what it could handle, but I soaked in the joy of being on the ice, especially after spending so many years telling myself I'd never do it again.

For a few minutes, everything was good.

And then my mom ruined it.

Harry and I had just stepped off the ice to grab some water when my mom stepped in front of us, her gaze hard and colder than she'd ever looked at me before.

"Mom? You okay?"

Her voice was low when she spoke, but menacing. "How dare you."

I stiffened. "What?"

She stepped closer. "Don't you 'what' me. You know exactly what you did. Did you enjoy that?" She gestured to the ice, and I glanced over before looking back at her, trying to figure out what she wanted me to say.

"I'm confused. You organized a family event here. Did you expect me not to participate?"

What the hell was going on here?

She pointed a finger at me. “I saw you smiling. Enjoying yourself. Laughing with your *boyfriend*.” She spit out the last word like it should’ve been a curse word.

And it hit me what she was really upset about at the same time that my heart broke a little more.

“Am I not allowed to be happy, Mom?”

“No!” She didn’t even hesitate, and that almost hurt worse than the words that followed. “It should’ve been you,” she whispered as a tear slid down her cheek.

My mouth parted as shock and hurt hit me at once.

She shook her head, her tears falling faster. “Not my Bry—” She couldn’t finish his name before she started sobbing, and suddenly my dad was there with both my brothers.

Dad wrapped his arm around her, pulling her close while Jordan and Eric stared between us in horror. I stared at my mom, my body slowly going numb, apart from the warmth of Harry’s hand on my back. I wasn’t sure when he’d put it there.

Then my gaze slid to Jordan. “Why am I even here?”

His gaze was now filled with guilt and sorrow. “She needed a push. Yes, she lost a son, but she still has a daughter.” He stepped closer to me. “You’re my sister, Sam. I failed you by letting you run and hide for so long, but we need you. We don’t blame you for Bryce’s death.”

“She does,” I said, gesturing to our mom. There was no way to deny it now, not after what she said. My voice was hollow and resigned. “You’re never going to forgive me, are you?”

She was still sobbing into my dad’s chest, but even he couldn’t look at me.

“Before I left, you wouldn’t talk to me. You wouldn’t even look at me. You think I don’t blame myself? You think I just moved away and have been living my life happy as can be? Do you have any idea the kind of guilt and grief I’ve carried? I loved him too.” I sucked in a shuddering breath as years of pain and grief spewed from my mouth. “I loved him, Mom. He was my first best friend. You have *no idea* what I’ve lived with. None. Because you never bothered to ask. You never cared. You think it should’ve been me? You know what? You get your wish. Because as far as I’m concerned, I’m dead to you.”

I stepped away from Harry because if I let him comfort me right now, I'd shatter into a million pieces. And I wasn't sure if even his love was enough to put me back together if I fell apart right this second.

The grief and guilt that were always inside me shifted, and rage rose up alongside them. The rage I'd never fully let myself feel because I'd carried that blame like my own personal cross.

"I was seventeen." My voice was barely above a whisper, but it was clear enough for my mom to finally meet my gaze again. "I was a kid. I made a mistake—a horrible mistake—and I have hated myself for it every second of every single day since. I've spent five years trying to make up for it by being everything to everyone. I moved because I couldn't stand to see you look at me the way you're looking at me right now." Tears were streaming down my face and I let them fall. "I lost him too, Mom. I lost Bryce and skating and my family all at once. And I've spent five years punishing myself, but it's never once been enough for you."

Mom's mouth opened but nothing came out.

"I wished it was me." My voice cracked so hard the words almost didn't make it out. "I spent years wishing it was me instead of him, because at least then you'd still have the child you actually wanted."

My mom's expression twisted and I would've called it guilt, but I'd officially given up on her, which seemed fair since she gave up on me years ago.

"But I'm the one who's alive and I'm done apologizing for it." I glanced at Harry, feeling stronger just knowing he was here before I looked back at my mom. "Bryce would want me to be happy. So I'm going to be happy." My voice wavered on the last word, weakening my point, but I couldn't stand here any longer.

I turned and walked away from all of them, grabbing my shoes on the way. I'd swap out these skates quickly and then I was getting the hell out of here.

I'd had enough.

TWENTY-FOUR

Gordy

Sam walked away from the group, and despite every instinct I had screaming at me to follow her, there was something I needed to do first.

Sally was still crying into Greg's chest. Greg's arm was around her shoulders, his face pale and drawn, and he hadn't said a single word.

Not during Sally's attack.

Not during Sam's response.

Not even when his daughter walked away.

Looked like I needed to have words with him as well. This was unacceptable.

Jordan stood frozen with one hand over his mouth while Eric was staring off toward where Sam had gone. He was officially the only member of Sam's family that I liked.

I looked at Sally. At the woman who had been cold to Sam from the moment she'd arrived, who had ignored her, dismissed her, performed warmth for neighbors while freezing out her own daughter behind closed doors. The woman who, five minutes ago, had told a twenty-two-year-old that she wished she'd died.

Absolutely fucking not.

I'd been patient this entire trip. I'd watched, catalogued, and held my tongue because it wasn't my family, and Sam hadn't asked me to fight her battles. I'd sat through awkward meals with loaded silences and watched the way Greg couldn't hold his daughter's gaze. I'd watched Sally direct kindness and respect to everyone in the room except the one person who needed it most.

I was done.

“Mrs. Lowe.”

Sally lifted her head from Greg’s chest, her cheeks wet and her eyes red-rimmed. When her gaze met mine, her face paled.

Good. She should feel ashamed right now.

“She was seventeen.” My voice was calm and steady, not giving away any of the rage I felt on Sam’s behalf. “Sam was seventeen years old when that accident happened. She was a kid who wanted to go to a skating competition. That’s it. That’s the entire scope of her crime.”

Sally opened her mouth.

“I’m not finished.”

She closed it.

“Your daughter has spent five years destroying herself with guilt. She left her home, her family, and everything she knew because she believed she deserved to be punished. And tonight, you just confirmed every terrible thing she’s ever believed about herself. You told your daughter it should have been her. Your living, breathing daughter who has spent half a decade wishing the exact same thing.”

Finally Sally flinched.

“I can’t imagine the pain of losing a son and I won’t pretend to. But you’ve also been losing your daughter for five years, and that part is a choice. You chose to stop looking at her. You chose to stop reaching out. You chose to let her believe she wasn’t worth forgiving.”

Greg still hadn’t spoken, but his face crumbled with his own shame.

“You had a chance to fix what was broken. And instead you chose to lose another child.”

Sally and Greg stared at me like they couldn’t believe what I’d just said.

Jordan dropped his hand from his mouth. His jaw was tight and his eyes glassy with his own emotions. “He’s right, Mom.”

Sally’s gaze snapped to him.

“He’s right,” Jordan repeated, steadier this time. “I brought Sam home because I thought if you just saw her and spent some time with her, you’d remember that she’s still your daughter.” He shook his head like he didn’t recognize his own parents. “If I’d known that you felt like *this*, I never would’ve put her through this. Enough is enough.”

It was about damn time he said something.

“I wish I could say it was nice meeting you, but it wasn’t. Your daughter is the best thing that’s ever happened to me, and it disgusts me that you

can't see the gift that was right in front of you. She's a light in my life, and I'm more thankful than words could ever express that she survived that crash. That I got the chance to know her and love her. You've missed out on a remarkable woman."

I walked away without waiting for a response. There was nothing they could say that would sway my opinion of them at this point. The only person who mattered had already left. I headed toward the park entrance, scanning the paths for her until I found her on a bench near the edge of the park.

Her knees were pulled up to her chest and her arms were wrapped around them, making herself as small as possible. She was shaking—whether from the cold or everything else, I couldn't tell.

When she heard me coming, she lifted her head. The second her gaze met mine, her lip trembled and her eyes filled with tears.

I sat down next to her and wrapped my arms around her as she curled into me, her sobs breaking my heart. "I've got you. I'm not going anywhere."

We sat there until she pulled herself together. She let out a shuddering breath. "I can't go back to the house after that."

"We're not going back."

She glanced at me. "But our stuff? Where else will we go?"

"I'll take care of getting our stuff, but we're going to a hotel and then tomorrow we're going home."

"But tomorrow's Christmas Eve."

I watched her face closely. "Do you really want to stay here?" If she did, then we'd stay. But I suspected she'd feel better once we were back in Montana. The loss of her parents would sting for a while, but at least back in Montana we had a real family. Maybe not by blood, but they were family all the same. One message to the group chat and they'd surround her with love the second we walked out of the Missoula airport.

Her shoulders fell and relief filled her face. "Yeah, let's go home."

I got us an Uber and booked a hotel room on my phone while we waited, one hand still wrapped around her. She didn't talk and I didn't push. She'd talk to me when she was ready. We were past secrets now.

The hotel was downtown and probably fancier than necessary for one night, but she deserved a little spoiling after the shit her parents had put her through. I checked us in while Sam stood beside me, still holding my hand

like letting go wasn't an option. The woman at the front desk was professional enough not to comment on the fact that we had no luggage.

I'd already sent a text to Jordan asking him to grab our bags from their parents' house and bring them to the hotel tonight.

As soon as we got into the room, Sam kicked off her shoes, took off her coat, and climbed onto the bed, curling up on her side and facing the window.

I followed her, lying down behind her and wrapping my arm around her waist, pulling her against me until our bodies were flush, my knees tucked behind hers.

She laced her fingers through mine.

"Thank you," she whispered.

A smile tugged at my lips as I pressed them to the back of her head. "What did I say about thanking me?"

I suspected this would be a running theme in our life, but I never wanted her to feel like she owed me. She didn't. I loved her and I took care of the people I loved.

Her fingers tightened around mine. She was still shaking, but less now. Every few minutes her breath would catch with a quiet sob and a tear would fall on my hand before she'd press herself closer. Like she wished she could just disappear in my arms.

"I meant what I said to them." Her voice was a hoarse whisper. "At the rink."

"I know."

"I'm done going back there, Harry. I'm done."

"Then you're done."

She didn't have to justify anything to me. I was on her side. Always.

TWENTY-FIVE

Sam

I'd never felt safer than I did in Harry's arms. My body was still shaking slightly, and I couldn't tell if it was from shock, adrenaline, emotional upheaval, or all of the above. Tonight had unleashed fears that I'd held close to my heart for years—and revealed some truths I'd been too scared to face.

But through it all, Harry had been there, just like he was now with his chest flush against my back and his legs tucked behind mine. His arm was around me, holding me securely. I didn't feel judged for crying or for my outburst at the rink.

I felt loved.

And I wanted to hold on to that feeling with both hands.

I'd been crying off and on for the last hour. My eyes were swollen, my throat raw, and I'd gone through the entire box of tissues on the nightstand. But the tears had finally stopped and now curiosity was getting the best of me.

"What happened after I left?"

His thumb brushed gentle circles on my hand. "I talked to your mom."

I turned in his arms so I could see his face. "What did you say?"

His jaw clenched and his gray eyes seemed harder than I'd ever seen them. He was angry, but not at me. I was certain of that. "I told her she was wrong for treating you the way she did."

He shared the whole scene with me, and with each word out of his mouth, I fell a little more in love with him. No one had ever come to my defense like he had tonight. I pressed my forehead against his collarbone

and closed my eyes, trying to breathe through the swell of emotion that crashed into me.

“Jordan backed me up,” he added quietly. “For what it’s worth, I think your brothers are decent guys, although Eric is my personal favorite if I have to pick.”

That made a laugh bubble up.

“And my dad?”

“Didn’t say a word.”

That tracked. It was disappointing but not a surprise. My dad hadn’t always been like this, but grief had changed us all. But grief didn’t excuse cowardice, and standing next to your wife while she told your daughter she should be dead was cowardice of the highest order. I had hoped for more from him, but maybe I should’ve known he’d always side with Mom.

I was done worrying about either of them. It was time to move forward with my life. Harry was right that I didn’t deserve to punish myself for being young and making a bad choice. I wasn’t sure how easy it would be to let go of the mindset I’d been living with for the last five years, but I knew I was ready to try.

Especially with this man by my side.

I glanced up at Harry, cupping his face and bringing his mouth down to mine. His kiss was soft but just as all-consuming as always.

God, he could kiss.

He kissed me like he was devouring me, but instead of the intense passion from last time, this was slow, savoring.

Like I was a treasure and he was going to relish every second.

His hand came up to cup the back of my neck, his fingers threading into my hair, but I could feel his restraint—the way he was letting me set the pace, giving me room to take what I needed.

All I needed was him.

I pulled at the hem of his shirt, and he broke the kiss long enough to pull it over his head. My hands found his chest, his abs, the toned skin I was still getting used to exploring. His gaze was hot on me as he traced my touch across his body, his breathing getting heavier and his gray eyes turning dark and stormy.

We didn’t need words. Our actions would do the talking.

Maybe they always had.

Maybe I'd always belonged to him and he'd just been waiting for me to catch up.

He undressed me slowly, peeling off each layer with a patience that made my skin burn. My sweater first, then the top underneath, his fingers grazing my sides on the way up and leaving goose bumps in their wake. He unhooked my bra and then tossed it off the side of the bed. His mouth found the curve of my neck, kissing there while his hand cupped my breast and toyed with my hard nipples. He worked his way over my collarbone and then down to the swell of my breast, replacing his hand with his mouth. His touch wasn't rushed, and his mouth sucked on my peaked nipple like he was teasing me, completely unhurried, despite the way my body was writhing on the bed. I needed more.

I reached for the button of his jeans, but he grabbed my hands and brought them above my head, holding them together with one hand as his mouth met mine in a kiss that left me breathless.

How did he always know what I needed without me telling him?

He tightened his grip slightly and arched a brow, asking a silent question that I understood immediately. I nodded. I'd keep my hands right where he put them.

He kissed me again, quicker this time, and then moved down to pull my pants and underwear down my legs. While he was off the bed, he stripped out of the rest of his clothes until he was as naked as I was. His hungry gaze devoured me as he slowly lifted my foot, placing it on his shoulder and then kissing his way down my leg until he was between my parted thighs.

A groan escaped him before he licked up my center and then swirled that wicked tongue of his around my clit. My eyes closed and my head tilted back as bliss washed over me. I wanted to touch him, but I also wanted to trust his lead and that desire won out.

Just like his kiss on my mouth earlier, he kissed my pussy like he was savoring it, like every swipe of his tongue was meant to commit my flavor to memory. It was teasing and sensual and so intensely frustrating because it wasn't enough to throw me off the cliff of pleasure I was desperate for.

"Harry." It came out more pleading than I'd ever heard from myself before, but I couldn't stop it.

His heated gaze met mine and then he slowly slid a finger inside me while his mouth fastened to my clit and sucked. My hands gripped the top of the pillow as pleasure wound tighter and tighter inside me. My thighs

shook and my breath came out in shallow pants until it reached a fever pitch and I tipped over, my orgasm radiating through me like a supernova until I was a shaking mess on the bed.

Harry kissed his way up my body, his mouth finally meeting mine again at the same time he thrust inside me to the hilt. We both groaned at the perfect stretch of him buried inside me.

One of his hands came up to hold my wrists again, while the other held him up as he picked up his rhythm, his gaze never leaving my face. This was like nothing I'd ever experienced before. This wasn't just sex.

It was something else entirely and I was only sure of one thing.

I was his.

I clenched my inner muscles, and his rhythm wavered as his eyes fluttered and his forehead dropped to mine.

"Sam." His voice was ragged, but he still managed to make my name sound like a prayer.

Our gazes stayed locked on each other as our bodies did all the talking, coming together again and again, our pleasure reaching new heights I didn't think either of us had ever experienced before.

And then blinding pleasure ripped through me again and I screamed his name. His hips stuttered and with one more thrust, he buried his head into my shoulder as his whole body shook with his release.

After a moment, he shifted to his side and pulled me against him. My head found his chest, his arm wrapped around me, and the room was quiet except for our breathing settling back to normal.

"I love you so much," I whispered, glancing up at him.

His gray eyes shone with so much adoration that I still didn't feel completely worthy of. "I love you too."

"Please don't ever leave me." I hated even saying it. It made me feel weak to need someone as much as I needed him, but it was the truth. Him leaving me was now my greatest fear.

He shook his head. "No chance. You're stuck with me for life."

"For life, huh? That sounds like a proposal."

The corner of his mouth lifted slightly. "If I thought you'd say yes right now, it would be."

I sucked in a breath. Did he really mean that?

He brushed my hair away from my face. "You are the greatest gift I've ever been given, and I promise to treasure you always. And someday, I'll

get down on one knee and make it official.”

What had I ever done to deserve his devotion?

Whatever it was, I wasn’t going to take it for granted. I snuggled into his chest, holding him tight.

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TWENTY-SIX

Gordy

Foster was waiting at baggage claim, and I'd never been so happy to see a familiar face.

I'd texted him the Cliff Notes version of what had gone down while we were waiting for our flight in Seattle, so I wasn't surprised when he flicked his glance to Sam and arched a brow. She was looking down at her phone and hadn't noticed him yet. I gave him a look that said she'd be okay. It was probably going to be a bumpy road, but I had no doubt all of us would rally around her and give her more love than her parents could ever dream of.

Sam finally glanced up from her phone and spotted Foster. "Hey."

He pulled her into a one-armed hug and held on for a beat longer than usual. "Hey. Abby's back at the apartment, but she gave me clear instructions to make sure you knew the hug was from her." His face lit up when he said Abby's name like the lovesick guy he was.

But I got it. I couldn't deny I was a bit lovesick myself.

"Merry Christmas Eve," he said, moving to me and giving me a pat on the back.

"Thanks for coming to get us."

"Of course! Abby's got dinner going now, or else she would've been here too."

We grabbed our bags and followed Foster through the automatic doors to his truck in the parking lot. The frigid Missoula air hit us the second we stepped outside, and even though it was freezing, there was something so refreshing about Montana air. It was crisp, whereas the air in Seattle had just felt heavy.

Sam tilted her face toward the sky and closed her eyes for a second. She didn't say anything, but she didn't need to. Her shoulders dropped as all the tension she'd carried in Seattle was swept away. Montana was her real home now.

I pulled out my phone in the truck and texted my sister.

ME

Back in Montana.

Her reply came fast.

VIVIENNE

I thought you were staying in Seattle for Christmas?

ME

Change of plans. Believe it or not, our family isn't the most dysfunctional one out there.

VIVIENNE

I'm not so sure about that. Call me later. I need to talk to you about something.

I stared at the message for a second, then pocketed my phone. Vivienne could wait. I knew she was still upset I hadn't come home for Christmas, but whatever it was probably wasn't a big deal. I'd call her later.

Foster drove us straight to the apartment he shared with Abby and Mason. It was the same apartment Sam and Abby had shared before Foster and Abby started dating. When Abby's grandma died, Abby had been burning the candle at both ends juggling her classes, her job at the tutoring center, and her internship at a local engineering firm while living at her gram's house thirty minutes away. Foster had come up with the idea for him and Sam to switch places, so Abby and Mason could live in their apartment with Foster helping out, and we'd all been on board. Sam had lived in the hockey house ever since, even though she'd offered to leave at the start of this school year so we could open up the room to another hockey player. But none of us had wanted her to move out, me especially.

When we walked in, the living room looked like Christmas on a budget. There were colorful lights strung around the front window and a small fake tree in the corner with presents underneath. Three stockings hung from command strips on the wall next to the TV.

From the kitchen, I could hear Abby's voice and a lower one responding—Mason, most likely. Abby's brother had recently turned eighteen and had been living with Abby and Foster since their grandmother died. The kid had been dealt a rough hand, but he didn't let that get him down. Foster, Drew, Liam, and I had made it our mission to take him out once a week so he had guy time. Since we'd started doing that, he'd really come out of his shell.

Abby came around the corner and booked it straight for Sam, hugging her tight and whispering something in her ear that I couldn't hear. Sam's arms wrapped around her just as tightly. The two of them stood there for long enough that Foster and I exchanged a glance and quietly moved past them. We'd left our bags in the truck since Foster would still need to take us back to the hockey house after dinner.

When they finally separated, Abby caught my eye and mouthed *thank you*.

I gave her a nod even if I was tired of women thanking me for doing the decent thing. What kind of world did we live in where they felt a thank you was owed for being a good, supportive person? That should've been the standard.

Mason appeared in the kitchen doorway, a wooden spoon in one hand. "Hey, Sam. Gordy." He lifted the spoon in greeting. "Gordy, want to come in and take a look at things? You're a better cook than Abby."

"Hey!" Abby stared at her brother with fake hurt on her face. "I'm a decent cook, thank you very much."

Mason's smile grew wide—it was good to see him so happy. "Yeah, okay, sis. But Gordy might as well be a professional."

Sam laughed a bright and happy laugh that made my gut tighten with a feeling only she stirred up in me. It was the first real smile she'd had on her face since the ice rink, and it was a relief to see it.

"Let me see this feast you've prepared," I said, heading toward the kitchen. We'd been over here enough times that I knew where everything was and it had been almost two weeks since I'd cooked anything. I missed being in a kitchen and whipping up a meal to feed my friends.

Feeding people the food I made felt like the best act of love I could give to the people who'd become more family to me than any of my blood relations—apart from maybe my sister.

They'd started a turkey breast and had potatoes, green beans, and the ingredients for gravy laid out on the counter. Mason had clearly been on

chopping duty—there was a cutting board with unevenly diced onions next to a pile of potato peels. I rolled up my sleeves and took over.

Cooking had always made sense to me when other things didn't. The logic of it—heat, timing, the way flavors built on each other when you gave them the right conditions or knew the right combos—was the closest thing to meditation I'd ever found. Pop had taught me that during the first summer I spent in Big Sky, standing over a cast-iron skillet in his kitchen. He'd said cooking was the only honest work because you couldn't fake the result. Either it tasted good or it didn't.

I seasoned the turkey breast and put it back in the oven, then moved to the potatoes. I salvaged the uneven chops the best I could so they'd cook evenly and then dropped them into a pot of salted water. The gravy on the stove was stuck to the bottom of the pan and way thicker than gravy should be. I tossed it out and started from scratch in a clean sauce pan with the turkey drippings, a splash of white wine, and chicken stock.

Mason leaned against the counter and watched me work. "You're way better at this than I am."

"Just takes some practice. When I first started cooking, my chopped potatoes looked a lot like yours."

"You're just saying that to make me feel better."

I made eye contact. "Not even a little. Yours actually might be better than mine were."

His eyes lit up. "Really?"

"Really. If you want to be good at anything, you have to practice and keep at it."

Foster hovered near the counter, watching me while he took a sip of his beer. He'd pulled a second one out of the fridge for me.

"You good?" he asked.

"Yeah."

He studied me for a second, then glanced out to the living room. "Is she?"

"She will be. She's a little tender right now. Her parents were..." Rage filled like a fire in my chest just thinking about the bullshit her mom had said to her.

Foster winced. "That bad?"

"Let's just put it this way. Your dad, my parents, and Sam's parents should start a club."

“Fuck.”

“Yeah.”

Foster’s dad was a piece of work who’d tried to break up him and Abby when they got together. Foster hadn’t spoken to him since he found out.

I glanced out toward the living room, needing to check on her after everything she’d been through. Sam and Abby were on the couch, Sam’s legs curled underneath her and Abby mirroring her pose. They were staring at each other, but each of them were keeping their voices too low to hear from in here. I hoped Sam was finally opening up to Abby. If anyone deserved the truth from Sam, it was her.

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TWENTY-SEVEN

Sam

I hadn't consciously decided about whether or not I would tell Abby all the sordid details of Seattle and the last five years, but the second I saw her and she came running up and hugging me, I couldn't *not* tell her. The guilt had been eating away at me that she didn't know the truth, and now that Harry knew and there had been some form of resolution—even if it meant closure on what I had always known as family—it still felt like Abby deserved the truth. Because really Abby was more family than my parents had been since the accident, and she had trusted me with her grief.

It was time I trusted her with mine.

While the guys went into the kitchen to keep working on dinner, Abby pulled me to the couch. We sat across from each other and she reached out a hand, giving mine a squeeze.

"I don't know where to start," I confessed.

"Start at the beginning."

I grabbed the pillow behind me and hugged it to my chest. It was one we had bought together at a local boutique in Missoula and had cute purple frills along the edges.

"Sam, you know you can trust me, right?"

I hated that she even felt she had to ask the question, but I hated even more the concern in her voice. She didn't deserve to feel that way. Never once had I doubted that I could trust her. I trusted her with more than she knew.

I just hadn't trusted her with my full truth. But, to be fair, I hadn't trusted *anyone*.

“I told you I had three brothers,” I said. “And I did have three brothers, but I lost my brother Bryce five years ago in a car accident.”

The words tumbled out of my mouth like they had been waiting for ages to come out, and once I got started, the words spilled out like a torrent of water rushing out of me. Occasionally, Abby’s eyes would fill with tears, but she’d quickly brush them away and squeeze my hand, giving me all her strength, even though I felt so undeserving of it. When I got to the part about my parents and the ice rink, any sadness in her eyes had turned to anger, and her scowl mimicked Harry’s so much it almost made me laugh.

“I cannot believe they treated you that way. What the hell?”

I put my hand on top of hers and squeezed it back. “It’s okay—”

“It’s not okay,” she interrupted. “It’s never okay for your family to treat you that way. Sam, you are incredible. You’ve been my best friend since freshman year when we got randomly assigned to be roommates. You pulled me out of my shell. You’ve carried me through all my trauma and grief. If it wasn’t for you, I don’t even know if I would have given Foster a chance.”

I shook my head at that. “You and Foster were inevitable.”

“Still,” she said, “you are far and away the best person I know. I can’t fathom anyone disrespecting you this way and not seeing how special you are.”

My voice was thick. “Thanks, Abby. I’m sorry I didn’t tell you.”

Abby’s eyes became glassy with tears again. “Why didn’t you?”

I shrugged. I’d asked myself that question a number of times, especially on the plane ride back to Missoula, knowing that I would have questions to answer and people who deserved the truth.

“I don’t know,” I told her. “It was easier to just fake it. In California, I had my aunt and she knew everything, but when I came to Montana, it was like a fresh start and I could really be anybody.” My fingers found the frills along the edge of the pillow, picking at them as I kept going. “And even though I knew it wasn’t real—that I was faking it—I wanted it to be. I wanted to be that girl who made everyone around her feel better, who could light up a room with a simple smile whenever she entered. I wanted to be the girl who you knew you could come to and she’d always have your back. She’d always lift you up. She’d always be there. I wanted to be her so desperately.

“And I guess maybe it was a fake-it-till-you-make-it thing, because I think I did become her. It didn’t always feel like an act. But it also wasn’t fully real because I never felt like I deserved any of you. I never felt like I deserved your friendship or the loyalty of the hockey boys when they let me move in.” I pressed my face into the pillow for a beat, then looked back up at her. “And Lord knows I don’t feel like I deserve Harry.”

Abby and I were both tearing up at this point, but I wouldn’t apologize for my tears anymore. It was time the truth came out. It was time I let myself be free from the past that had haunted me.

Abby shook her head before she even started talking, like the emotion arrived before the words did. “Sam, friendship isn’t about what you deserve.” Her voice cracked and she had to take a breath. “It’s give and take. It’s being there for someone and letting them be there for you. And that’s what family should be too.” She tightened her grip on my hand. “Knowing you can always rely on that person, you can always go to them, call them at any time and they’re there for you. That was all real. We are always here for you, and never once have I doubted that you were always there for me. So even hearing you say that you think you were faking it, I’m telling you right now it was real.”

I liked her version of events. I liked believing that I hadn’t lied to all the people closest to me for five years, even if I had. Even if it was just a lie of omission.

“Can you forgive me?” I asked her.

She was already shaking her head. “There’s nothing to forgive. We’re best friends and you’re my family. I’m here for you through the highs and the lows, through the light and the dark, no matter what. As far as I’m concerned, you’re my sister.”

My tears were freely flowing down my face now. I hated crying like this, knowing the guys could walk out of the kitchen at any minute, but she had no idea the relief her words gave me. How much I had feared this conversation, feared that I had irreparably harmed our relationship, when she had truly always been like a sister to me too. And the relief of knowing that she was still here by my side, even though I had lost my parents and didn’t know where I stood with my brothers—it was everything.

It was exactly what I needed.

She grabbed a box of tissues and pulled them to us, handing me one while she took another. We blew our noses, laughing through our tears, and

then she leaned forward and pulled me into a tight hug that I hadn't even realized how badly I'd needed.

Abby pulled back and tucked her legs tighter underneath her, leaning in with an arched brow. "So what's the deal with you and Gordy?" She pointed at me. "And no lies this time."

I let out a laugh. "Well, let's see. He lied to my brother when Jordan showed up at our door and said that he was my boyfriend."

"Which he wasn't?" she asked.

"No, he wasn't," I confirmed.

"But he is now?"

I nibbled my lip and covered my face before smiling and laughing at her. "Yes. He is definitely my boyfriend now."

Her arms shot straight up. "Yes! Finally! I knew it. I knew there was something going on between you two. It was just a matter of time."

I laughed, the feeling coming free and easy.

"For what it's worth," she said, once we both pulled ourselves together, "I'm really happy for you. Not about what went down with your parents. Fuck those guys."

I chuckled because it wasn't every day that Abby used a swear word. But then she continued. "But I mean about you and Gordy. You both really deserve happiness, and I'm glad you have each other."

I was glad too. He had become more important to me than anyone else in my life, and that was a gift I wasn't going to take for granted.

Just then, the guys walked out of the kitchen.

"Dinner is served," Foster said, coming over to Abby. He bent down, his thumb gently wiping away the final trace of a tear from before. Then he kissed her.

I looked over and Harry was already watching me. He reached out his hand and I didn't hesitate to take it.

From now on, I always would because Harry was my safe place.

TWENTY-EIGHT

Sam

It was Christmas Day, but it didn't really feel like Christmas.

Unlike Foster and Abby's apartment, the hockey house was devoid of almost all Christmas decorations because no one had really been here. Drew, Harper, Rory, Liam, and Ava were all down in Meadowbrook for the holiday, now that things were a little bit better with Drew and his parents despite him dating the girl involved in the family feud they'd been carrying for generations. Despite the plan that Drew and Harper would only go down Christmas Eve and Christmas Day, Gordy had told me that Drew's family promised to be nice if they'd come spend more time with them because they missed him and Rory so much. Deciding to accept the olive branch, they'd spent the last week down in Meadowbrook. They were working it out, and this Christmas had been a trial run to see how well things went.

Harry had run off to the store so he could give us some semblance of a Christmas feast, and I was lazily lounging on the couch binge-watching old episodes of *Secret Lives of Mormon Wives*. I maybe had a slightly unhealthy obsession with reality television shows, especially ones around religious upbringings, likely because it so often mirrored my own. The drama was just starting to get good, which wasn't uncommon for this show, when the front door of the hockey house opened. Instead of Gordy, like I expected, in walked Liam and Ava followed by Drew, holding a sleeping Rory in his arms, and Harper.

"What's going on?" I asked. They were all carrying bags, a few of which looked like they had wrapped presents in them.

"We're having a family Christmas," Liam said. "We heard about your shit trip, and since we were only down in Meadowbrook for Christmas, we

decided to drive up today so we can all celebrate together. We already informed our families. We spent the last few days with them and did most of our Christmas traditions last night, so they were fine.”

My breath caught in my throat before I finally found my words. “What?”

Liam looked at Drew. “Was my accent too thick just then?”

Drew laughed. “No, I think she’s just surprised, man.”

Liam had a faint—very faint—Irish lilt that came out when he was emotional or very, very drunk, but it wasn’t his slight accent that had confused me. It was the fact that they all had their own families to be with and yet they’d come back to Dunridge for *me*.

“Why do you look so surprised?” Drew asked. “We weren’t gonna let you sit in this house with just Gordy. The man hardly talks. You’d be bored to tears. That’s no way to spend a Christmas. You have to watch terrible Christmas movies or get rip-roaring drunk off Christmas eggnog.”

Harper rolled her eyes while Ava looked at Drew with a flat stare. “You get drunk off Christmas eggnog? Are you serious right now? How are we related?”

Drew grinned at her. “You’re just annoyed because you didn’t think of it first.”

Now it was Ava’s turn to roll her eyes. “Yeah, okay, keep lying to yourself.”

They bickered as they piled shopping bags onto the kitchen counter, and I couldn’t stop staring at the chaos of it. Liam was already raiding our mostly empty fridge while Drew settled Rory into her Pack ’n Play in the living room.

My heart felt full in my chest as I stared at them. I couldn’t believe they’d driven back here for me. Granted, Meadowbrook was only a forty-five-minute drive, but still. They were here.

Foster, Abby, and Mason arrived at the same time Harry got back from the store. Harry walked in carrying four grocery bags and stopped in the doorway, taking in the full living room. His gaze swept across the group and then found mine as the corner of his mouth ticked up.

He didn’t look nearly as surprised by their appearance as I had been which told me one thing. He’d been behind this. He’d been the one to rally the troops.

Of course he had.

Drew insisted on putting on a cheesy Christmas movie on a streaming site and poured us all Christmas eggnog, which I learned was just eggnog with an alarming amount of rum in it.

“This is a holiday tradition, Sam,” Drew said, handing me a glass like he was presenting a fine wine. “Passed down through generations of Dumontier men.”

“Through one generation,” Harper corrected from the couch. “Your dad made it last night and you stole the recipe.”

“Inherited. I inherited the recipe. There’s a difference.”

One sip and I was done. Not even rum could save the taste of eggnog. I set it on the coffee table, and Harry offered to make us other Christmas cocktails, which I accepted with pleasure.

Harper and Drew were sprawled across the floor with Rory while the movie played, Drew providing commentary that none of us had asked for. Liam and Ava had claimed the love seat, Ava tucked under his arm while Liam threw popcorn at Drew every time he said something dumb—so, frequently. Foster, Abby, and Mason were sitting on the couch, Foster playing with Abby’s ponytail where only I could see it. I loved that Abby had found a man who loved her so much. She deserved happiness more than anyone I’d ever met.

Meanwhile Harry had disappeared into the kitchen to prepare our feast.

I slipped out halfway through the movie, heading to the kitchen. I paused in the archway, my gaze running up and down the man who had become my everything. Harry stood at the counter with his back to me, sleeves rolled to his elbows, chopping something in a way that looked effortless even though I knew it wasn’t. He hadn’t been happy with the protein options so instead of doing a traditional Christmas dinner of ham or turkey, we were doing lasagna. The scent of garlic and tomato was absolutely heavenly, and I had no doubt Harry had put his own little twist on it.

I came up behind him and slid my arms around his waist, pressing my cheek to the broad plane of his back. His hands stilled on the cutting board.

“Hi,” I murmured against his shirt.

His hand came down to cover mine. “Hi.”

I didn’t say thank you. I’d already said it a hundred times and he’d told me to stop every single time. So instead I just held on, feeling his steady heartbeat under my palms, listening to the muffled chaos in the other room.

He turned in my arms, leaning back against the counter so he could look down at me. His gray eyes were warm as he stared back at me, not bothering to hide the love shining in them. I wondered now if he ever had and I'd just been too blind to notice.

His hand came up and tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. "You okay?"

I nodded. "Better than okay."

I went up on my toes and kissed him. It started out slow and leisurely, but then his hand slid to the back of my neck and we both moaned as he deepened the kiss. I would never tire of his kisses.

"I heard that. Get a room!" Liam hollered from the living room.

I smiled against Harry's lips, but he didn't pull away.

"You need to put the lasagna in the oven or else they'll all get hangry," I whispered.

"They can eat snacks."

I huffed a laugh, but he kissed me once more and let me go, turning back to the counter. I stole a piece of mozzarella from the cutting board and went back to the living room with a warmth in my chest that had nothing to do with the cocktails I'd been drinking.

I curled up in the recliner chair and instead of watching the movie, I watched the people who'd all shown up for me. One thing finally became clear to me; family didn't have to be blood. Family was the people who showed up, who supported you and loved you—even when it was ugly.

They were the ones there for you no matter what.

TWENTY-NINE

Gordy

I'd never loved or appreciated my friends more than I did when I'd gotten home from the store to see them all here. I'd expected Foster, Abby, and Mason to come over, but even I'd been surprised to see Drew and Liam show up, especially since their families lived nearby. I was even more grateful that I wasn't spending this holiday back East with my parents now that I got to spend it with all of these guys. This was what true family loyalty and love that Pop always talked about looked like—the kind he felt like he'd failed to create with his own kids because money had poisoned it. While I didn't believe that money was all bad—it had its place in the world—this definitely carried more value to me.

We'd all just sat down to eat the meal of lasagna, garlic bread, and salad that I'd thrown together when there was a knock on the door. I instantly stilled, immediately remembering a similar situation only a couple of weeks ago when the person on the other side of that knock had been Sam's brother. I really wasn't in the mood to see any of her family so soon after what had happened in Seattle.

"Seriously, who knocks?" Liam said, looking at Sam. "Is this your brother again?"

I hated how her face paled slightly like the idea bothered her as much as it bothered me.

There was another knock, more impatient this time. Liam huffed as he scooted out of his chair and went to the door. A moment later, he came back with a cheeky grin on his face.

"Gordy, your sister is here."

Everyone froze as the woman behind him came into view. She was a female version of me—black hair and similar gray eyes, although hers were lighter than mine. Her hair was long and straight, but there was no doubt we were related, except maybe that she didn't carry the same brooding energy I'd been told I had.

Vivienne was a force when she wanted to be and had a lot more fire than I'd ever had, but she carried herself like she was prim and proper. She was also way more type A than I was and had a need for control that had frustrated my parents on more than one occasion because she wasn't always good about just doing what she was told. I actually admired that about her, and it was probably why we'd always gotten along well, even when my parents had tried to pit us against each other.

My chest tightened at the sight of her, and I suddenly felt bad that I hadn't called her. The fact that she was standing in the hockey house right now, suitcase probably still in a rental car outside, told me more about whatever she was about to say than the words themselves would. Whatever this was, it was big.

"Viv? What are you doing here?" I asked.

She put her hands on her hips. "Well, since you refused to answer my calls or come home for Christmas, I decided to come to you. I really could have used your support, you know."

I stared at her like she'd grown another head. "Support for what?"

She lifted her chin. "I'm starting my own NFL franchise. Here in Montana."

My eyebrows shot up. "You're *what*?"

"You heard me."

"I—" I didn't know what to even say to that.

"Hold on," Drew interrupted. "You can just *start* an NFL franchise? Aren't there like a whole bunch of rules and approval that needs to happen?"

The arched eyebrow she aimed at me said everything. "They don't know?"

"They do not," I conceded. They knew the Gordon name carried money, but I'd never told them just how much. I didn't particularly revel in the idea of them knowing now, but there was no way it could be avoided with the direction this conversation was going.

“Gordon Holdings is one of the richest companies in the world,” Viv said. “Apart from that, Harrison and I have our own wealth from investments and trusts. I’m using that as the capital, and I’ve already gained approval from the required twenty-four existing owners. Everything is already in place, and we start construction on the stadium shortly.”

That meant she’d been working on this process for a long time. You didn’t just wake up one morning and decide to spend billions to start a new team. And there was no way the other owners had simply agreed unless she’d given them good reason to. They wouldn’t agree if she didn’t have a solid plan in place—it didn’t look good for anyone if a team failed, especially a new franchise, which was exactly why they made it so difficult to start one.

“You’re starting a franchise here in Montana?”

“Yes, I am.”

“You’re serious right now?”

“I’m dead serious. I told Mom and Dad last night, and it went badly enough that I got on a plane this morning.” She paused. “I’m giving them time to process. I’ll reach out again after the new year.”

“Why would they be upset about it? Seems pretty cool to me,” Foster asked.

“Our father is a minority partner of an existing team,” Viv explained. “And while I have repeatedly asked to be brought in and take a bigger role in the sports world through that existing stake, I was ignored and pushed aside.”

“Why?” Abby asked.

Viv rolled her eyes. “Because I don’t have a penis. It’s sexist bullshit. I know more about football than any of the owners of that other team—apart from maybe the majority holder, but the others just want the box seats and the prestige of saying they own it. I know the players. I know the rules. I know the game, the coaches. I know how this business is run. And that’s what I wanted to pursue as a career. But they wouldn’t take me seriously.”

Wait, if she was doing this on her own that meant...

“Viv, please tell me you didn’t.”

Her throat bobbed as she swallowed, already knowing what I was alluding to. “I did.” For the first time, her voice wavered slightly.

I stared at her. “You put your entire trust into this? Viv, if this plan fails, you’ll have nothing.”

She stared at me, and for a moment she looked a little scared. But more than that, she looked hurt—hurt that I was also doubting her.

“I can do this, Harrison. I can make this happen. I’m skilled enough and smart enough. And if they refuse to see it, I’ll make them. And I will make the best damn team this league has ever seen. Right here in Montana.”

“Why Montana?”

“Why not? Our family has roots here. And it’s about time Montana had their own team, don’t you think? People love football here. Why shouldn’t they have their own professional team to root for? Missoula is big enough. We can make it happen. So what if it’s not Atlanta or Seattle or LA. We deserve to have a home team to root for.”

“You really want to do this?”

“It’s done. I already signed off on the paperwork and put down the money to start building the stadium.”

Drew scratched his head and held up his finger. “Wait a second. Doesn’t it cost like *billions* of dollars to get a team franchised? And I mean, that’s just the team, right? Like, building the stadium also costs at least millions, right? Am I insane here, or is that a big-ass number? You can seriously afford that?”

Viv stared at him, then turned to me like she was shocked my friends truly didn’t understand the scope of our wealth.

Liam finally said the question everyone was thinking. “Hold on—are you secretly loaded? Like, *loaded* loaded? Because I knew you came from money, but I didn’t realize you came from Bruce Wayne levels of money. And if you do, then beers are definitely on you from here on out.”

“Are you even allowed to own a team if your dad also has—” But before Foster could even finish the question, Viv was waving it away like she’d already answered it a billion times.

“Yes, he is a limited owner. He is not the majority stakeholder. If he was, this would be a different conversation.”

“You’re really doing this?” I asked her again because I was having a hard time wrapping my head around this. Viv had always loved football and made no secret about her interest in our parents’ stake in the existing team. It was part of why she’d always worked so hard at Gordon Holdings—to prove she could handle anything they threw at her.

She took a breath. “I’m really doing this. I quit my job at Gordon Holdings to do this, so there’s no going back now. And I would really like

your support.”

I nodded once. “You’ve got it.”

Her jaw dropped ever so slightly—like she was surprised at my quick response—before she caught herself. I knew the feeling. In our family, support wasn’t something you expected. It was something you braced yourself to not receive.

“Okay,” she said, her shoulders dropping in relief.

I gestured to another seat. “You want to pull up a chair and come join us for Christmas dinner?”

Her face lit up with a smile, and I caught Sam watching us from across the table with a little smile of her own. Viv pulled up a chair while Abby grabbed an extra plate for her with some lasagna on it.

Looked like another Gordon was returning to their roots.

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THIRTY

Gordy

Sam in a fitted gold dress was a problem. Especially when it hugged every curve and dipped low enough at the back that my hand found bare skin when I placed it there—a fact that made patience feel less like a virtue and more like a punishment.

The hockey house had been transformed for New Year's Eve. Liam had taken charge of the decorations, which meant there were too many string lights because he knew Ava loved them and a disco ball he'd found at a random store downtown. Drew had handled the playlist, and the bass thumped through the floorboards while people moved around with drinks in their hands. It wasn't a rager, but there were enough people here that the room was getting hot from the mass of bodies.

Viv was also here. She'd bought a place in Missoula, claiming she needed to be close to the future stadium site while things got underway, and despite being a few years older than all of us, she'd fit into the group faster than I'd expected. She and Harper had hit it off almost immediately as two women with sharp tongues and zero tolerance for male bullshit. Harper also knew a thing or two about your family disapproving of your career choices. But despite my gaze bouncing around the room to see if everyone was having a good time, it was Sam that I always came back to.

Sam and that damn gold dress that I was certain she'd bought just to torture me until I could get her out of it.

She was in the kitchen pouring herself a drink and laughing at something Abby was telling her. Her head was tilted back, her throat exposed, and the gold fabric of her dress caught the light every time she moved. She looked happy. Every day since we'd returned to Montana,

she'd seemed a little lighter, her smiles coming easier, her laugh more vibrant. It was more obvious than ever how much the past had weighed her down before.

I leaned against the doorframe and watched her. It was an old habit. I'd watched her like this at every single party we'd thrown in this house since the moment she moved in. But it was different knowing I could touch her now. I could walk up to her and slide my hands over her hips, drop my lips to her neck, or kiss her behind her ear and watch her shiver. She was mine now, and it made watching her even more exciting than it had been before.

"Staring is creepy, you know." Liam appeared next to me, beer in hand, grin firmly in place. "Even when she's your girlfriend."

"Says the man who can't stop staring at his woman."

Liam's cheeks flushed but he didn't deny it. He glanced back at Ava. "Well, you can't deny she's a sight to behold. You think they all went shopping together and got dresses designed to torture us?"

"Absolutely."

He laughed and headed back toward the living room where Drew was attempting to teach Viv the rules of beer pong. She'd gone to Yale but hadn't partied as much as I had here at CFU. I think she'd always held herself apart from her peers because she'd been trying to prove to my parents that she was serious and responsible.

It was nice to see her finally letting her hair down a little. And from what I could see, Viv was already winning.

Sam slipped her hand into mine and tugged me toward the living room as midnight approached. Liam had pulled up the countdown on the TV, and Drew was distributing champagne in plastic champagne glasses he got from the dollar store.

"Classy," Harper said, eyeing the cup Drew handed her.

"It's not the vessel, Freckles. It's the vibes."

"Noted, Andy." His face broke out in a grin before he kissed her temple and pulled her into his arms.

Sam pressed into my side, her hand resting on my chest while I easily wrapped an arm around her waist. I never got tired of feeling her body against mine.

"Thirty seconds!" Liam shouted.

The room got louder as everyone coupled up. Sam looked up at me, her blue eyes bright, her lips curving into the kind of smile that used to gut me

because I thought I'd never be the reason behind it.

Now I was.

"Ten! Nine! Eight!"

She went up on her toes, already closing the distance.

"Seven! Six! Five! Four!"

My hand slid to the back of her neck.

"Three! Two! One!"

Our lips met in a deep and claiming kiss. My hand tightened on her neck, and her fingers curled into the fabric of my shirt while the room erupted around us.

When I pulled back, her eyes were dazed and her cheeks flushed pink.

"Happy New Year," she whispered.

I leaned down, my lips brushing the shell of her ear so only she could hear me. "I want to start this year how I plan to spend the rest of my life. Buried between your perfect thighs."

She sucked in a sharp breath. Her fingers tightened on my shirt and her eyes went wide before they went dark.

"Harry." Her voice was barely above a whisper. Wrecked already and I'd hardly touched her yet.

I grabbed her hand and pulled her toward the stairs without another word. Behind us, Liam's voice carried over the noise. "And there they go! Happy New Year to us all, but especially to Gordy."

I didn't look back. Liam was one to talk. I had no doubt he was two seconds from taking Ava somewhere private and fucking her blind. The rest of the guys would do the same. Kissing wasn't enough when our women deserved to start the new year being ravished.

Sam's grip was tight on my hand as she followed me up the stairs, the music and laughter fading with each step until we reached my room and I pushed the door open.

The second it closed behind us, I turned and her mouth joined mine. The kiss was hot and urgent, her hands shoving my shirt up my chest. I pulled it over my head and tossed it. Her palms were on me immediately, sliding over my abs, my chest, nails dragging lightly down my sides in a way that made every muscle in my torso clench.

I backed her toward the bed, found the hem of her slinky gold dress, and pulled it up over her hips, past her gorgeous bare breasts and over her head, throwing it in a heap on the floor.

She stood before me completely naked. Fuck me, if I'd known she wasn't wearing underwear, I would've had my head between her legs in an instant. I'd known she wasn't wearing a bra—the dress hadn't allowed for one—and I silently thanked whoever had designed it.

I let my gaze drag over her body. The full curve of her breasts, the dip of her waist, the flare of her hips. I'd seen her naked a handful of times now, and it still made my brain short-circuit.

"You get more beautiful every time I look at you."

"I think you're a little biased," she murmured.

"I think you're stunning." And hell yeah, I was biased. I was allowed to be. The most beautiful woman in the world was in love with me.

I stepped into her space, my hand cradling her jaw as I tilted her face up, brushing her lips with mine. I kissed her slow, taking my time despite every instinct screaming at me to take her hard and fast. I needed to make sure she was ready, and my woman's pleasure always came before mine.

Sam's hands were at my belt, working it open with quick efficiency. She shoved my pants and boxers down and wrapped her hand around my cock before I'd even stepped out of them. My forehead dropped to hers and I groaned.

"Sam."

"Mmm?" She stroked me firm and slow, her thumb sliding through the moisture at the tip, spreading it in a teasing circle that made my jaw clench.

She sank to her knees before I could stop her. I should've known. Sam loved this. She'd told me as much the first time she'd had me in her mouth, and every time since, she approached it with this single-minded enthusiasm that turned my brain to static.

She licked the tip slowly, her blue eyes staring up at me, watching for the exact moment my composure slipped. That was her thing now. She got off on taking me apart, piece by piece, until the man who barely spoke more than ten words at dinner was cursing, pulling her hair, and forgetting his own name.

"You're so quiet right now," she murmured against the head of my cock. "I'm going to fix that."

She took me into her mouth, her tongue flat against the underside, and sucked deep enough that my hand shot to the back of her head. My fingers threaded through her blonde hair and I gripped. She loved this too—when I

exerted a little control over her. Her moan vibrated around me, and my hips flexed forward on instinct.

“Fuck, Sam.” It came out guttural.

She pulled back just enough to speak, her lips swollen and glistening. “There he is.” That satisfied grin. Like she’d just scored a goal on me and wanted to make sure I knew it. “More of that, please.”

She took me deeper, her hand working what her mouth couldn’t reach, her rhythm steady and relentless. She hollowed her cheeks and my head tipped back. I couldn’t watch anymore because if I kept looking at her on her knees with my cock in her mouth and that look on her face, this was going to be over embarrassingly fast.

But she wanted me to watch. She pulled off and waited. The second my gaze dropped back to hers, she licked a slow stripe up my length and took me in again.

My grip tightened in her hair and I held her there, controlling the depth, and the moan she made was so fucking sexy. She loved being held and guided. She was in charge of everything else in her life, but here she let me steer and got off on it just as much as I did.

“Enough.” My voice sounded wrecked. I pulled her up by her hair and she came willingly, a flush across her chest and her eyes glazed with want.

“I wasn’t done.”

“Yeah, you were.” I walked her backward until her knees hit the mattress and she sat. I held her jaw, tilting her face up. “I told you tonight where I planned to spend the rest of my life. I meant it.”

Her breath hitched. “Then stop talking and get down there.”

I pressed her back against the mattress with one hand flat on her sternum, holding her there while I knelt between her legs. She squirmed, trying to sit up, and I pushed her down again. The look she gave me was all heat and no patience.

“Harry, if you make me wait, I swear to—”

I dragged my tongue flat against her pussy, and the threat died in her throat. She was already soaked, and the taste of her hit me the way it always did. I was addicted to her flavor on my tongue. My hands gripped the insides of her thighs and spread her wider, pinning her open while my mouth worked her clit. Her fingers found my hair and pulled hard enough to sting.

Good. I wanted her desperate.

I slid two fingers inside her and curled them forward, finding the spot that made her breath stutter, and kept my tongue on her clit with a pressure I knew would drive her out of her mind. I'd learned her body over the past week and a half. I knew that she liked firm, steady pressure more than teasing. I knew she came harder when I held her in place so she couldn't squirm away from it. I knew the pitch of her voice shifted right before she went over, and I was listening for it.

"Oh, fuck, right there...don't you dare stop—"

There it was.

I sealed my mouth over her clit and sucked while my fingers fucked her in a steady rhythm. Her thighs clamped around my head, and her back arched clean off the mattress. She came loud, her whole body shaking, my name broken apart between gasps. I worked her through it until her grip in my hair loosened and her thighs fell open.

I kissed her inner thigh and she twitched, still sensitive. When I looked up, she was staring at the ceiling with her chest heaving.

"I take it back," she breathed. "You can make me wait if that's what happens."

I climbed up her body and kissed her. She hummed against my mouth, tasting herself. Then she hooked her leg over my hip and tried to pull me into her.

She reached for me, but I caught both her wrists in one hand and pinned them above her head.

Her eyes flared and her breath caught. And then she smiled, slow and knowing, because this was what she wanted. She pushed up against my grip just to feel me hold her tighter.

I lined myself up and pushed into her in one slow, deep stroke, making us both groan. She was so tight, hot, and wet around me, and I held still for a second with my forehead pressed to hers, letting us both feel it.

"You feel incredible." My voice was barely holding together.

She rolled her hips against me, impatient. "Harry, please, I need you."

"You've got me." She'd had me from the second we met. And I'd be hers for the rest of my life.

I pulled back and drove in deep. Her gasp was sharp and her eyes went wide. I did it again. Harder. She arched into me, her wrists still pinned, her body rising to meet mine. I set a rhythm that was slower than she wanted,

because I knew it would make her desperate and there was nothing better than Sam desperate.

“Harry, faster—”

“No.” I thrust deep and held there, grinding against her clit, and her eyes rolled back. “You’ll get what I give you.”

Her inhale was shaky. “You’re such a—” I thrust again and whatever insult she had planned dissolved into a moan.

I kept that pace. Deep and controlled, pulling nearly all the way out before sinking back in, making her feel every inch. Her wrists strained against my hand, but she wasn’t trying to get free. She was testing my grip the way she always did, feeling how strong I was, reminding herself that I could hold her here as long as I wanted.

I released her wrists and gripped her hip, flipping her onto her stomach.

She gasped and immediately pushed up onto her hands and knees, looking back at me over her shoulder with flushed cheeks and wild eyes. “Fuck, yes.”

I gripped her hips and pulled her back onto my cock in one hard thrust. The moan she made echoed off the walls. My hand slid up her spine, between her shoulder blades, until I was pressing her down so her chest was flat against the mattress while her hips stayed high. The angle was so much deeper this way, and I couldn’t hold back a ragged exhale as I thrust into her perfect body. She turned her face into the pillow and moaned so loud I was sure everyone downstairs could hear her.

Let them.

Let them hear how I made my woman moan. How she cried out for my cock.

Her pussy clenched around me, and my rhythm stuttered for a second before I regained control. Then I fucked her with the rhythm she’d been begging for, one hand on her hip, the other still pressing her down. She was loud and unapologetic about it and I loved that about her. Sam never held back. Not with her friends, not with her life, and definitely not in bed.

“Touch your clit,” I told her.

She slid her hand between her legs without hesitation, her fingers working her clit while I drove into her. Her fingers brushed against my shaft as I pumped in and out, and a shiver went down my spine. Her pussy started clenching tighter and tighter as her moans grew in volume and her own rhythm started to falter. She was so close I could practically taste it.

“That’s it.” My jaw was clenched, my own orgasm bearing down hard. “Come all over this cock that was made for you.”

She broke apart with a cry, and her pussy clenched around me so tight there was no way I could’ve held back even if I’d wanted to. I buried myself deep, my hips jerking as I came so hard my vision whited out at the edges. Her name tore out of my mouth as a gasp.

I sagged on top of her, not putting my full weight on her but pressing us together back to chest. Fuck, I didn’t want to move or pull out of her. So I didn’t. Instead I carefully repositioned us so I was still inside her even though I was only semi-hard now, but we were both on our sides, her back still to my chest. My face was buried in her hair, and her fingers were now laced with mine as we caught our breath.

“Happy New Year, Harry.” I could hear the smile in her voice.

“Happy New Year, Sam.”

She turned her head to look over her shoulder so she could see me, her eyes sparkling. “So. Buried between my thighs for the rest of your life, huh?”

“That’s the plan.”

Her smile filled her face and made me feel ten feet tall. “I can live with that.” She snuggled deeper against me, holding my hand tighter against her chest.

This was how I wanted every year to start.

THIRTY-ONE

Sam

The guys had a longer break from hockey in the winter than most NCAA teams because they were a club team, but they still had to play before classes resumed again. So even though we still had a couple more weeks of winter break, their game came a week after New Year's.

Harry and I had spent the last week in a complete honeymoon stage. I think we'd christened just about every space in the hockey house that we could get away with—and a few others. But between that and him doing more cooking, which I felt was inspired by his sister chasing her dream, he'd also just been solely focused on hockey. They'd had a lot more practices since returning from Christmas break, and I could tell he loved being back on the ice.

I loved watching him play. I'd stopped by toward the end of one of their practices, and watching his intensity on the ice as he blocked shots was a huge turn-on.

During a game like tonight, it was even hotter because that intensity practically rolled off him in waves.

Abby, Harper, Ava, and I all sat together in our usual spot. Harper had Rory on her lap with Rory's little ear protection headphones on. Rory was gnawing on a teething toy that had a convenient clip attached to her sleeve as she stared at the ice, and I swear the girl knew exactly where her daddy was even though she was only a baby.

The arena wasn't as packed as normal since it was still technically winter break, but there were a fair amount of students and locals who'd shown up to support the players. Dunridge took their hockey seriously, even if it was technically a club team.

The players came out for warm-ups and my eyes went straight to Harry. He moved through his pre-game routine, doing his post-to-post slides, dropping into the butterfly, then popping back up. He did one stretch to loosen his hips that had me practically drooling because the motion looked seriously obscene and gave me way too many dirty thoughts.

Foster skated past and tapped the glass near Abby, who pressed her palm against it with a smile that I'd tease her about later. Drew did the same thing to Harper a second later, except he also made a ridiculous face at Rory that had the baby squealing and kicking her feet.

A few minutes later, the puck dropped and Foster won the draw cleanly, sending it back to Drew, who fired it up the boards to Liam. The first shift was fast, and while I was still learning the sport, it seemed a little sloppier than usual. I wasn't sure if that was just because they were rusty after break or what.

But Harry looked sharp, and even with his helmet on, I could tell his gaze was locked on the action. It was no wonder he was so good at reading people; it's what he did on the ice and what made him one of the best goalies in the league. There was something about the way he settled into the crease that made it seem like the net behind him didn't exist. Like the puck couldn't possibly get past him because he'd already decided it wouldn't.

A few minutes in, the other team had a player who raced across the ice with insane speed and tried to score, but Harry dropped, squeezing his pads together so there wasn't even a sliver for the puck to go through. The rebound kicked to another player, who fired it high, but Harry snapped his glove up and caught it like he was picking an apple off a tree.

Ava whistled next to me. "Your boyfriend is a badass. I'm glad he's on our team."

"I know." I couldn't help the grin.

Harper bounced Rory gently on her knee, narrating the action in a deadpan sportscaster voice. "And the goalie says no. Denied. Rejected. Just like your father's cooking."

"Is Drew's cooking that bad?" Abby asked.

"It should be a war crime, but we're working on it," Harper replied.

I was only half listening, because a shift change had just sent a new line over the boards and one of the CFU players caught my eye. Number 63. There was something about the way he skated on the ice that tugged on a memory.

I sat up straighter without meaning to.

My spidey senses were tingling. I think I knew that guy. I didn't recognize the jersey number, but I could swear I knew him.

"Hey, who's number 63?" I asked Abby.

Abby furrowed her brow as she looked at the player in question. "I don't know. It might be the freshman who was transferring here this semester. I don't know anything about him. Foster said Coach told him a new player was supposed to be joining the team, but I think it was supposed to be when the semester started. He must've decided to come earlier so he didn't miss more games."

A transfer. Who transferred mid-year their freshman year? Actually, that was probably more common than I thought. People changed schools all the time for all kinds of reasons. But something about this particular transfer was making my skin prickle in a way I couldn't explain.

"Has he been practicing with the team all week?"

If it was who I thought it was, Gordy would've told me, right? He wouldn't keep that kind of secret and let me be blindsided.

"No, I don't think so. When Foster and I were talking last night, he didn't mention anything about a new player for today's game, so it must be his first day. And if that's the case, then the poor guy hasn't even gotten to practice with the team yet. Talk about trial by fire."

"Yeah..." My gaze was now locked on number 63.

He didn't do anything flashy, and it was clear he wasn't as in sync with the rest of the team. He took a position along the boards and battled for a loose puck before he made a simple pass to the point. But I watched every second of it with an intensity that had nothing to do with hockey and everything to do with the gnawing feeling in my gut.

The first period settled into a rhythm after the shaky start. Both teams found their footing, and the plays got faster and more physical. Foster won most of his face-offs. Drew and Liam controlled the blue line the way they always did, practically reading each other without even looking, switching coverage seamlessly, and pinching at exactly the right moment. Our forecheck was relentless, hemming the other team in their zone for long stretches.

Harry made another spectacular save midway through the period—a point shot that deflected off a stick in front and changed direction

completely. He somehow got a pad on it, kicking it into the corner. Drew cleared it up the boards and we transitioned the other way.

The period ended scoreless, which wasn't surprising given how tight both teams were playing. During the intermission, I tried to focus on the conversation happening around me, but my mind kept drifting back to the new player.

There was no way.

He couldn't be here at CFU.

Why the hell would he be *here* at CFU?

The second period started and the other team came out with more urgency. They scored first, three minutes in, on a deflection that bounced off one of our defensemen's skates and past Harry before he could react. It was the kind of garbage goal that made everyone groan. Harry slammed his stick against the post and reset. I could see the frustration in his shoulders even from up here, but it was gone in a breath. He was already focused on the next play.

Foster tied it up a few minutes later, burying a rebound that Drew had fired from the point. The puck had landed right on Foster's tape in the slot. He didn't hesitate to rip it to the top corner. The guys on the bench went nuts, banging their sticks on the boards. I was on my feet along with the women next to me before I even registered moving.

Midway through the second, number 63 got his longest shift yet. Coach sent him out on a line change, and this time he was more involved. He won a board battle in the corner, digging the puck out with his feet and getting it to the point. On the next play, he set up in front of the net for a screen, taking a cross-check to the back from a defenseman without budging. The kid could hold his ground.

But then he was along the boards in the neutral zone, reaching for a loose puck, when one of the other team's defensemen lined him up and absolutely leveled him. The hit was clean by hockey standards, but it looked fucking brutal. Number 63 went down hard, his head bouncing on the ice.

I was on my feet before I even processed what I was doing. My hands were in front of my mouth and my heart slammed against my ribs as I watched Foster skate up to him and help him up. Thank God for his helmet or that could've been so bad.

"Sam?" It was Abby's voice, distant and concerned. "Are you okay?"

I didn't answer. I couldn't take my eyes off the ice until he stood up and Foster clapped him on the back. They skated away like nothing had happened, but my heart was still racing like I'd just been chased by a bear.

I sat down and thrust my shaky hands between my knees.

"What was that?" Harper was looking at me with one eyebrow raised in concern. "You looked like you were about to jump over the glass."

"Nothing. I'm fine. That was just a hard hit."

"It was a hard hit," Ava agreed. "But you don't usually react like that to a player you don't know."

"I guess I'm still getting used to how violent hockey can be. I forgot over the break."

They exchanged a look but turned back to the game without questioning me further. Abby's hand found mine and squeezed once, and I squeezed back because I didn't know what else to do.

Because I was almost certain now. Almost. And the almost was killing me.

The rest of the second period blurred past. I registered the action but I was watching it through a fog. Every time number 63 stepped on the ice, my chest constricted. Every time he sat on the bench, I tried and failed to see his face.

The third period was a grind with both teams throwing hits and blocking shots. Drew scored another goal, putting us in the lead, and the arena erupted. Harper held Rory's little hands and clapped them together while Rory kicked her feet happily, and even she seemed entertained by the chaos.

We held on for the win. 3-2. The guys celebrated on the ice, mobbing Harry in the crease because right at the end he'd blocked an attempt that could've forced them into overtime.

The game ended and the girls and I made our way to the spot outside the locker rooms where we usually waited for the guys. But a weird anxiety was thrumming through me, vibrating under my skin like a live wire. The girls were talking next to me—something about dinner plans, about whether we should order in or let Harry cook—but I couldn't pay attention to it. My entire focus was narrowed to that door.

Players started filing out. A couple of freshmen I didn't know well. Then Liam, who gave Ava a wink and a "Ladies" as he passed us to sweep her up in his arms. Drew emerged and went straight to Harper and Rory, pressing a kiss to the baby's forehead.

Then the door opened again, and Harry came out.

I knew immediately by the look on his face that my instincts had been right. His jaw was set, and his gray eyes found mine with a worry and a warning at the same time.

And sure enough, right behind him was my little brother.

I stared at Eric with shock. He was now wearing jeans and a sweatshirt, a gear bag slung over one shoulder, and his blond hair damp.

“You transferred to CFU?”

He shrugged and gripped the back of his neck. “Yeah, I was going to tell you, but you left Seattle before I could.”

I opened my mouth to respond, but I was at a total loss for words. He glanced around at all the people staring at us and then stepped closer and dropped his voice. “Um, can I talk to you for a second in private?”

I nodded and he immediately grabbed my arm and pulled me away from the group. I glanced at Harry who was watching me with eyes that saw too much and told me if I needed him to step in, I only had to say the word.

Eric pulled me to a quiet little alcove near the vending machines where the noise from the hall faded to a murmur.

“Look, I’m going to cut straight to the point because I think our family’s done enough dancing around each other for a lifetime. I’ve already lost one brother.” His voice cracked on the last word and he cleared his throat, but he didn’t look away from me. “I won’t lose you too. I love you. I know I didn’t say it that night at the rink, and that moment has haunted me on repeat. I should’ve spoken up and stood up for you.”

He pressed his lips together, and I could see the effort it was taking him not to let his emotions get the better of him. “Mom is wrong. And Jordan and I are in full agreement on this. We get that she’s grieving, but we’re grieving too, and we don’t want to lose you.”

He took a breath, steadying himself. “I already knew I was planning to transfer here. I was afraid to say something to you because I thought you would try to tell me to stop. But home doesn’t really feel like home anymore, and I want to know you again. Plus CFU’s got a great hockey program.”

I couldn’t find words as I stared at him. This was the little brother who used to stickhandle a tennis ball through the kitchen. He’d always been the peacekeeper, and now he was standing in front of me telling me...

“Are you saying you transferred to CFU specifically to be close to me?”

He nodded. “Basically, yeah. It’s time someone in our family came to you and showed you that you matter.”

I stared at him in complete disbelief. And then, without thinking too hard about it, I launched into his arms, hugging him tight. He gripped me back, his arms solid around me in a way that reminded me painfully of Bryce. Of the way Bryce used to hug me after competitions, lifting me clean off the ground.

Eric didn’t lift me off the ground. But he held on like he was afraid I might disappear again.

“Thanks, Eric.”

I didn’t realize how important it had been to me to have someone in my family on my side. But it meant the world.



Later that night, Harry and I were in his bed watching a movie on his laptop that I was struggling to pay attention to. I was tucked into his side with my head on his chest, his fingers trailing absently up and down my arm while I replayed Eric’s words on a loop. I was still trying to absorb the fact that my little brother had uprooted his entire life to be near me when my phone rang.

I reached for my phone on the nightstand, and my stomach dropped when I saw the name on the screen.

Mom.

She never called me. Not once in the last five years had she ever picked up the phone to call me, let alone answer the few calls I’d made to her. And now, the same night Eric revealed he’d transferred to CFU, she was calling me at eleven o’clock at night.

I sat up and Harry’s hand stilled on my arm. I swung my legs over the side of the bed, intending to take this in my room down the hall where no one else could hear it.

He sat up too. “Sam?”

“It’s my mom. I should probably take this.” I was about to stand when he placed his hand on my arm.

“Stay.”

“Harry, I don’t want you to—”

“Stay in here with me. You’re not doing this alone.”

The ringing stopped, but just as quickly it started again. Truthfully, I didn’t want to face whatever this call was without him. We hadn’t ended things well when I’d left Seattle, and there was no good reason for her to call me at this time of night after years of silence.

“Hello?” Harry’s hand squeezed my arm, offering me reassurance and his solid strength.

“What did you say to your brother?” Her tone was sharp and clipped, filled with the same coldness she’d had when I’d been home.

But now at least I understood why she was calling. Because Eric had followed me to Montana.

“I didn’t say anything to him. I didn’t even know he was coming here until he showed up tonight. He made this decision on his own.”

“Eric was happy at home going to UW. He had friends, a team, a life. And then suddenly he ups and decides to transfer to CFU. I know you were behind this.”

Would I always be the villain now when something didn’t go my mom’s way? Was that the role my life had been relegated to?

I didn’t think Harry could hear her exact words from where he sat, but my face must’ve given me away because he shifted closer, his knee pressing against my thigh. I let myself lean into the contact without thinking about it.

“He’s an adult, Mom. I swear I had nothing to do with this.”

As if not even hearing me, she responded, “You have cost me two sons now, Samantha.” Her voice shook, and I couldn’t tell if it was from anger or grief or if she even knew the difference anymore. “Are you going to take Jordan from me too? Is that your plan? To destroy this family completely?”

I closed my eyes. There it was. The same script, just a different verse. Everything that went wrong in the Lowe family led back to me. Every loss was my fault. Every fracture started with my name.

A year ago, those words would’ve gutted me. Now, they just stung.

“I don’t have to, Mom. You’re driving your family away all by yourself.”

Harry’s hand moved from my wrist to the back of my neck. His thumb traced a slow line along the edge of my hair, and the touch was so steady, so sure, that it eased the sting of her words.

“How dare—”

“Goodbye, Mom.” I pulled the phone from my ear and hung up.

My hands were shaking as I set the phone face down on the nightstand and stared at the dark wall in front of me, waiting for the tidal wave. For the guilt. For the voice in my head that had always been louder than anyone else’s telling me I shouldn’t have said that, that she was my mother, that I owed her my patience because she’d lost a child and she was grieving.

But grief didn’t excuse being cruel.

Harry kept his hand on the back of my neck, his thumb still moving in that same slow line. “You know you don’t have to put up with that. From anyone.” A pause. “Not even her.”

I wanted to believe him. I wanted to take those words and tuck them somewhere safe and build a wall around them so the doubt couldn’t get in. But I could already feel it creeping back—the familiar whisper that said maybe I did owe her something for still being alive when Bryce wasn’t. That maybe I was the cause of all the problems in our family.

“Yeah,” I said, wishing I believed it.

His hand tightened slightly on my neck, and he pressed his lips to my temple and held them there. “Come here.”

He pulled me back onto the bed with him, and I went without resisting, my head resting back on his chest as he wrapped his arm around me. My arm slid around his waist, holding him a little tighter than I had before the call.

I really did want to believe him. I just wasn’t there yet.

THIRTY-TWO

Gordy

I watched Eric from across the locker room while I adjusted my chest protector. He'd been at CFU for two weeks now and had practiced with us every day since that first game where he'd shown up without warning. Foster had apologized for not giving me a heads-up. He'd known a new player was coming but not his name until he showed up in the locker room.

The kid worked hard, I'd give him that. He was first on the ice at practice and last off, and he never complained when Coach ran bag skates. But right now, forty minutes before puck drop, he was winding tape around his blade with so much tension I was surprised the shaft didn't snap.

"You nervous?" I asked.

He looked up, then back down at his stick like he was seeing it for the first time. Quickly, he tore the tape with his teeth and smoothed the edge with his thumb. Then he stood, bounced on the balls of his feet a couple of times, and walked over to my stall.

I waited. Goalies in general were good at waiting—we had to be—but as a Gordon I liked to think I had exceptional patience.

"Can I talk to you for a second?" He kept his voice low so no one else would hear, not that they were paying attention anyway. Liam was telling some story that had Drew wheezing. Foster was lacing his skates and listening to his pre-game playlist.

"You're already talking to me."

Eric huffed a short laugh but it died fast. He sat on the bench next to me and leaned his elbows on his knees, staring at his hands. "I know I kind of showed up out of nowhere and that probably put you in a weird spot with Sam. I didn't mean for it to go down like that. I thought I'd have time to tell

her before the game, but everything moved faster than I expected once I landed. I just didn't want her to think you knew about me coming since we both know you didn't."

"You're good. Sam knows I don't keep secrets from her."

He nodded like he was reassuring himself. "Good. I'm sorry for how things went down back home too. None of that was right. Sam deserved a lot better. She's tougher than anyone gives her credit for."

"I know."

He spun on the bench to face me. "Look, I want you to know that I'm not here to cause problems. But I also need you to know I'm here because I want to be close to my sister."

Sam had already told me all of this. I was surprised it had taken Eric two weeks to work up the courage to talk to me about it.

"But I also want to be a good teammate to you, and I'd really like to know where we stand. You and me."

Eric had pulled his weight with the team since he'd arrived and impressed the hell out of me. As far as Sam went, he'd been letting her take the lead while regularly checking in so she knew he was serious about wanting to get to know who she was now.

"Sam's been hurt enough by your family. As long as you don't add to it, you and I are fine."

His throat bobbed, but there was determination in his gaze that I admired. "I won't."

"Then we're good. Now go finish getting ready."

He gave me a smile and went back to his stall.

Foster appeared in my peripheral vision and sat in the spot Eric had just vacated. "Everything good?"

"Yeah."

Coach gave us his usual pre-game pep talk and then it was time for warm-ups.

We filed through the tunnel, and the cold hit me like a clean slap that cleared my head and narrowed my focus. The arena was louder than last game. Students were back for the semester and the student section was packed, which meant the energy was up.

I skated to my crease and started my routine. Post-to-post slides, butterfly drops, glove snaps. The ice was fresh and my edges bit clean. I tracked the puck and the players during warm-up shots, reading the release

points and getting back into my groove. Liam fired one high glove and I snatched it out of the air without thinking.

“Show-off,” he called.

I flipped the puck back to him and reset.

The buzzer sounded. We cleared for the anthem, and then we were back on the ice for the opening face-off. The opposing team was from Colorado, and they had a strong first line. Their center won the draw from Foster and passed the puck to their right winger. He carried the puck into our zone on the rush and fired a wrister from the top of the circle. I picked it up early, tracked it through the traffic, and kicked it to the corner with my pad. Drew was on it immediately, chipping it off the glass and out of the zone.

The first period went fast. Both teams pushed tempo, and the hits were heavier than usual. Colorado liked to finish their checks, and a couple of our guys got caught admiring their passes. Liam got rocked along the boards on a dump-and-chase play, but he popped up grinning, which meant he was about to make whoever hit him regret it.

Foster’s line controlled the next few shifts. He won three straight draws, and Drew quarterbacked the puck from the blue line with eagerness in his gaze. He faked a slap shot and slid it across to Liam, who one-timed it low blocker. The Colorado goalie got a piece of it, but the rebound squirted loose and Foster jammed it home.

The bench erupted as sticks banged on the boards and helmets got slapped. Foster pointed at Drew as they skated back to center ice because the goal had started with Drew’s fake. Drew shrugged like it was nothing, which it wasn’t—the play was filthy.

Eric’s line came out for the next shift. I settled into my crease and watched.

He lined up on the left wing and took the draw position seriously, leaning forward on his stick, eyes locked on the puck. When the center won the face-off back, Eric was already moving. He drove wide along the boards and called for the pass, took it in stride, and carried it into the zone with a burst of speed I hadn’t seen from him in practice.

Then he tried to do too much.

Instead of dumping it in or making the simple play to the point, he tried to cut to the middle and deke the defenseman. The D-man read it, poked the puck free, and Colorado transitioned the other way in a two-on-one.

I squared up to the shooter, cutting down the angle, and when he passed across to the trailer, I pushed off hard and slid across, getting my pad down just in time. The puck deflected into the corner and the whistle blew for an icing.

Eric was already back on the bench when I looked up. His head was down. I knew he wanted to prove he belonged and felt like he'd just fallen short, but we'd all played poorly at one time or another. None of us had forgotten how bad Drew played after Rory had first showed up.

Shit happened. It was how you turned it around and kept pushing to be better that mattered.

The first period ended 1–0 in our favor. In the locker room, Coach made adjustments. He told Eric to simplify his game, which was exactly what he'd said before the game started. Eric took it without argument.

In the second period, Colorado came out harder. They scored twice in four minutes—a deflection off a skate that I had no chance on, and a snipe from the slot where their center picked the top corner over my glove. I tipped my mask to the ceiling and exhaled.

Fuck, I hated when they got past me.

Our student section started a chant to get us going, and Drew and Liam gave each other a look that I knew too well.

A few minutes later, Liam fed him on a cross-ice pass, and Drew wound up from the left circle, ripping a slap shot that beat the goalie clean. Tie game. Drew skated past Harper, flexing his arm and making her laugh and shake her head.

Midway through the second, Coach sent Eric's line out on a key shift. We were in a grind, cycling the puck deep in their zone, and the third line needed to keep the pressure on while the top six rested.

Eric parked himself in front of the net which was smart. He was big enough to be a presence there, and screening the goalie was a thankless job that won hockey games. The puck came back to the point, and our defenseman wound up for a shot. Eric held his ground while the goalie tried to look around him, and he took a cross-check to the kidneys without flinching.

The shot went wide, but the rebound kicked off the end boards to Eric's stick. He had a half second to react, and he didn't try anything fancy this time. He swept the puck toward the net where it banged off the goalie's pad and trickled across the line.

Eric's linemates swarmed him. He looked stunned for a second, like he couldn't believe it had gone in, and then his face split into a grin that reminded me so much of Sam that I glanced to where I knew she was sitting in the stands. She had the same wide smile on her face as she cheered on her brother.

On the bench, Liam grabbed Eric's helmet and shook it.

Eric was still grinning when he sat down, clearly riding the high of his first goal for CFU. His eyes found the stands—looking for Sam, I was sure—and he sat a little taller when he saw his sister cheering for him.

The third period was a war. Colorado threw everything they had at us and kept me busy. There was a breakaway that I stacked the pads on, a point shot through a screen that I blocker-punched into the corner, and then a scramble in front of the crease where three of their players were hacking at loose pucks and I covered it with my glove while bodies crashed into me.

The clock ticked under two minutes, and one of our defensemen got called for hooking. Drew slammed his stick on the ice. "Are you kidding me?"

Colorado went on the power play with a one-goal deficit and nothing to lose. Coach sent the penalty kill unit out and Eric was on it—a decision that surprised me until I remembered how he'd planted himself in front of the net earlier without flinching. Coach needed bodies willing to get in shooting lanes, and Eric had already proven he'd take the punishment.

Colorado's power play was organized. They cycled the puck around the perimeter, probing for seams, patient enough to wait for the right look. I tracked the puck and the players, looking for any hint of where they might shoot it. Their center fired from the slot and I made the save, but the rebound was alive, bouncing toward the open side of the net.

Eric dove.

He threw his body across the crease and blocked the puck with his shin, sending it skittering to Drew, who cleared it the length of the ice. The buzzer sounded two seconds later with us still in the lead.

The guys mobbed me and Eric, showing him as much love as they would anyone else on the team because even though he was still new, he'd proved his worth.

He was a Lumberjack now for sure.

After the game, I was one of the last ones out of the locker room. Eric was waiting in the hallway, freshly showered, with his gear bag over his

shoulder. Sam was with him, her hand on his arm, talking animatedly about his goal. Her whole face was lit up as they talked and my chest warmed. I wasn't kidding earlier; as long as he kept that smile on her face, he and I were good.

"Your boyfriend made an insane save in the third," Eric said to her, a little awe bleeding through the casualness he was trying for. "I thought for sure that breakaway shot was going in."

"He does that." Sam slid her arm through mine and leaned into me. Her warmth seeped through my jacket, and I couldn't help but stare down at her, once again feeling like the luckiest man alive, before focusing back on her brother.

"Good game, Eric."

He adjusted the bag on his shoulder. "Thanks, Gordy."

He said good night to Sam—she hugged him, long and tight, and told him she was proud of him—and then he headed to the parking lot.

She looked up at me, and the vulnerability in her blue eyes was the kind she only let me see. "Thank you for looking out for him."

"He's your brother. That makes him mine too."

She went up on her toes and kissed me, and just like always, the rest of the world disappeared when her lips were on mine.

THIRTY-THREE

Sam

Harry had barely closed the front door behind us before his mouth was on mine.

We'd just gotten back from Summit Hills, where he'd pulled out every stop for Valentine's Day—a reservation that had probably required calling weeks in advance, a bottle of wine I knew cost more than he'd ever admit, and a candlelit corner table where he'd spent two hours looking at me in that dark gray button-down that brought out his eyes like he was counting the minutes until he could get me alone. I'd worn a red dress that stopped mid-thigh and dipped low enough at the neckline that his gaze had dropped there more than once over dinner. Each time, his jaw tightened just slightly and his eyes went a shade darker, and each time, a thrill ran through me because I knew exactly what that look meant.

Now we were home and he was done being patient.

His hands gripped my hips and walked me backward until my lower back hit the kitchen counter. His kiss was deep and demanding, and tasted like the wine we'd shared with a hint of something darker. When his tongue swept against mine, I stopped caring about anything except getting closer to him. My fingers curled into the front of his shirt, pulling him against me, and I could feel how hard he was already, pressing against my lower belly through his pants.

"Someone's eager," I murmured against his mouth.

"I've been thinking about getting you out of this dress since you walked down the stairs in it." His voice was low and rough, making heat pool between my thighs.

"That was three hours ago."

“I’m aware.” He bit the spot where my neck met my shoulder, and my hips rocked forward on instinct. I made an embarrassingly needy sound, but Harry had this effect on me. One look, one touch was all it took for my brain to shut off and my body to respond by instinct.

“What if someone walks in?” I asked, even though I had no intention of stopping either way. The idea of someone walking in—of Liam or Drew strolling through the door with their cocky grins—should have made me want to take this upstairs.

It didn’t.

It made my pulse race faster.

“They won’t.” He sounded so certain, I chose to believe him.

His hands found the zipper at the back of my dress and dragged it down in one slow pull. The fabric loosened and he peeled the straps off my shoulders, letting the dress slide down my body and pool at my feet. I’d worn a matching set of barely there red lace underneath. I’d bought it specifically for tonight, and his sharp inhale told me it had been worth every penny.

His hands traced down my sides, over the string of lace at my hips, and then back up to cup my breasts through the thin fabric. His thumbs brushed over my nipples and they hardened instantly, straining against the lace. I leaned back into the counter, grinding my hips forward against his, and the low groan that vibrated through his chest made my skin prickle.

“You wore this for me.” His voice was rough against my ear.

“Who else would I wear it for?”

His teeth grazed my earlobe and I shivered. Then his mouth moved lower—along my jaw, down my neck, across my collarbone—until his lips closed around my nipple through the lace. The texture of the fabric combined with the heat of his mouth made my back arch and my fingers grip his hair. He sucked harder, his tongue working through the lace, and I gasped as heat shot straight between my thighs.

He switched sides, giving the same thorough attention to my other breast that he gave to everything where I was concerned. No one had ever made me feel like the center of their universe the way Harry did.

His free hand slid down my stomach and beneath the waistband of my underwear without preamble, his fingers finding me already wet.

“Fuck,” he breathed against my skin. His fingers slid through my center and I gasped, my grip tightening in his hair. He stroked me slow, his middle

finger circling my clit with the firm, steady pressure he knew I liked, and my head fell back.

“Harry—” I was already shaking. He’d barely touched me and I was ready to combust, which was either a testament to how good he was or how gone I was for him.

Probably both.

He pulled his hand out of my underwear and I actually whimpered at the loss, which earned me a look that was pure male satisfaction. My bra was next, tossed aside before his fingers slid into the waistband of my underwear and pulled them down my legs. I stepped out of them and stood in front of him completely naked while he was still fully dressed. The imbalance of it did something to me that I wasn’t prepared for. I felt exposed in the best way—like he had all the power and I wanted him to take it.

God, I fucking loved when he went all dominant on me. He was always so quiet and composed, but in bed, when he took control, his eyes burned with so much hunger it bordered on possession.

If only he understood that he owned me completely whether we were in the bedroom or not.

His gray eyes dragged over my body with the same intensity he used to track a puck from the point. Then his gaze flicked to the kitchen table.

I followed his gaze. “Harry, that’s... we eat there.”

“I know.” He picked me up and set me on the edge of the table. The wood was cool but sturdy under my bare thighs, and I sucked in a breath as he stepped between my legs. He put his hand flat on my sternum and pressed me back until I was lying across the table, staring up at the ceiling, completely bare on the surface where we’d shared hundreds of meals with our friends.

“This is so wrong,” I said, even as I spread my thighs wider for him.

“Tell me to stop then.”

“Don’t you dare.”

He dropped to his knees at the end of the table and pulled me toward him by my hips until my ass was at the edge and my legs were draped over his shoulders. His mouth was on me before I could take a full breath. His tongue was flat and firm, dragging up my center and then circling my clit before his lips sealed around it and sucked.

My hands shot to his hair. My back arched off the table and I cried out, loud enough that I was grateful for the empty house. He ate me like he cooked—thorough, attentive, savoring every taste—and the low groans and hums against my clit sent vibrations through me that made my thighs shake on his shoulders.

He slid two fingers inside me and curved them forward, finding the spot that made my breath stutter. His mouth never left my clit, but one hand reached up to pinch and tease my nipple.

“Oh, God, yes. Fuck.” The dual stimulation was almost too much. My heels dug into his back and my hips bucked against his mouth. He pinned me down with his forearm across my hips, holding me against the table while he kept going, and the feeling of being held in place while he destroyed me with his sinful mouth was intoxicating.

His name ripped from my throat as I came hard, tremors racking my body as the pleasure continued to pulse through me in waves. He worked me through every wave, his mouth gentle now, easing me down until the aftershocks faded and I went limp against the wood.

He stood and I watched him through hazy eyes as he unbuttoned his shirt and stripped it off. His chest was broad and defined, his abs taut, and I reached for him, pulling him down by the back of his neck to kiss me. I tasted myself on his mouth, and it made me want him inside me with a desperation that bordered on feral.

“Take off your pants,” I said against his lips.

“Demanding.”

“It’s Valentine’s Day. I get to be demanding.”

His mouth curved against mine in a smile, but he didn’t argue. He straightened and pushed his pants and boxers down, stepping out of them, and his cock sprang free, thick and hard. I propped myself up on my elbows and watched him wrap his hand around himself once, a slow stroke from base to tip, and the sight of Harry touching himself while he looked at me sprawled naked on the kitchen table sent a rush of heat through me so intense I clenched around nothing.

“Get over here,” I demanded.

He grabbed my thighs, and my legs wrapped around his waist. The height was almost perfect as he lined himself up and pushed inside me in one slow, deep stroke that had us both groaning. The stretch of him was exquisite, and my nails dug into his forearms as he bottomed out.

He held still for a beat, his jaw clenched, his hands gripping my hips. “I could stay inside you forever.” His voice was barely holding together.

“No complaints here.”

Every time with him got better. I wasn’t sure how that was possible when it was always mind-blowing, but it was true.

Then he started to move. Slow at first, with long strokes where he pulled nearly all the way out before sinking back in, and the drag of him against my walls had me arching off the table. His thumbs pressed into the hollows of my hips, holding me exactly where he wanted me while he set a rhythm that was controlled and devastating.

A tiny, rational part of my brain catalogued the fact that we were having sex on a piece of furniture that we all routinely ate at, but that thought lasted approximately half a second before Harry angled his hips and thrust against a spot that had every thought I’d ever had evaporating from my brain.

“Harder,” I gasped. If he kept hitting this spot, I might die from the pleasure, but oh my God, what a way to go.

His grip on my hips tightened and his pace quickened, each thrust forceful enough to push me slightly across the table’s surface. The pleasure started ratcheting higher like the start of a roller coaster when you’re going straight up slowly, knowing you’re going to have to go down eventually and it’ll be an insane rush. The sound of skin hitting skin filled the kitchen, mixed with my moans and his ragged breathing.

His hand slid up my body—over my stomach, between my breasts, along my collarbone—and then his fingers wrapped around the front of my throat. Light, controlled pressure against my pulse point, not restricting but possessive, and my entire body went electric.

“Yes,” I breathed.

God, how did he know? We hadn’t talked about this and it hadn’t been something I’d ever been brave enough to ask for with past partners—probably because you really had to trust someone to let them hold your neck like this.

But he’d known.

His eyes locked on mine, dark gray, intense, and laser-focused in a way that made me feel like the only thing in his entire world. His hand stayed at my throat while his hips drove into me with a rhythm that was falling apart

at the edges as his control started to fray. I loved watching him lose it—loved being the reason the most composed man I'd ever met came undone.

"Touch yourself," he said, his hand lightly squeezing my throat. It was a command, but his voice was so wrecked it barely held together.

I slid my hand between us and found my clit, my fingers working in fast circles while he fucked me. The combination of his cock hitting deep, my fingers on my clit, and his hand on my throat created a crescendo of sensation that was almost too much. My legs started shaking around his waist and my breathing went shallow—not from his hand, but from the sheer overwhelming pleasure building inside me like a wave about to crest.

"I'm close," I gasped. "Harry, I'm so close—"

He leaned over me, his forehead pressing to mine, his hand still on my throat. "Give it to me. Give me everything."

I broke apart under him, and the orgasm ripped through me like I was hurtling off the roller coaster. I clenched around him in pulses that I felt all the way to my toes, and his name tore out of my mouth, broken and breathless and loud.

He let go of my throat and gripped both my hips, pulling me into his thrusts as his rhythm faltered and then shattered. He buried himself deep, and his head dropped as he came inside me with a shudder that moved through his whole body.

He collapsed on top of me, burying his face in my neck, dropping kisses that had little aftershocks of pleasure flickering through me. A few minutes passed before I caught my breath and a smile lifted my lips.

"We just had sex on the kitchen table," I said when I could speak.

His laugh was a low rumble against my chest. "We did."

"We have to disinfect this entire surface before anyone gets home."

"Already planned on it."

"And we can never speak of this."

He lifted his head, and the look on his face—sated, content, the ghost of a smile playing at the corner of his mouth—was one that I'd only ever seen directed at me. Harry didn't smile like this for anyone else.

It was mine.

"Happy Valentine's Day," he murmured.

I pulled his face down to mine and kissed him leisurely because I could. "Happy Valentine's Day." I traced a line down his jaw with my finger. "Carry me upstairs and I'll give you your present."

“That wasn’t my present?”

“Harry. That was the appetizer.”

A spark of heat glimmered in his eyes and told me he was already recovering. He pulled out carefully, making me gasp at the loss, and then scooped me off the table like I weighed nothing. I wrapped my arms around his neck and my legs around his waist, and he carried me toward the stairs.

I glanced back at the kitchen table over his shoulder. “We’re bleaching that.”

“Twice.”

I buried my laugh in his neck and held on tight as he took the stairs two at a time.

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THIRTY-FOUR

Gordy

I met Viv at a local coffee shop to check in on her since I hadn't heard any updates since her announcement on Christmas. Vivienne had been in back-to-back meetings since they started breaking ground on the new stadium, so this was the first time she'd been able to sit down with me in weeks. The place was small and mostly empty—just a couple of people sitting on the other side of the room. I'd picked it because it was quiet and not usually busy this time of day.

Gordons didn't air their business in crowded rooms.

She sat down at the table, her black hair straight and shiny, not a strand out of place. Even in jeans, she carried an air about her like she was about to chair a board meeting. But the shadows under her eyes were new. She was sleeping less than she was letting on. While other siblings might have hugged to say hello, Viv and I had never been that touchy-feely—or maybe it was more that Gordons in general weren't affectionate. I had her coffee already waiting for her, which was about as close to a hug as we got, and she gave me a thankful smile.

"So, any update from our parents?"

She took a sip of her coffee. "You mean they haven't been calling you incessantly, asking you to knock some sense into me?"

She was only half teasing. Even though I was the younger of the two of us, I was the son and therefore had always been treated as if I was the older and wiser of the two.

"No, I haven't heard a word from them," I said.

Which in itself was unusual. The last year, my dad had been sending me regular emails, cc'ing me on business endeavors and whatnot. He'd made it

clear he wanted me to move back East and start taking a more active role in Gordon Holdings. But the closer I got to graduation and that somewhat inevitable fate, the less I wanted it.

And frankly, seeing my sister chase her impossible dreams had made me feel a little reckless. I knew Sam wanted to stay in Montana, and it was my preferred choice as well. But what did that look like?

I knew what I wanted it to look like. But cooking wasn't exactly a prestigious endeavor as far as Gordons were concerned, not unless I was running a New York restaurant with Michelin stars. But I didn't really care about those things. I wanted to make good food and feed the people I loved. Anything else just seemed like a cherry on top.

"They aren't speaking to me," she said, her voice so low I almost didn't catch the words.

"Excuse me?" I had to have misheard her.

She stared at her coffee cup like it could give her strength before finally meeting my gaze. Her chin lifted—that same stubborn tilt I'd seen in the hockey house when she'd told me she was starting an NFL franchise.

"They're not speaking to me. They've decided I'm being unreasonable and until I come to my senses, they want nothing to do with me. They claim my actions are threatening to tarnish their good name."

My hand tightened around my cup.

I didn't love our parents the way most kids loved theirs, and while I certainly had no desire to work for them, Viv had always tried to please them. She had always worked hard to meet their expectations so they would see her for who she was. I couldn't imagine the blow it was to her to know they could so easily wash their hands clean of her.

"How are you doing with that?"

She huffed out a laugh. "Well, it stings. To know I've been the 'good girl' my whole life and always did what I was supposed to do. I followed the path laid out before me like some yellow brick road. I went to the college they chose and picked the major they chose for me and dated the guys they wanted me to date. And none of it was ever enough." Her humorless smile fell, and she vacantly stared beyond me like it was all crashing down on her at once. "It was never going to be enough," she said. "And that feels both devastating and a little bit freeing." Her eyes watered but she still held her chin high.

“Freeing, how?” I was truly curious, especially now that I was starting to consider my own freedom from the Gordon future.

“Well, for the first time in my life I’ve actually started asking myself what *I* want, and the truth is, I don’t know. I’m almost twenty-seven and feel like I’m embarking on a journey of self-discovery. I thought that was supposed to be what college was for, but apparently not. And it’s a little bit exhilarating and equal parts terrifying, but I know that every choice moving forward will be my own. Every risk I take, I’ll take for me. And that is truly liberating. I’m not working for anyone else. I’m not trying to appease anyone else. I’m basically giving a middle finger to the Gordon name at this point.”

She huffed out another laugh and took another sip of her coffee before nibbling her lip. “Do you ever wonder what our life would be like if we hadn’t been raised as Gordons?” she asked.

“Sometimes,” I answered. “I know we have a lot of privilege and money which has allowed us a lot of freedoms most people don’t have.” But that was a different kind of freedom. It was financial freedom, but as far as Gordons went, it had always come with a lot of strings.

Viv leaned back against her chair, her fingers toying with the edge of her coffee cup. Her gaze was pondering, like she’d been thinking about this for a while and was just now finding the words to explain it.

“I’m wondering what it would be like to know you’re loved. I mean, through this whole experience—this whole franchising and, you know, building the stadium and the fight with Mom and Dad—I’m just... I’m realizing that I don’t know what that feels like. I don’t remember ever hearing them tell us they loved us. I don’t even know if our parents are capable of love, especially the kind of love we see in movies, or in our friends—with *your* friends in particular.” She gestured to me. “I mean, most of my friends I hardly speak to anymore because I’m not going to any social engagements, and even when I did, I mean, those were all essentially mergers and acquisitions, not love matches. Which sounds ancient and historical but is very much alive and well in the upper crusts of society. I don’t want that.”

She paused long enough to take a breath, and I watched her throat bob as she swallowed. Her composure was holding, but barely—like a wall with hairline fractures that she was willing to stay upright through sheer force of habit.

“You know, being around your friends, even though you guys are younger—you’ve seemed so much smarter. Like you’ve chosen what’s important. You’ve found your own family. You’ve *made* it. You didn’t just accept the one that was given to you by blood. And on top of that, you found people that are your perfect other half, that make you light up.” Her eyes locked on to mine and her voice softened. “I mean, look at you, Harrison. I’ve never in my life seen you as happy as you are with Sam and surrounded by your friends. When you’re playing hockey, yes, but now you smile even when you’re off the ice. You seem lighter, and I want that for you. I *love* that for you. But I want it too.”

Warmth spread through my chest at Sam’s name, and I couldn’t stop the half smile that pulled at the corner of my mouth. Viv wasn’t wrong. I was lighter. Sam had made everything in my life better.

Viv’s eyes were bright now, her voice gaining speed like she’d been carrying all of this alone for too long. “I want to be loved. I want to explore and adventure and find my person who believes in me doing these crazy big things even when no one else seems to. Is that insane?”

“Not in the slightest.” I didn’t even hesitate with my answer.

Everyone deserved that kind of love.

And while she didn’t have it now, I had no doubt she would in the future. My sister deserved love and happiness, and I knew she would never settle for less. I had to believe her other half was out there waiting for her.

She took another sip of her coffee and I watched her pull herself back together—shoulders squaring, posture straightening, the composed version of Vivienne Gordon sliding back into place. “Okay, enough about me. Let’s talk about you. Graduation is in a couple of months. Are you going back East? Or are you going to stay here?”

Wasn’t that the million-dollar question?

“I don’t want to go back East,” I told her.

Her lips quirked in a smile. “So are you going to become a chef, then?”

I huffed a laugh. “You sound as bad as the guys and Sam.”

“Well, why not? You’re good at it. Why not be a chef and chase your passion?”

There was no good answer for why I couldn’t, and it wasn’t that I didn’t want to. It just had never felt like a possibility. But I was starting to think that with each passing day, more and more was becoming possible. I had the woman of my dreams. My sister was going off on her own and breaking

away from the Gordon name. I'd always pushed against Gordon Holdings, preferring hanging out with Pop or cooking in the kitchen.

So maybe it was time to follow it all the way through.

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THIRTY-FIVE

Gordy

Some nights the game just clicked and everything came easy.

I couldn't explain it better than that. There were games where I had to fight for every save—where the angles felt a half step off, my reads were a beat slow, and I was surviving on reflexes instead of instinct. And then there were games like tonight, where I saw everything before it happened, where the net behind me felt small and the ice in front of me felt like mine.

Northern Idaho had a scrappy squad. But their top line had a tell I'd picked up within the first two shifts. Their center always looked at his target before he passed. Eyes left, puck went left. Eyes down, he was shooting. It was subtle—most skaters wouldn't catch it—but I lived in those margins.

I settled into my crease after the first whistle and let my focus expand the way it did on nights like this. I tracked sticks and bodies, not just the puck. A good goalie reacted; a great one anticipated. And tonight, I was anticipating everything.

During a break in the first period, I glanced toward the stands. Sam was in her usual spot behind our bench, but tonight she wasn't just with the other hockey girlfriends. Viv sat next to her, a smile bigger than I'd ever seen on her face while she talked to Sam. I'd never paid attention to how stiff Viv had always been, but seeing her so relaxed now showed just how much weight she'd been carrying on her shoulders her whole life.

I turned back to the ice and focused on the game, but the image of my sister and girlfriend existing in the same world I'd built here—the one my parents had never encroached on—made my chest puff up a little. My world that had nothing to do with Gordon Holdings and maybe I could keep it that way.

Foster won the next draw, and our top line cycled the puck deep. Drew carried it behind the net and waited for the coverage to shift before feeding Liam in the slot. Liam didn't shoot—he faked the one-timer and slid it back to Drew, who'd looped to the top of the circle. Drew's wrister was a laser, low glove side, and the Northern Idaho goalie got a piece of it but couldn't hold on. The rebound popped to Foster crashing the net, and he buried it.

The second period was where Northern Idaho pushed. They came out in the intermission with adjustments—more traffic in front of my crease, more shot attempts from the point, and just trying to get bodies in my sightlines and take away my reads. I'd give them credit; it was smart and meant I had to work a bit differently, but I could adjust easily enough.

Their defenseman wound up from the blue line and I picked up the release, but there were two bodies between us. I held my position instead of dropping early, waited for the puck to clear the screen, and caught it in my glove at the last second. The arena reacted, but from my end it was just patience. I'd seen enough point shots through traffic to know that dropping too early was how you got beat on deflections. You had to stay tall and trust your eyes and instincts.

A few shifts later, their center broke in on a partial breakaway that he'd picked off an errant pass at center ice and had a step on our D-man. He crossed the blue line with speed, but I read him immediately. His eyes were down, which meant he was shooting, not passing. I pushed out of my crease to cut the angle and took away the bottom of the net. He went high, trying to pick the corner over my blocker, and I got enough of it to redirect the puck into the glass.

The kid was talented, and he'd be even better if he wasn't so obvious about his tells. He stared at me as he skated past like he couldn't figure out how I'd known.

I reset in my crease and exhaled. God, I loved this game. I loved the adrenaline and the rush of players coming at me knowing the only thing stopping them from a goal was me. It was a high I never got tired of.

Drew tapped my pads with his stick on the next stoppage. "You're locked in tonight."

I gave him a nod.

I was in the zone.

The third period was cleaner. We controlled possession, and Northern Idaho's legs started to go. They'd spent too much energy in the second

trying to crack me open, and now they were paying for it. Their shifts got shorter. Their passes lost zip. I could see the frustration building in their forwards—the way they'd shoot from bad angles or force plays that weren't there because they were desperate to get on the board and the clock was working against them.

Their winger ripped a shot from the half-wall with eight minutes left. I tracked it off his blade and kicked it to the corner without moving more than I needed to. Our D-man collected it and sent it up the boards.

With four minutes left, they pulled into a timeout and I took a drink of water. The scoreboard read 3–0. Liam had added a shorthanded goal in the second that I'd watched from the other end of the ice. Liam had skated past the penalty box afterward and bowed to Drew, who was serving two minutes for tripping. Drew had flipped him off and laughed.

I glanced at the stands again. Sam was on her feet, clapping, and Viv was next to her cheering. Sam caught me looking and pointed at me, then cupped her hands around her mouth and yelled something I couldn't hear over the crowd. I didn't need to hear it. The look on her face said enough.

I couldn't wait to get home and celebrate properly.

Northern Idaho managed two more shots in the final minutes. A wrister from the circle that I gloved easily, and a last-second slap shot from the point that I blocked with my chest and smothered before the rebound could go anywhere.

Then the buzzer sounded.

It had been a shutout. Damn, that felt good. The best nights were the ones when no one got a goal past me.

The guys piled toward me, and I took the helmet taps and glove bumps without saying much. Foster grabbed my mask and shook it, his smile as big as mine no doubt was. Our senior year was bittersweet. We loved hockey and knew we'd never play it at this level after this season, so every victory felt just a little sweeter this year.

I quickly showered and dressed before heading out to find Sam and Viv waiting in the hallway. Sam's cheeks were flushed from the cold arena, and she had that bright, electric look she got after watching us play. Viv stood beside her, pride shining in her eyes.

"You didn't let a single one in," Sam said, sliding her arms around my waist.

"That's generally the goal."

She pinched my side and I caught her hand.

Viv watched us with a wistful expression I'd never seen on her before. "I should come to more of these," she said.

"You should. We've still got a few more weeks of games left before the end of the season." I'd love to have my sister in the crowd cheering me on.

We headed out together. The early March air was cold and sharp, and the mountains were invisible in the dark, but I knew they were there the same way I knew everything else that mattered in my life was exactly where it was supposed to be.

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THIRTY-SIX

Sam

I couldn't remember the last time I'd been this happy. I had never realized how exhausting *pretending* to be happy all the time was until I was finally able to feel it sincerely.

And I owed it all to the man in the driver's side of the car with his hand resting on my thigh.

It was early March, and the days were finally getting longer. The bitter cold that had settled over Montana for the last three months was loosening its grip just enough that I'd swapped my heavy parka for a lighter jacket, and the sun didn't disappear behind the mountains at four thirty anymore. Spring was still a ways off, but you could feel it coming a little closer every day.

Harry and I were driving back from a date night in Missoula. He'd taken me to a little Italian place that he'd been wanting to try for weeks because one of the guys on the team had mentioned they made their pasta fresh and experiment with different flavors. We'd split a bottle of red wine and eaten delicious food, although I was still partial to his homemade pasta.

He'd ordered tiramisu for dessert and fed me the first bite across the table. I'd let him, even though public displays of affection used to make me want to crawl out of my skin. With Harry, everything felt different though. Easy. Like I'd been holding my breath for five years and had finally remembered how to exhale. I found that I loved when he touched me or doted on me in public just as much as I loved when he did it in private.

I still had moments of self-doubt. They crept in at odd times—when I woke up before him and watched him sleep, wondering what he could possibly see in me, or when I caught myself laughing too hard and a voice

in the back of my head whispered that I didn't have the right to be so happy. Those moments were getting quieter, though. They didn't scream at me anymore. And on the days they were too loud, or sounded too much like my mom's voice, I could tell them they were wrong.

Most days, at least.

Today, not a single negative thought had flowed through my mind. I'd enjoyed a wonderful dinner with the man I loved and hadn't once questioned if I deserved to feel this happy.

It was progress.

He was driving us home with one hand on the steering wheel and the other resting on my thigh, his thumb tracing an absent pattern against my legs. I turned sideways in my seat, watching him, mesmerized by him—like I couldn't quite believe he was real.

God, he was gorgeous. The dashboard lights caught the line of his jaw, sharp enough to cut glass, and his dark hair was slightly mussed from where I'd run my fingers through it at the restaurant when I'd kissed him in the parking lot. His sleeves were rolled to the elbow the way they always were because Harry ran warm, and I could see the muscles in his forearms shift every time he adjusted the wheel. Just the sight of his hands—especially knowing how good those hands could make me feel—made my stomach flip.

I didn't know how I'd resisted this man for so long. Looking back, it seemed absurd that I'd agreed to fake date him and never once considered that he might actually want the real thing. That he'd wanted it for longer than I'd known. He'd waited for me without ever making me feel like I owed him anything for how long he'd waited, and that kind of patience was so rare it still made my chest ache when I thought about it too long.

He was my best friend. He was the person who saw every ugly, broken piece of me and still chose me. And he was mine.

Whether I deserved him or not.

God, I was so fucking happy it made me giddy. I nibbled my lip and he glanced over at me, arching a brow. "What?"

"Just admiring the view."

His lips lifted in a grin that matched mine. "Mine's better."

I shook my head but couldn't stop the ridiculous smile spreading across my face. I had to look away from him or I was going to do something reckless.

The highway stretched out ahead of us. A few cars passed in the opposite direction, their headlights sweeping briefly across the windshield before disappearing. The mountains on either side were just dark shapes against a slightly less dark sky. A song came on the radio that I hadn't heard in ages, and I gasped and lunged for the volume.

"Oh my gosh, I love this song!"

I cranked it up and started dancing in my seat—shoulders moving, head bobbing, feeling the beat. Harry glanced over, and the corner of his mouth pulled up higher as he smiled, but not like he was laughing at me—more like he found me endearing.

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"Don't just sit there, Harry. This is a classic."

"I'm driving."

"You can bop your head. Bopping is allowed while driving."

He did not bop his head. But his thumb started tapping against the steering wheel in time with the beat, which I still considered a win for Mr. Reserved.

I was singing along, badly and loudly, laughing between lyrics because I only remembered half the words and was making up the rest. The music filled the car, and my chest felt so full it almost hurt—except it wasn't pain. I didn't have a word for what it was. Contentment, maybe, or gratitude.

I looked over at Harry, whose eyes were still firmly on the road.

And for a split second, I was seventeen again.

Sitting in the passenger seat, music blaring through the speakers and feeling so happy my body almost couldn't contain it. Looking at the person driving and thinking that life couldn't possibly get better than this exact moment.

The thought brushed through me so fast I almost missed it. A whisper of déjà vu, gone before I could grab it. A flicker of something cold beneath all the warmth.

I brushed it aside and focused on living in the present. Enjoying this moment of peace.

We exited the highway and were making our way through town, taking the route we always took home. I was still singing, my eyes on Harry as we rolled through an intersection on a green light.

I never saw the other car.

There was no warning. One second I was looking at the man I loved, and the next, the world exploded.

And the sound of metal shrieking against metal, glass shattering, and tires screeching was all too familiar. The seatbelt locked hard across my chest and slammed me back, and my head snapped sideways and connected with something hard.

My brain fractured. I wasn't here anymore. I was in two places at once—this car, that car five years ago—and the overlap was so complete that I couldn't separate them. Harry's voice was somewhere, calling my name or maybe just shouting, but it was muffled like it was coming from underwater, or from another timeline entirely.

I couldn't reach it. I couldn't reach anything.

Something warm and wet slid down my face, but I couldn't move my hands to wipe it away. I felt frozen in my body, my mind playing games on me. Had I fallen asleep? Was this real? This couldn't be real.

No.

No, no, no.

This couldn't happen again.

I tried to turn my head. Tried to see Harry. Tried to make sure he was still there, still breathing, still alive, because the last time I'd been in a car that sounded like this the person next to me had—

The thought wouldn't finish. My brain refused to complete it.

The car had stopped moving, and the world was tilting at an angle that didn't make sense. I could hear something but it was fading. Everything was fading. The edges of my vision went gray, then dark, closing in from the sides like a curtain being drawn.

I tried to say his name. Harry. It formed in my mouth but I didn't know if it made it out.

And then the world went black.

THIRTY-SEVEN

Gordy

Everything was upside down. The seatbelt was cutting into my chest, my arms were hanging beneath me, and for a fraction of a second, my brain couldn't make sense of any of it. Then the windshield came into focus, and everything clicked into place with a sickening lurch.

I turned my head toward the passenger's side, and my stomach nearly revolted at the impact my car had taken on her side. "Sam—Sam, talk to me."

She didn't answer. Her eyes were closed and her head was hanging limp against the seatbelt, blonde hair falling toward the roof beneath her. I said her name again. Louder. She still didn't move.

Fuck.

I needed to get out of this car. I braced one hand against the roof—which was now the floor—and unhooked my seatbelt with the other. The drop was only a few inches, but the impact sent pain shooting up my shoulder. I ignored it and crawled through the shattered driver's side window, glass biting into my palms and forearms as I pulled myself free.

My phone was still in my pants pocket, and I had it in my hand dialing 911 before I was fully upright.

The other car was somewhere off to my right—I caught the shape of it in my periphery, up on the curb, but I couldn't focus on it long enough to register more than that. I should check on them. I knew that. But I couldn't do anything until I knew Sam was okay.

I crouched next to the passenger side and put the phone on speaker.

"911, what's your emergency?"

“There’s been an accident.” My voice came out too loud but I couldn’t seem to regulate it. “An intersection in Dunridge... we’re—” I looked around for a street sign but nothing registered. Everything beyond a few feet of Sam’s window was smeared and indistinct, like trying to read through water. I’d taken this road hundreds of times, but my brain couldn’t focus, couldn’t find the names among the worry clawing at me as I stared at Sam’s unconscious form. “Two vehicles. One flipped. I need you to hurry. Please.”

The operator was asking me something but I’d stopped hearing her.

A thick line of blood ran from Sam’s hairline down the side of her face. The sight of it emptied every rational thought from my head like someone had pulled a plug.

“Sam. No... Sam.”

I reached in and fumbled with her seatbelt. My fingers weren’t cooperating. They were too big, clumsy and shaking so hard that it took me three tries to press the release. I caught her weight as she dropped and pulled her through the window as carefully as I could, one arm under her shoulders and one behind her head, and then I was sitting on the pavement holding her against my chest.

She was breathing, but it wasn’t a relief because she still wasn’t waking up and her skin was too pale against the bright red blood on her face and in her hair.

“Sam. Baby, come on.” I brushed the hair from her face, my hand leaving a smear of her blood across her cheek. “I need you to wake up. You’ve got to fight. You have to fight for me, Sam, please.” My voice was thick, and the panic was shredding my chest apart.

The 911 operator was still talking from the phone on the ground beside me, but I couldn’t process a word of it.

Then there were voices. I glanced up and other cars had stopped. A man and a woman were running toward us from a nearby house. The woman dropped to her knees beside us.

“What can we do to help?”

I shook my head. For the first time in my life I couldn’t formulate a plan. On the ice, I read the play and I reacted. I was so fucking good at that. But there was no play to read here and no save to make and my hands—the same hands I trusted with everything—were shaking against the woman I

loved more than I'd ever known was possible and I couldn't make them stop.

How did I fix this?

How did I save the one person who mattered more than anyone else in the world?

The man jogged toward the other car. The woman stayed, her hand on my arm, saying things I nodded at and immediately forgot.

All I could see was Sam.

The blood.

Her closed eyes.

Her faint breathing.

"Sam. I need you to open your eyes." My voice had gone quiet and I barely recognized it. "Open your eyes for me. Please."

Sirens sounded in the distance and then grew louder until finally red and blue lights were washing across the pavement. After that, everything blurred together. Voices. Hands. Someone crouching in front of me, and then someone else trying to pull my attention away from Sam.

"Sir—sir, I need to take a look at you."

"I'm fine. Help her."

"My partner's going to take her. I need you to let me check you out."

I didn't let go of Sam's hand until the other EMT told me they needed space to work. I made myself release her fingers, but it was one of the hardest things I'd ever done.

The EMT in front of me was shining a light in my eyes. Asking me questions. Did I lose consciousness? Did I know what day it was? Could I tell him where I was? I answered on autopilot while I watched them work on Sam over his shoulder. They put a collar around her neck. Then a backboard. Then they were lifting her onto a stretcher, and I tried to stand but the EMT put a hand on my chest.

"Hold on. You've got glass in your hands and your shoulder might be dislocated. We need to—"

"It's not dislocated." I'd played through a dislocated shoulder before. This wasn't that. "I'll get checked out at the hospital. Right now I need to be with her."

He looked at me for a second, then nodded.

They were loading Sam into the ambulance. I climbed in after her, and nobody stopped me. The inside was bright and it smelled faintly like

antiseptic. But my entire focus was on the monitor connected to Sam that was beeping—each beep proof that her heart was still beating. I collapsed on the seat and grabbed her hand, ignoring the slight sting in my palm. My pain didn't matter right now. The only thing that mattered was her.

The EMT was working on Sam, checking things, calling out numbers to her partner. I caught fragments. *Stable. Reactive. Good sign.* I held on to those words with a death grip.

The female EMT said something directly to me at one point. I think she was telling me Sam's vitals were strong.

For a second I thought she was moving—a twitch of her fingers and a shift in her wrist—until I realized it was *my* hand. I was shaking so hard that her hand was moving with mine.

I'd always been steady. On the ice, in front of my family, in every high-pressure moment of my life. I was the one who was calm and put together. That was who I was. It was the only thing I'd ever been certain about.

But right now I was struggling.

I needed to stay steady for her. I couldn't fall apart while she needed my strength.

I tightened my grip and forced my hands to stop. I focused on the beeping of the monitor and let the rhythm ground me.

Beep. Beep. Beep.

She was alive. Her heart was beating. I was going to hold on to that until someone told me different.

When we got to the hospital, the back doors opened and then Sam was being wheeled through automatic doors into a hallway that was too bright and too white. I kept pace, her hand in mine, until a nurse stepped in front of me.

"This is as far as you can go, sir."

"I can't—"

"We're going to take her back and get her assessed, okay? But this is as far as you can go until she's stabilized and we know what we're dealing with." Her voice was firm but kind. "Is there someone we can call for you?"

"No." I could make those calls myself.

She looked at my hands—the cuts clearly unattended to—and then at my face. "We're going to need to take a look at you too."

"After."

“Sir. You can’t do anything for her right now except make sure that you’re okay so you can be there when she wakes up. Let me take a look at those hands and check you out for other injuries.”

I heard her words, but my gaze followed Sam’s body as they pushed the gurney through double doors that closed with a click—an automatic lock for only authorized personnel to bypass.

I stared at those doors. At the small window where I could see the stretcher disappearing around a corner. And then there was nothing to see.

I swallowed thickly as I looked at the nurse and gave her a short nod. “Let me make a call first.”

She went to the nurses’ station, but she kept her eyes on me as I leaned against the wall, pulling out my phone. I sank to the floor, my body giving out on me as emotions pummeled me. I braced my elbows on my knees and closed my eyes, leaning my head back against the wall, trying to find something stable to ground me. Terror was thrumming through me worse than anything I’d ever felt.

This was the kind of fear that lived in your chest and squeezed until you couldn’t tell if you were breathing or not.

I opened my eyes and looked at my phone screen, scrolling to his name and pressing call.

It rang twice.

“Hello?”

“Foster?” My voice broke on his name. “There’s been an accident.”

That was all I got out before I broke down.

I couldn’t lose her.

I’d never survive it.

THIRTY-EIGHT

Gordy

I'd called Foster because I knew he would rally the troops.

He hadn't even asked me to repeat myself. I'd barely gotten the words out—*accident, hospital, Sam*—and his voice had gone all Captain. “Which hospital?”

They'd all arrived within the hour. Foster and Abby first, then Drew and Harper with Rory in her car seat, then Liam and Ava with Eric hot on their heels. I'd texted Viv and she'd shown up not long after Eric.

That had been four hours ago.

The waiting room was small and too bright, with fluorescent lights that hummed at a frequency I was convinced was designed to make everything feel worse. The chairs were hard plastic, and a television mounted in the corner played the news on mute, closed captions scrolling across the bottom like the world outside was still happening.

I couldn't fathom that. The world outside should've stopped.

Everything inside me felt like it was frozen while I waited for news of Sam's condition, and yet the world kept moving. It didn't make sense.

My hands were wrapped in white gauze where a nurse had picked glass out of my palms and cleaned the cuts. She'd also checked my shoulder which was bruised but not dislocated, like I'd told the EMT. They'd insisted on imaging, and I'd sat through the CT scan with my jaw clenched because every minute in that machine was a minute I wasn't in the waiting room when news could come. The scans had come back clean but I didn't care. I hadn't cared about my own body since the moment I'd crawled out of that car.

I stared at my gauze-covered hands, my mind flashing back to the moment right before the accident. Guilt slithered through my gut as helplessness ate away at me. I could see plays clearly on the ice. It was my job to see several steps ahead and block a goal. How had my instincts failed me so horrifically in that moment in the car? How had I not seen the other car not slowing down as we came to the intersection? Why didn't I ignore the green light and look both ways anyway?

Abby was curled into Foster's side, her face ghostly white. She hadn't said much since she'd arrived. Foster had told me quietly, when we'd gotten up to grab coffee and snacks for everyone about an hour in, that he was worried about her. After losing her parents and then her Gram, he didn't know what another loss would do to her.

I hadn't known what to say to that. I'd never lost anyone before. And yet I already knew with absolute certainty that if Sam didn't make it through this, the person I'd been before tonight wouldn't either.

Drew was pacing, something he'd been doing since he got here. His shoes made a squeaking noise against the linoleum floor, but instead of being annoying, the rhythm of it had become oddly grounding. Harper sat with Rory asleep against her chest, her hand resting on the baby's back, and I'd caught her eyes tracking Drew's path back and forth, clearly worried about him. Liam sat with his elbows on his knees and his leg bouncing, cracking his knuckles every few minutes until Drew told him to stop and Liam told Drew to stop wearing a hole in the floor, and then neither of them stopped.

Eric sat next to me. He hadn't spoken much either, but at one point he'd leaned over and asked me to walk him through exactly what happened. I told him everything I could remember. The green light. The impact on the passenger side. The blood. He'd listened without interrupting, his jaw tight, and when I finished he'd put his hand on my shoulder and squeezed once.

"She's tough," he said.

I nodded because I didn't trust my voice. She *was* tough. She was the toughest person I knew.

But tough didn't make you invincible, and right now she was somewhere behind a set of double doors I couldn't get past, and every minute that ticked by without news made the walls close in a little more.

Eric had texted Jordan and his parents. Jordan was catching a flight as soon as possible. Neither of his parents had responded. I wasn't surprised

although it brought them even lower in my book than they'd been before. Eric, however, was fuming more and more the longer they didn't respond.

I stared at those double doors. The same ones they'd wheeled her through when we arrived. I'd memorized every detail of them by now—the scuff marks at the bottom, the small rectangular window, the sign that read **AUTHORIZED PERSONNEL ONLY**. I kept waiting for someone to come through them and tell me she was awake and everything was going to be fine.

No one came.

And the longer we waited, the more my guilt grew until it felt like a living, breathing thing festering inside of me. I'd messed up, and if Sam didn't make it, I'd never forgive myself.

The coffee Foster and I had gotten sat untouched on the chair beside me, having gone cold a long time ago. Liam had eaten most of the snacks and then offered to get more, but no one was really hungry. We all just sat there, existing in the kind of silence that only happened when you were in limbo, waiting on news that had the power to change your life in unimaginable ways.

Another hour crawled past. Then finally the double doors opened and a doctor stepped through.

Every single one of us stood up.

The doctor scanned the waiting room and seemed momentarily taken aback by the size of the group. "Family for Samantha Lowe?"

We all raised our hands, and I watched the doctor's expression shift as he tried to reconcile the question with all the hands in the air.

Eric stepped forward. "I'm her brother. Eric Lowe."

The doctor nodded and glanced at the rest of us. Eric didn't hesitate. "Whatever you need to say, you can say it in front of all of them. Everyone's family here."

The doctor looked at Eric for a moment, then spoke. Sam had sustained a head wound that had caused some bleeding, but they didn't believe it had caused lasting neurological trauma. There had been some internal bleeding as well, which they'd been able to stop surgically. But she had slipped into a coma, and they weren't entirely sure why. They wouldn't know her full condition, or whether there was additional neurological involvement, until she woke up.

Until. He'd said *until*, not *if*. I held on to that word like a rope thrown into dark water.

"Can we see her?" Eric asked.

"One at a time," the doctor said. "If she does wake up, I don't want to overwhelm her with a room full of people."

Eric turned to me immediately. "You go first."

I looked at him in surprise. He had every right to walk through those doors before anyone else, but he shook his head before I could argue.

"She'd want you," he said. "Go."

I followed the doctor through the double doors I'd been staring at for five hours. Down a hallway, past rooms with curtains drawn, machines beeping, and the low murmur of voices I didn't register. Then we stopped at a door and the doctor gestured me in.

I walked to her bedside and froze. She had dark circles under her eyes, and her skin was still too pale. There was a bandage wrapped around her head, and her blonde hair was more matted and tangled than I'd ever seen it. An IV line ran into her left hand. A monitor beside the bed tracked her heartbeat in a steady green line, and the beeping was the same rhythm I'd clung to in the ambulance.

She looked like she was sleeping. If I didn't know better, I could convince myself she'd just dozed off on the couch at the hockey house after a long day and I'd come to carry her to bed.

But I did know better.

The doctor left and closed the door behind him. The room got very quiet and still with only the beeping and hum of the machines and the sound of my own breathing, which was shakier than I wanted it to be.

I pulled the chair next to her bed and sat down. I found her hand—the one without the IV—and wrapped both of mine around it. Her fingers were warm, which was something. Warm meant alive. Warm meant blood was moving, her heart was working, and, most importantly, she was still here.

"Hey, Sam."

My throat tightened and I had to stop. I leaned forward, pressing my forehead against our joined hands, and focused on breathing until the tightness loosened enough to let words through.

"I need you to come back." My voice was rough and barely above a whisper. "I know you're in there somewhere, and I need you to fight your way out. You're the strongest person I've ever met and I'm not just saying

that. I've watched you battle bigger obstacles than this, like surviving your parents' house for two weeks and having the courage to get back on the ice after five years. I've watched you carry guilt that was never yours to carry and still show up for every single person you love without asking for anything in return." I swallowed hard. "So I know you can do this. I know you can come back from this because you've come back from worse."

I lifted my head and looked at her face, my gaze catching on the bandage, her closed eyes, and the stillness in her body that was so wrong on a person who was so rarely still. This was the woman who danced in the kitchen and sang in the car. She moved through the world like it was something to be grabbed with both hands.

"I love you." The words came out cracked but steady. "And I'm not going anywhere. I'll be right here in this chair every single day until you open your eyes and tell me to stop hovering." I almost smiled, but couldn't quite get there. "You're going to hate how much I hover. You're going to tell me you're fine and try to get up too fast and I'm going to drive you absolutely crazy, but I don't care. I don't care, Sam. Just come back so you can yell at me about it."

Her hand didn't move in mine. The monitor beeped, steady and unchanged.

"Please." My voice broke on the word and I stopped fighting it, letting the tears come. There was no one here to see them, and even if there had been, I wouldn't have cared. "Please, baby. Wake up. I need you."

The room stayed quiet, and my helplessness grew to a fever pitch.

I had never been a religious person. The Gordons were far too pragmatic for organized religion.

But sitting in that hospital room, holding the hand of the woman who had become every good thing in my life, I prayed. To God, to the universe, to Pop's Montana sky, to whatever power might exist beyond what I could see and control.

I begged.

I bargained.

I offered up everything I had and everything I would ever have—the trust fund, the Gordon name, hockey, all of it—if someone, anyone, *anything* would just let her open her eyes.

The monitor beeped.

I held her hand tighter and waited.

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THIRTY-NINE

Gordy

My walk back to the waiting room was slow, like there was lead in my shoes that got heavier with every step I took farther away from her. Every part of me had resisted the idea of letting go of her hand and walking out of that room. But we could only visit with her one at a time, and I wasn't so much of a dick that I wouldn't let her brother get some time with her. I knew he was just as worried as I was.

So I made my way back to the waiting room to give him a chance before I commandeered the room again.

I rounded the corner and pushed through the double doors before coming to an abrupt stop.

Pop was standing in the middle of the waiting room. He was in his ranch coat—the old canvas one with the frayed collar that he'd owned for as long as I could remember—over a flannel that was misbuttoned, like he'd dressed in a hurry. Viv was next to him, worrying her lip between her teeth as they both stared at me.

Pop crossed the room in four strides and wrapped me in a hug so tight that it cracked the composure I'd been barely holding together. I gripped the back of his coat and held on. He smelled like wood smoke and coffee just like always, and the smell was so comforting that I felt the tension I'd been carrying since the accident ease a little.

"I got here as quick as I could," he said. Considering Big Sky was four hours away, I was surprised he was here at all. I glanced at Viv and she gave me a small smile.

"I called him. I called Mom and Dad too, but they didn't answer." It was the middle of the night on the East Coast. They might return her call in the

morning, but likely they wouldn't. I didn't feel like calling them myself. I couldn't stand the cold distance of my parents right now.

I needed the warmth of the family that was always there for me, no strings attached.

Eric walked over to us. "How was she?"

"Sleeping." My voice was gruffer than normal, but it couldn't be helped. My emotions were all over the place tonight. "I figured you'd want some time with her."

He patted me on the back and made his way to the nurses' station where they buzzed him through the double doors. I watched him until the doors closed, then Pop grabbed my shoulder.

"Come take a walk with me," he said. "Her brother will be with her for a while."

A part of me was afraid of moving any farther away from her, but the bigger part knew I was on the edge of a breakdown, and I didn't want that to happen in front of all my friends.

So, I followed Pop as he made his way toward the exit and back into the cold night air. He walked to a bench a few feet away from the entrance and sat down, gesturing for me to take the spot next to him.

Neither of us spoke for a while. Pop had never been the type to fill silence, and right now I was grateful for that because I didn't have any words that wouldn't break apart the second I tried to voice them.

The truth was I was scared down to my marrow. I couldn't recall another time in my life where I'd been scared. But right now, I was terrified. I felt like my own life was in limbo, waiting with bated breath for Sam to decide my fate. If she didn't survive...

He reached into his coat pocket and pulled out a small flask, unscrewing the top and handing it to me.

"I don't normally recommend drinking your problems away, but it's cold and the whiskey will help warm up the blood a bit."

I took a sip and the warmth spread through my chest. "Thanks," I choked out.

We sat in silence a little longer—I was convinced I'd gotten my stoicism from Pop—before he spoke again. "You can let it out, you know. It doesn't make you weak to feel, especially not for the woman you love."

The dam broke.

I told him everything I could remember about the accident—every minuscule moment I could remember and all the moments I missed.

Pop listened without interrupting. When I finished, I stared at the parking lot and felt the guilt gnaw deeper.

“I should’ve seen it,” I said. “I had a green light but I should’ve looked anyway. I should’ve—”

“Should’ve what?” Pop’s voice was even. “Read the mind of a driver running a red?”

“I read plays all the time. I see things before they happen. That’s what I do.”

“On the ice.”

“Everywhere.” My voice cracked and I hated it. “That’s who I am. I’m the one who always sees it coming. I should’ve seen it and stopped. I should’ve protected her. I was sitting right next to her and I couldn’t—” I stopped because the rest of that sentence was going to take me apart.

Pop was quiet for a moment before he took the flask back from me and took a swig himself.

“When your grandmother got sick,” he said, “I spent every night in a chair just like the ones in there. And every night, I’d lie awake running through everything I should’ve done different. Should’ve made her go to the doctor sooner. Should’ve noticed she was tired before she told me. Should’ve pushed harder when she said she was fine.” He turned the cap between his hands. “I made myself sick with it. Replaying every conversation, every moment, looking for the one where I could’ve caught it and changed what was coming.”

He looked at me. “You know what all that guilt got me?”

I shook my head.

“Nothing. Not a damn thing. It didn’t help her. It didn’t change the outcome. It just ate me alive while she needed me present.” He put the flask back in his pocket. “Your girl is going to wake up. And when she does, she’s going to need you whole—not eaten alive by guilt over something you couldn’t control.”

I stared at the ground. My throat was tight and my eyes were burning again. I didn’t trust myself to speak.

“Your grandmother used to say that the strongest thing a man can do is accept what he can’t change and show up for what he can.” He put his hand on my shoulder, the weight of it heavy, warm, and steady. “You couldn’t

stop the accident. But you can be there when she opens her eyes. That's the play now."

"Thanks, Pop. Not just for this, but for coming all this way."

He pulled me into a side hug. "There's nothing I wouldn't do for you, kid. I'm so proud of the young man you've become. This is a rough bump in the road, but I know you'll get through this too."

I hoped he was right. Talking with him had eased some of my guilt, but the fear was still there. And I suspected that wouldn't go away until Sam woke up.

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FORTY

Sam

I wasn't sure where I was, but it was really fucking bright. And I had once again clearly misplaced my sunglasses.

I could hear people talking, but the voices and words were vague, like listening to a conversation through water. I felt like I was surrounded by clouds, and I couldn't really see anything, but I could sense something was there. A presence. A pull.

"Hello?"

Nothing. No response.

The room got brighter and I blinked. When I opened my eyes, I was suddenly in Mira's coffee shop.

But it looked different.

Well, no—it looked how it had looked *before* Mira bought it, when she'd worked there as just a barista. The walls were a little dingier, the tables clustered closer together. There was a chalkboard behind the counter with the day's specials written in that terrible handwriting that the old owner refused to let anyone fix. And in the corner by the window, there was a table with two chairs, one of them slightly pulled out, like someone had just gotten up.

It looked like it had when Bryce was alive.

My throat tightened.

"You're not supposed to be here, Ladybug."

I spun around and couldn't believe my eyes. He looked the same as I remembered him the last time I'd seen him. His blond hair—the exact same shade as mine—was slightly too long and falling across his forehead the way Mom used to nag him about. His eyes were the same bright blue. He

had that infectious grin on his face, the one that could talk anyone into anything, the one that had made teachers forgive him for late assignments and made Mira fall in love with him in the first place.

He was wearing his favorite old Seahawks hoodie with the frayed wrists.

I could hardly breathe, and my nose burned as tears filled my eyes. Without even hesitating, I ran up and hugged him.

He was solid. He was real.

Bryce was here.

He chuckled as his arms wrapped around me, holding me close. The laugh was so warm and so familiar it made me cry harder. God, I'd missed him so much. I'd missed the sound of his voice and the way he smelled like that cheap body spray he used too much of and the solid, safe feeling of my big brother hugging me tight.

Bryce had always given the best hugs.

"Hey, none of that, okay?" He squeezed me tighter. "You're getting snot on my hoodie."

A laugh choked out of me through the tears. "Sorry. I'm so sorry."

But I wasn't sorry about the snot. I was sorry about everything. The competition. The storm. The black ice. All of it.

He cupped my face and made me look at him. His grin had faded but his eyes still held the joy I remembered being there. "There you go apologizing again. Some things never change."

"Because it was my fault." The words came out raw. Even after everything I'd been through with the ice rink and standing up to Mom, there was still a part of me that believed it down to my bones. I'd started to loosen my grip on the guilt, started to believe I deserved happiness, but it was still always hovering in the background like a specter.

Bryce's expression fell. He dropped his hands from my face and took a step back, and for a horrible second I thought he was going to confirm it. That he was going to tell me what I'd always believed—that it was my fault, that I'd killed him, that I deserved every ounce of punishment I'd given myself for the last five years.

Instead, he pulled out one of the chairs at his corner table and sat down, propping his ankle on his knee the way he always used to. "Sit down, Sammy."

I sat.

He leaned back and studied me, and the look on his face was so achingly familiar—the same expression he’d worn whenever I was spiraling about a competition and he’d have to talk me off the ledge. It was patient and a little amused, like he had all the time in the world to torture me with his silence.

“You look good,” he said. “I mean, considering.”

“Considering what?”

“Considering you’re unconscious in a hospital bed right now.” His mouth twitched. “Your hair’s a mess, by the way. Like, really bad. If you could see it, you’d lose your mind. It definitely looks worse than that time we went camping and the squirrel attacked you.”

“That squirrel was feral,” I grumbled, but I still couldn’t believe he was really sitting here across from me talking about something as mundane as my hair.

“Where are we?”

“You tell me. It’s your subconscious.” He gestured around the coffee shop. “Although I’m flattered you picked our spot. I figured you’d go with the rink.”

“I never want to see another rink in my life.”

“Liar.” His grin widened. “I saw you skate. You were beautiful.”

My breath caught. “You saw that?”

“I see all of it, Sam.” His voice softened. “I saw you at the rink. I saw you stand up to Mom. I saw you tell her you were done apologizing.” He paused. “I also saw you fall in love with a six-foot-four hockey player who looks at you like you put the stars in the sky, which is another reason I know you won’t avoid rinks.”

I covered my face with my hands. “Oh my God.”

“What? He seems like a great guy. You could definitely do worse.”

“Bryce.”

“I’m just saying.” He held his palms up, still grinning. “The guy pined for you for over a year. I mean, that’s commitment.”

A flash of a memory, the sound of metal, and then Harry’s panicked voice flitted through my mind. There was an accident. I remembered that now.

“Am I dead?” I asked.

His grin faded. “No. But you’re not exactly thriving, either. You’re in between.”

“In between what?”

“Here and there.” He rested his elbows on the table. “You’ve got a choice to make.”

My stomach dropped. “What kind of choice?”

“The kind where you decide if you’re going back or staying here with me.”

The words hung in the air between us, and I waited for the terror to hit, but it didn’t. Staying here with Bryce. Being with my brother again, in this warm, quiet coffee shop where nothing hurt and no one looked at me with the blame or pity that had lived on my mother’s face every time she saw me. How many times had I thought about what it would be like if I’d died with Bryce? If everything would be better if I hadn’t survived?

“Would that be so bad?” I whispered. “Staying?”

Something shifted in his expression. The teasing big brother fell away, and what was left underneath was somber. “Yeah, Sam. It would.”

“Why? You’re here. This is—” I looked around the coffee shop. “It’s peaceful. No one’s blaming me for anything. I don’t have to perform or pretend or—”

“You were never pretending.” His voice was firm. “That’s the part you never got. You think the person you became in Montana was some kind of mask, but she’s not. She’s you. The girl who held Abby together when her gram died—that’s you. The girl who moved into a hockey house full of boys so her best friend could live with her boyfriend—that’s you. The girl who makes everyone around her feel like they matter—that’s *you*, Sam. You didn’t build that person to hide from what happened. You built her because that’s who you always were to begin with.”

My jaw tightened and I stared at the table. “If I’d never insisted on going to that competition, you’d still be alive.”

“Maybe.” His gaze locked on mine. “Or maybe I would’ve wiped out on my bike the next week, or gotten hit crossing the street, or choked on a hot dog. You don’t know. You’ve been carrying a ‘what if’ for five years like it’s a fact, and it’s not.”

“Mom said—”

“Mom is broken.” His voice was gentle but unflinching. “And broken people break the people around them. She lost her son and she didn’t know what to do with that grief, so she aimed it at you because you were the easiest target. That doesn’t make it true.”

I shook my head, but I was starting to remember things I'd repressed after the accident—after guilt had felt like it was eating me alive. “You would’ve talked me into going anyway.” His eyes lit up and his lips lifted in a grin. “You told Mira once—when you know something’s right, you go after it, and you don’t let fear make the decision for you.”

“*And here we observe the elusive Samantha Lowe, using her brother’s own words against him in a stunning display of self-awareness.*” He said it in that terrible British accent—the one he used for his nature documentary narrations—and the sound of it was so specific, so *him*, that it nearly broke me.

“Don’t,” I whispered.

“Don’t what? Don’t remind you that I was a whole person who loved my life and would have never, ever wanted you to spend yours punishing yourself for something that wasn’t your fault?” He leaned forward. “Sam, you told Mom you were done apologizing. You chose yourself for the first time in five years. And then you ended up here, by no fault of your own, and you’re really going to tell me you want to stay?”

“It’s not that simple.”

“It is that simple.”

“No, it’s *not*.” My voice cracked and the tears came again, hot and angry. “You don’t understand what it’s been like. Five years, Bryce. Five years of seeing your face every time I closed my eyes. Five years of Mom’s silence and Dad’s guilt—hell, my own fucking guilt—and feeling like I stole your entire future. Five years of choosing men who couldn’t get close because I didn’t believe I deserved someone to love. Five years of holding everyone else together so I never had to sit still long enough to feel how shattered I was.”

I pressed the heels of my palms into my eyes. “And I was *just* starting to let that go. I was just starting to believe that maybe I could be happy. Harry’s—” My voice broke. “He makes me feel like I deserve good things. And the last thing I remember is the sound of metal and his voice screaming my name, and now I’m here with you and you’re asking me to *choose* like it’s so easy?”

Bryce was quiet for a long moment. When I finally dropped my hands and looked at him, his eyes were sad.

“Yeah,” he said softly. “I’m asking you to choose. Because I know what you’d pick if the guilt was making the decision. You’d stay here with me

out of penance, not love. And I won't let you do that."

The words hit me deep. It was exactly what I'd been running from for so long. I opened my mouth to argue, but nothing came out.

"So I'm asking you something no one's asked you in five years." He met my gaze. "Not what you owe anyone. Not who needs you. But *what do you want, Sam?*"

The question shocked the breath from my lungs.

What did I want?

What did *I* want, if I stripped away the guilt, obligation, and years of self-punishment?

The answer came like waves gently washing over my feet as I stood in the sand on a beach. Harry pulling me in by the waist as I danced past him in the kitchen and kissing me like I was all he needed to breathe. Abby's head on my shoulder during a movie. Liam playing up his accent when he wanted attention or drank too much. Drew's ridiculous dad jokes, which had gotten worse since he became an actual dad. Holding sweet little Rory in my arms.

I wanted to cook breakfast with Harry on Sunday mornings. I wanted to graduate and get a job that I loved but that also drove me a little crazy sometimes. I wanted to buy a house and have a family of my own.

I wanted to *live*. I wasn't done with this life yet.

"I want to go back," I said. And for the first time, the words didn't feel like an apology.

Bryce smiled wide, his face so full of pride it made my chest ache. "There she is. That's the sister I know and love."

He pushed back from the table and stood. I did too, and he pulled me into another hug. I buried my face in his chest and held on tight. His hand came up and cupped the back of my head the way he used to when I was little and crying about a bad competition. I let myself stay there for one more minute. Just one.

"I need you to do something for me," he said against my hair.

"Anything."

"Stop carrying me like a debt. Carry me like a gift." He pulled back and looked at me. "Remember me the way Mira does—like it's an honor, not a punishment."

My lip trembled but I nodded.

He looked behind me. "Turn around."

When I turned, the coffee shop was gone and we were standing in a hospital room. My body was on the bed, pale and still. And oh God, my hair. Bryce wasn't joking; it did look almost as bad as when I got attacked by the squirrel.

Harry was in the chair beside me, hunched forward with his forehead pressed against our joined hands. White gauze was wrapped around his palms, and his shoulders were shaking.

Even from here, I could hear his voice—rough and barely above a whisper.

I need you to come back to me. Please.

Bryce nudged my shoulder. "I approve, for what it's worth."

I laughed through my tears but couldn't look away from Harry. I knew that broken look on his face, the fear that was burrowing into his features. It had been on mine whenever I'd looked in the mirror right after Bryce died. The look of someone who was bargaining with the universe for a miracle they weren't sure they deserved.

"You have to go back," Bryce whispered. "It's not your time and you've made your choice."

I turned to him one more time and memorized every detail I could take in—the fraying hoodie, his too-long hair, and my favorite, the grin that could talk anyone into anything.

"I love you," I said.

"Love you too, Ladybug." He chucked my chin. "Now go."

I hugged my brother once more, and then closed my eyes.

FORTY-ONE

Gordy

Sam hadn't moved in two days.

Forty-eight hours of torture and terror. There was still nothing wrong that they could identify, but she just wouldn't wake up.

The nurses had stopped asking me to leave when visitor hours officially ended. One of the older ones who worked nights, Denise, brought me an extra pillow without being asked. The day nurse, Carla, had a recliner brought into the room that lay flat so it could be used as a bed. But sleep had been hard to come by. Sleeping required your body to relax, and mine was strained so taut with stress and worry there was no chance of relaxing.

Foster had brought me a bag of clothes and food. The guys seemed to be rotating on who was on food duty, but every meal was delivered like clockwork, and someone was always there to make sure I actually ate it.

I spent the time talking to her, even though I wasn't sure she could hear me. I told her about Pop's ranch and the summer I'd learned to cook. I told her about the first game I'd played at CFU, how the arena had been half-empty and I'd let in three goals but still felt freer than I ever had in my life. I told her I loved her. I said it so many times, hoping each time would be the one when she'd open her eyes and I'd hear her say it back again.

But she didn't move.

The monitor kept beeping and the IV dripped.

And Sam stayed still.

I leaned forward in the recliner, elbows on my knees, her hand cradled between both of mine. My thumbs traced slow circles on the back of her hand the way I'd been doing for two days, mapping the ridges of her knuckles like I was trying to memorize them.

“You know what I keep thinking about?” My voice was rough. I’d stopped caring about how wrecked I sounded. “Do you remember that night at the house when you walked in on us singing to Rory? She’d been crying nonstop and Liam came up with this stupid idea that she was a girl and would like music and being sung to, so we gave it a shot.” A smile pulled at my lips at the memory. “Liam did some kind of folk-rap lullaby if I recall correctly, and the only nursery rhyme I knew was “Twinkle, Twinkle” but I couldn’t remember the rest of the words and just kept repeating that over and over. And then we looked up and you were standing in the doorway in that little black dress and matching high heels.” I huffed a laugh. “God, you have no idea how hard I had to fight my body’s reaction when I caught sight of you. And then you made fun of my pajamas.” I ducked my head, the memory making me smile but also bittersweet while she was still in a coma. “I loved it when you razzed me about stuff. But then I said good night and went upstairs because staying in that room with you looking at me like that would’ve undone me.”

I pressed my forehead against our joined hands. “But I looked back. Halfway up the stairs, I couldn’t help myself, and God, your ass in that dress was a sight to behold.” I exhaled. “You have no idea how many nights I debated just kissing you to see what it was like. I tried to convince myself it wouldn’t be as good as the fantasy, but you are so much better than any fantasy.”

I swallowed. “There was never going to be anyone else for me. I could’ve waited another year, another five years—it wouldn’t have mattered. It was always going to be you.”

I lifted my head and looked at her face. Her color was better today, but her hair was still a tangled mess, and I had no doubt she’d be furious about it when she woke up.

Not if, but when. Because she *had* to wake up.

“I need you to fight, Sam.” My voice cracked on her name. I’d said this before. Every day, multiple times. I’d tried coaxing her stubbornness. Told her I’d let her pick every movie for a month. Told her I’d make her those lemon bars she loved whenever she wanted. Tried every angle I could think of because I was desperate. “I need you to come back to me. Please.”

I closed my eyes and dropped my head to her hands. “I’d give anything to go back to that night and not waste any time. I’d tell you how fucking

gorgeous you were and how in love I was with you, and we would've had more time together. I need more time, Sam."

Her hand moved.

My head snapped up, my eyes wide and locked on her face.

Her eyelids fluttered and her brow creased as she winced, like the room was too bright. Then her lips parted and a small, cracked sound came out that was barely a whisper.

"I knew you were checking out my ass that night."

A mix between a laugh and a sob escaped my mouth. Tears blurred my vision as I brought her hand to my mouth, pressing my lips against her knuckles. Then I was standing, leaning over her, cupping her neck and resting my forehead against hers.

"Sam." Her name came out wrecked. "Sam, fuck, baby, please never scare me like that again."

Her eyes opened slowly before she winced again, and I quickly jumped up and closed the curtains to dim the light in the room. When her blue eyes finally met mine, it felt like I took the first full breath I'd taken in days.

"Harry." Her voice was still scratchy from lack of use, but God, it was so good to hear it. Before she could ask, I grabbed the cup of water the nurses had left in the room with a straw just in case she woke up and put it to her lips.

She took a small sip, and then another.

"Thanks," she said, her voice a little stronger. "How long have I been out?" she whispered.

"Two days."

Her eyes widened slightly. Then her gaze traced over my face— no doubt seeing the stubble I hadn't bothered to shave and the shadows under my eyes from lack of decent sleep.

She squeezed my hand. "I love you, Harry."

I leaned down and pressed my lips to her forehead, mindful of the bandage. "I love you too, Sam," I said against her skin. "I love you so much." All the fear I'd carried came out in a rush. "I was so afraid I was going to lose you."

Her fingers tightened around mine. "I'm not going anywhere. You're stuck with me for life."

I huffed out a watery laugh. "You promise?"

Her lips lifted in a small smile. "Promise," she whispered, her voice still a bit hoarse.

The door opened and Carla appeared, taking one look at Sam's open eyes before a wide smile broke out across her face. "Well, hello there," she said, already moving to check the monitors. "Welcome back, Sam. You had quite a lot of people worried. Let me grab the doctor."

She slipped out and returned a few minutes later with the doctor right behind her. He ran through a series of checks to assess if there were any neurological impairments. She could remember her name, the year, and where she was, but she couldn't remember the accident itself, which the doctor said was normal. They'd run more tests, but the initial signs were strong.

When they left, the room went quiet again and Sam's eyes found mine, but they looked heavier than they had a few minutes ago.

"Sleep," I told her.

"I've been sleeping for two days. I don't understand why I'm so tired."

"Your body is recovering. Give it what it needs. It's okay. I'll be here when you wake up."

"You better be," she murmured. Her eyes closed, and within seconds her breathing evened out and her lips parted slightly.

A few minutes later, the door opened quietly and two figures slipped in.

Jordan stopped at the foot of the bed, his jaw tight and his eyes red-rimmed. He looked like he hadn't slept much either. Eric was right behind him, and his face crumpled the second he saw his sister sleeping.

"The nurse came out to the waiting room and told us she woke up."

"She did. She's just resting right now. She'll be okay."

They both seemed to sag with relief. They'd been here nearly as much as I had although they'd opted to wait in the waiting room instead of crowding Sam's room.

Jordan leaned against the wall, his gaze locked on Sam's sleeping form while Eric took the other chair next to her bed.

"Have you heard from your parents?"

"Just Dad," Jordan said. "He asked if he should come. But I'm leaving it up to her. After what happened at the rink, this is her call. If she wants him here, then we'll let him know, but he certainly doesn't deserve it after how he's treated her. Honestly, I'm surprised he offered at all considering we haven't heard a word from Mom. Eric and I agreed we're done trying to

force this family back together. All that matters is that Sam knows we're here for her no matter what."

We exchanged a look that conveyed the gratitude I felt. He knew. He got it.

"I texted Foster, and he's letting everyone else know that she's awake," Eric said before shooting me a smile. "I have no doubt they'll all show up in the next half hour."

I let my own smile lift my face. I had no doubt he was right. They'd bring food and flowers and converge on the hospital, making sure Sam knew how loved she was.

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FORTY-TWO

Sam

Turned out, getting in a car accident the second time around was marginally less traumatic than the first. And by marginally, I mean that nobody died and I walked away with bruises and a scar down my stomach instead of a shattered life, so the bar was admittedly low.

It had been two weeks since I'd been discharged from the hospital, and while my ribs and abdomen were still sore, the doctors were calling me lucky. I'd gotten a moderate concussion, some internal bleeding that they'd stopped surgically with a laparotomy, bruised ribs, and a collection of other bruises from the impact. But there was no lasting damage, neurological issues, or broken bones. The scar was much more noticeable than the small ones I'd gotten from my last accident, but it was a reminder that I'd chosen to live.

It could've been so much worse.

We'd found out the other driver had been driving under the influence of alcohol and drugs and was currently in jail awaiting sentencing for vehicular assault while intoxicated, DUI, and reckless endangerment.

My professors had been surprisingly accommodating. I'd expected to have to grovel and beg for extensions, but most of them had just emailed me get-well messages and adjusted my deadlines. I guess that was the benefit of going to a college in a small town. My professors got to know me personally, and they knew I wasn't a flake. One of my comm professors had sent me a card signed by the entire class, which I'd cried over in bed while Harry held me. I'd been a little more emotional after the accident.

The good news was that even though I was behind, I wasn't so far behind that my graduation was in jeopardy, and that was the only thing I

really cared about at this point. I was going to walk across that stage with my friends in May.

Tonight was a hockey game, and based on the way everyone was acting, you'd think it was my first time leaving the house in my entire life.

"You don't have to hold my arm," I told Abby as she guided me through the arena entrance like I was ninety years old. "I got hit by a car, not a steamroller."

"You were in a coma for two days."

"And now I'm not. Progress."

She gave me a look that said she loved me but was also mentally calculating the fastest route to the emergency room. And I couldn't really give her too hard of a time about it. Her mom had died in a car accident, so mine had been especially difficult for her.

Behind us, Harper was carrying Rory on one hip and a bag big enough to survive a weekend camping trip in the other.

"Are you sure you're warm enough?" Harper asked. "The arena's always freezing."

"I'm wearing three layers."

"I should've brought an extra blanket. Maybe Ava will have one."

I rolled my eyes to the ceiling and tried to find my Zen. I loved these women, but good Lord, they'd never driven me so crazy at the same time.

"Guys, for the millionth time, I'm *fine*."

Abby just smiled and pulled out a spare blanket she'd apparently brought.

I gave up.

The arena was filling up, and the energy had a different edge to it tonight. The season was winding down—only four games were left—and the crowd was a little louder, a little more invested, like everyone knew these nights were numbered.

For Gordy, Foster, and the other senior players, it was especially bittersweet. I knew we'd come to games next year if we chose to stay nearby because Drew, Liam, and Eric would still be playing, but it wouldn't be the same. It felt like the end of an era, and while the future was exciting, it was a little terrifying too. There were so many unknowns that came with the end of college.

But there was one thing I knew for sure—I'd always have these people in my life. We'd find time for each other even if we didn't talk every day.

The guys took the ice for warm-ups, and my gaze found Harry immediately. He was stretching in front of the net, dropping into a low crouch and holding it before rising smoothly, testing the edges of his skates against the ice. When he glanced toward the stands and found me, the corner of his mouth lifted just enough that I caught it.

I lifted my hand and blew him a kiss. He pretended to catch it and then put his hand against his chest, right over his heart. I think I might've melted into my seat a little.

God, I loved that man.

Eric skated past a moment later, tapping the glass near me with his stick before pointing at the seat I was already sitting in. The universal gesture for *stay put*.

"I'm being babysat by everyone," I muttered.

"It just means you're very loved," Harper said, not looking up from where she was adjusting Rory's ear protection headphones.

Yes, I was. My heart felt a little fuller as I sat up taller. One big change from the accident and my coma dream with Bryce was that the guilt I'd carried for so long had disappeared. I no longer questioned if I deserved to be hovered over or mothered by my friends.

I knew they did it out of love, and I deserved to be loved this completely.

The game started and we all got swept up in the action. The guys played well, clicking in a way that came from years of building chemistry together. All the seniors were playing harder than ever, making every moment on the ice count. Foster controlled the draws while Drew and Liam ran the blue line with that eerie telepathy they'd always had. Eric had improved since the start of the semester and found his rhythm with the team. And then there was my Harry who stood like a wall in front of the crease, prepared to do whatever it took to stop a goal.

Midway through the second period, Viv slid into the empty seat next to me. She was dressed in dark jeans and a pretty red cashmere sweater that probably cost more than my rent, but she'd ditched the blazer she usually wore, and her hair was down instead of pulled back.

"Mind if I sit?"

"Not at all."

She settled in, crossing one leg over the other, and watched the ice like a hawk hunting prey. I'd gotten to know Viv a little better over the past few

months, and I'd learned a lot about her. She was sharp, direct more often than not, and a little intimidating, but underneath it she was warmer than she let on. She reminded me of Harry in that way.

And she was *obsessed* with sports. She loved football first and foremost, but hockey was a close second, and she could call plays as well as the players on the ice.

"How are you feeling?" she asked, her gaze still on the ice.

"Like I got hit by a car."

Her mouth twitched. "Harrison told me you'd say something like that."

"He knows me well."

We watched a few more shifts in comfortable silence before she turned to me. "Can I ask you something?"

"Shoot."

"What are your plans after graduation?"

I blinked. Of all the questions I'd been fielding lately—how are you feeling, are you sleeping, do you need anything—that one caught me off guard. I thought about it constantly, but I didn't have a good answer.

"Honestly? I'm not sure. I know I want to stay in Montana. Beyond that, it's kind of a blank page."

"What's your major?"

"Communications."

She nodded like she'd already known the answer and was just confirming. "Have you thought about what kind of work you'd want to do with that?"

I shifted in my seat. "I mean, I've looked at a few things. PR, marketing, and brand management are obvious directions. I just haven't found anything that's really clicked yet." I paused. "Which sounds pathetic coming from someone who's about to graduate."

"It doesn't sound pathetic at all. It sounds like you're waiting for the right opportunity." She held my gaze. "What if I told you I had one?"

I stared at her. On the ice, the ref blew the whistle, but Viv didn't break our eye contact.

"What kind of opportunity?"

She angled her body toward me. "Every sports team needs someone who understands community, branding, and how to make people fall in love with a team, especially one that doesn't exist yet. I need someone who can

connect with this state—with real people, not just investors and sponsors. Someone who knows Montana and loves it.”

I opened my mouth, but she wasn’t finished.

“I’ve been watching you, Sam. Not in a creepy way—” A flash of dry humor. “But I’ve seen how you operate. The way you hold your friend group together, the way you read a room, the way people gravitate toward you. That’s not something you can teach. And a communications degree gives you the framework to channel it professionally.”

My throat felt tight, and I didn’t trust myself to speak. The game was still going on in front of us, sticks clashing and skates cutting ice, but it had faded to background noise.

“I’m not offering you this because you’re Harrison’s girlfriend. I want to be clear about that.”

“Then why?”

Her chin dipped and her eyes warmed. “Because I think you’d be extraordinary at it. And I’d rather have someone extraordinary than someone with a perfect résumé.”

I swallowed hard against the lump in my throat. “Can I think about it?”

“Take all the time you need.” She turned back to the ice like she hadn’t just dropped a bomb on my entire future. “There’s no rush. The franchise isn’t going anywhere, and neither am I.”

The buzzer sounded for the end of the second period, and the arena swelled with noise. Abby leaned over and asked if I wanted anything from concessions. I shook my head, still processing Viv’s offer and the possibilities it opened up for me.

Suddenly, the future didn’t feel like something I was bracing for.

It felt like something I was running toward, ready to grasp with both hands.

FORTY-THREE

Gordy

Four games were all that was left of my hockey career. I knew I could play pickup games, but it would never be the same as this.

The schedule was pinned to the locker room wall like it had been every year since we brought this team back to life freshman year, but lately my eyes kept drifting to the bottom of it, to the shrinking number of dates that hadn't been crossed off yet. Four games, and then the season was over.

I tried not to think about it as I went through warm-ups. My body knew what to do, so I let it work while my mind drifted to places I didn't want it to go. The arena looked the same as it always had. But knowing something was ending changed the way you saw it. This game had given me the realest family I'd ever known. It had been everything to me.

I spotted Sam in the stands during warm-ups. She was in her usual spot with all the other girlfriends. It was her first game back since the accident.

This game had given me her too. If it weren't for hockey, I wasn't sure Foster and I would've even known each other and then I wouldn't have met Sam.

I might've been bracing myself to say goodbye to the sport as I'd always known it, but hockey had given me everything I could ever need in life off the ice.

And that was one hell of a gift that I wouldn't take for granted.

Eric skated past me and tapped my pads with his stick. "She's fine. I already checked." He grinned and skated off, and despite myself, the corner of my mouth pulled up. He'd definitely grown on me. He played hard, kept his head down, and loved his sister with a fierce kind of loyalty I respected.

The ref dropped the puck and the game started.

I settled into the crease and everything else fell away—the worry about Sam, the questions about graduation, and the weight of knowing these nights were running out.

None of it existed inside the crease. In here, I just had to read and react.

Their top line came in hard on the first shift, cycling the puck low. The center fed the winger on my glove side, and I tracked the release, saw the angle open, and slid across to cover it. The shot hit my pad and kicked to the corner. Drew cleared it.

The rhythm of the game took over.

We scored first on a power play when Liam walked the blue line and found Eric cutting to the net. Eric redirected it past the goalie's glove, and it was his first power play goal of the season. The bench erupted, and I watched the guys pat Eric on the back as he skated back across the ice.

The second period was even more intense. UM's defenseman ran Liam into the boards behind my net hard enough that I heard the glass shake. Liam popped up with fire in his eyes, and two shifts later he leveled the guy with a clean hit at center ice that drew a roar from the crowd. But no one cheered louder than Drew.

In the third, they pulled within one on a breakaway that I got a piece of but couldn't stop. The puck trickled over the line and the red light went on behind me. I exhaled hard through my nose, rolled my neck once, and found the next face-off dot. It was only one goal. That was fine. We still had the lead.

The last five minutes were a grind. They threw lines at us in quick rotations trying to wear us down, and the shots kept coming. My legs burned and my glove hand was starting to ache, but I tracked every release and smothered every rebound.

They couldn't get past me to save their lives—or their game.

The buzzer sounded and I stayed in my crease for a beat, letting the noise wash over me. Then I skated out to meet them at center ice. Foster caught my eye first, and the grin on his face said he understood. This was as emotional for him as it was for me.

We met at the red line and the rest of the team piled in around us. Eric hovered at the edge of the group with a grin so wide it split his face. I reached out and hauled him in by his jersey.

I held on to the moment for an extra second before letting go.

Only three games left.



The locker room afterward was even louder than usual. Guys were peeling off gear, tossing socks at each other, and making stupid bets—because the freshmen never learned. The energy was high, the way it always was after a win, but underneath it there was something else—a current that ran through the seniors that the younger guys couldn’t feel yet. This was ours, and it was almost gone.

I was pulling off my chest protector when Foster sat down on the bench next to me. He’d already stripped down to his base layer, and his hair was still damp and plastered to his forehead.

“Good game,” he said.

“You too.”

He leaned back against the wall. For a moment he just sat there, watching the chaos around us, letting it all sink in.

“Can I run something by you?” he asked.

“Go ahead.”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “I’ve been thinking about what I want to do after graduation. And before you say it—yes, I know that’s the most annoying question on the planet. Every person I talk to asks me that question, and I’m getting sick of it too.”

I almost smiled. “I wasn’t going to say that.”

“You were thinking it.”

He wasn’t wrong. I’d been fielding that same question. But it was the pressure of the Gordon legacy that weighed on me most heavily.

“So what did you want to run by me?” I asked.

Foster straightened up and turned to face me. “There aren’t enough restaurants in this town.”

I looked at him.

“I’m serious. Missoula’s growing. The student population keeps climbing, the stadium Viv’s building is going to bring in even more people, and there’s what—a handful of decent places to eat? Most of the good spots are packed every weekend. There’s room for something new.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“I want to open a restaurant.”

“You what?”

“I want to start a business. And I think that a restaurant would be a good investment around here because there’s a lot of opportunity.” He paused. “But I can’t cook for shit. I can barely make pasta without setting off the smoke alarm. Abby’s banned me from using the stove unsupervised.”

I waited, because I could see where this was going and I wanted to hear him say it.

“I’m good at the business side. Numbers aren’t my thing, but I’ve got Abby for that. I can handle people, logistics, and I know how to build something from the ground up because I spent my whole life watching my dad do it—even if I never wanted his version of it.” He held my gaze. “But I need a chef. Someone who actually gives a damn about the food. Someone who’d rather be in a kitchen than behind a desk.”

The locker room noise faded to a hum.

“You’re asking me to be the head chef at your restaurant?”

“Yes, but I was actually thinking we could be partners in it.”

I immediately thought of Pop’s kitchen and the first time he’d handed me a cast-iron skillet and taught me to cook. He’d unleashed a love affair with food that hadn’t faded since. I’d accepted that it would be something I just did for myself or my closest friends, but now Foster was offering me a way to build a life around it.

“I need to think about it. I want to talk to Sam first,” I said.

He smiled and patted my back. “Take your time. I get it.”

“Does Abby know about this?”

“Yep. I run everything by her since it’ll impact her too. I hear opening a restaurant can be stressful.”

I’d heard the same, but it sounded exciting too.

“Let me know what you decide.”

“I will,” I told him.

He headed for the showers and I sat there for a while longer, turning the idea over in my head—examining it from every angle, looking for the weakness, the flaw, the reason it wouldn’t work.

But I couldn’t find one.



Later that night, Sam was curled against me in my bed, her head on my chest and her fingers tracing idle patterns on my stomach. The house was quiet. It was late enough that everyone had either gone to bed or gone out to celebrate our win.

Words had been building in my throat that were bubbling to the surface. "I want a life with you, Sam."

Her fingers stopped their tracing, and she glanced up at me, her gaze open and reflecting the same love I felt.

"I've always known what I wanted. You know that. It's always been you above anything else. But after the accident, I stopped being willing to waste time on anything that isn't this. Us. The life we're building here. I'm done letting anyone else's expectations take up space in my head."

Her lips lifted in a tender smile, but she let me keep going without interrupting.

"I don't want to make any decisions about my future without you in them," I said, running my fingers through her hair. "Foster asked me tonight about opening a restaurant together. And my first thought was that I needed to talk to you. Because none of it matters if you're not part of it."

Her hand came up and cupped my jaw, her thumb brushing across my cheekbone. "Harry."

"You're it for me. I knew it before, but the accident made it impossible to pretend you are anything less than everything."

Her eyes searched mine and then she pulled my mouth down to hers and kissed me soft and slow, like we had all the time in the world.

A lifetime.

She pulled back. "Thank you for waiting for me. For being patient when I was too blind and too scared to see what was right in front of me. Thank you for coming to Seattle with me and being my rock. For holding me up when I was afraid I wasn't strong enough to do it by myself. Thank you for always being so honest and devoted to me. I want a life with you too. God, I love you so much it feels overwhelming."

I grinned. "I know the feeling."

Her smile widened and then her lips were back on mine, soft and steady. "Stay in Montana with me," she whispered against my mouth.

"There's nowhere else I'd rather be."

"Good. Then I think you'd better text Foster and tell him you guys are opening a restaurant. And while we're talking about our future, I should

probably tell you that your sister basically offered me a job.”

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FORTY-FOUR

Sam

The biggest pain about my recovery was that I wasn't allowed to have sex while the worst of my injuries healed, including the long incision that now cut through my abdomen. That might not have been an issue for most people, but they didn't have a Greek god of a boyfriend walking around shirtless, doting on their every whim, and overall just making their ovaries explode because he was so fucking hot and perfect.

The scar was ugly and impossible to ignore. It was the only thing that slightly hindered my ever-growing libido.

I'd never been short on confidence in my body, but I'd never had a scar this ugly before. The damage had been more extensive in my last accident, but they'd been able to repair everything with very small incisions.

There was nothing small about the scar cutting a straight line down my stomach.

But the doctor had signed off on physical activity after six weeks of healing, and I was desperate to try to find my comfort with my body again, new scar and all.

Harry was cooking dinner when I got home from my follow-up appointment. The kitchen smelled like garlic and rosemary, and he had his sleeves pushed up past his forearms while he stirred something on the stove. I leaned against the doorframe and watched him for a moment, feeling the familiar pull of want that had been building for weeks with nowhere to go.

"Doctor cleared me," I said, keeping my voice casual.

He looked up. "For what?"

"All physical activity."

His gaze held mine and I watched the words register. His gray eyes darkened just enough that my stomach flipped and heat crept up the back of my neck.

“Everything?” he asked.

“Yep,” I said, popping the *p*. “Full clearance. Running, jumping, heavy lifting.” I paused. “Other forms of cardio.”

His mouth twitched. He turned the burner off, set the spoon down, and crossed the kitchen toward me with a focus that reminded me of the way he watched the ice during a game. It was intense having the weight of all his attention solely focused on me.

He stopped in front of me, and his hand came up to cup my jaw, tilting my face toward his. “How are you feeling?”

“Like I haven’t had sex in six weeks.”

A low laugh rumbled through his chest. “That’s not what I meant.”

“I’m fine, Harry. I promise.” I held his gaze. “I mean, I’m a little worried you’ll take one look at my Frankenstein stomach and lose your boner, but other than that I’m great.”

His eyes softened as he pulled me closer against him. “Every inch of you is beautiful. Scars and all.”

He closed the small space between us, kissing me slow at first while his thumb traced my jawline. His mouth moved against mine with a tenderness that made my chest ache. I fisted the front of his shirt and pulled him closer, deepening the kiss until his restraint started to crack. His hand slid from my face to the back of my neck, angling me closer, and I felt the shift in him when the gentleness gave way to hunger.

God, I’d missed this so much. He’d kissed me plenty while I recovered, but he’d been so painfully restrained the whole time I was genuinely starting to worry.

But his restraint was gone as he deepened the kiss and groaned into my mouth. He broke our kiss, and before I could even catch my breath, he swept me into his arms and raced upstairs to his room. He kicked the door shut behind him and sat down on the edge of his bed with me still in his arms. His mouth found mine again as I quickly adjusted so I was straddling him, rocking against his hard length through our pants.

My fingers raked through his hair, and I was already breathing hard, wound tight from weeks of wanting him and not being able to do anything about it.

He pulled his shirt over his head, and I ran my palms over his chest, his abs, all the warm skin I could never get enough of. God, he really was so ridiculously handsome. His hands went to the hem of my shirt, starting to lift it when my body locked up.

I caught his wrists.

He stopped immediately, his eyes searching my face. "What's wrong?"

"I'm fine." The words came out too fast. I redirected his hands to my hips and kissed him again, harder, hoping to push past the knot in my chest. His fingers curled against my hip bones, and his mouth responded to mine, but I could feel him paying attention in that maddening way he always did. Reading my body the way only he could.

I angled my torso slightly away from him when his hands drifted upward again, my body once again tensing subtly. Or at least I thought it was subtle until his thumbs stilled on my ribs and he pulled back from the kiss.

"Hey." His voice was low. "Talk to me."

"There's nothing to talk about. I just want to keep my shirt on for a bit."

He didn't say anything, but his steady gray eyes still saw everything I was trying to hide. Part of me wanted to scream because he always did this. He never pushed, but he also never let me get away with deflecting. He'd simply wait, patient and present, until the walls I put up felt ridiculous even to me.

"It's ugly, Harry." The words fell out before I could second-guess them. But if I was going to be honest with anyone about how I felt in my new body, it was him. "The scar, I mean." My body deflated as I stared at his chest because I could no longer meet his eyes. "It's long and angry looking and right there in the middle of my stomach. Every time I look at it, I feel like my body doesn't belong to me anymore."

Saying it out loud made my eyes sting. I had never been self-conscious about my body. I'd walked around in a bikini without a second thought, undressed in front of men without hesitation, and owned every inch of myself with a confidence that came as naturally as breathing.

But that was before. Now I had six inches of raised pink skin carving an ugly line down my center. Every glance in the mirror now reminded me that my body had been cut open and would never look the same again. I hadn't even felt comfortable wearing half my wardrobe because most of my tops showed my midriff, which would show my scar.

Harry brushed my hair from my face and lifted my chin until I met his eyes. “Sam, that scar is proof you survived. You’re alive and here with me. That’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

Tears filled my eyes. It couldn’t be that simple.

“Can I see it?” he asked.

My throat constricted. I wanted to say no. I wanted to crack a joke and steer us back to making out so we could skip past this part entirely.

But I’d promised myself I was done hiding from the people I loved, and I trusted Harry to be honest with me about my new reality. I moved off his lap until I was standing in front of him and pulled my shirt over my head.

His gaze dropped to the scar. It ran vertically from below my sternum to just under my navel, pink against my skin because it was still healing.

He lifted his hand and pressed his fingertips to the top of the scar, and then traced it down slowly. His touch was light and so gentle, I held my breath. He followed the entire length of it, his fingers steady and warm against my skin. Then he leaned forward and kissed every inch of it, following the same path his fingers had just taken. A sob caught in my throat.

His gaze met mine again as he kissed the bottom of my scar. “You’re alive because of this scar, which means it’s now one of my favorite parts about you. It’s not ugly at all.”

My breath hitched, and tears blurred my vision for a second before I blinked them away as I slid my fingers into his hair, holding on while he stayed there for a moment, his forehead resting against my stomach, his breath warm on my skin.

“Harry.” My voice cracked on his name.

He looked at me the same consuming way he’d always looked at me, like I was the only thing in the room worth seeing.

He rose to his full height and kissed me, and this time when I kissed him back, the knot in my chest loosened enough to breathe. His hands settled on my waist, thumbs brushing the edges of the scar, and in this moment it didn’t feel ugly. It felt like a piece of me, a piece that made me stronger—that showed I’d survived.

I unhooked my bra and let it fall, and when his gaze swept over me, it was the hungry and reverent look he always gave me. The one that made me feel like a goddamn masterpiece.

I reached for his belt, and this time, my hands didn't shake as I shoved his jeans and boxers down. He was already hard, and the sight of him made me clench with need that had been building for six long, frustrating weeks.

He sat on the edge of the bed and pulled me toward him by my hips until I was standing between his knees. His mouth pressed to the center of my chest while his hands explored my body, palms skating up my sides, across my ribs, down the curve of my waist. Every place his hands landed felt like a claim being restated.

I gripped his shoulders and let my head fall back as his mouth found my breast. His lips closed around my nipple and sucked, his tongue flicking against the peak, and a needy moan escaped my throat. Six weeks of deprivation had turned my nerve endings into live wires. Every touch felt amplified, every sensation dialed up to a volume I'd never experienced before.

His mouth moved to my other breast while his hands worked the button of my jeans open. He peeled them down my legs along with my underwear, his palms dragging down my thighs as he went. When I stepped out of them, his hands slid back up the outside of my legs until they settled on my hips again.

He looked up at me from where he sat. His gray eyes were dark and heavy, his lips swollen, and the raw hunger on his face made my stomach swoop. I reached down and wrapped my hand around his cock, stroking from base to tip, and the groan that rumbled out of him was deep and just as needy as I sounded.

He guided me forward and I climbed into his lap, my knees pressing into the mattress on either side of his hips. We were chest to chest, face to face, and when I looked down between us, the scar was right there. Visible and unavoidable, but no longer weighing me down with insecurities. Because the man I loved looked at it with such reverence.

I reached between us and positioned him at my entrance, then sank down slowly. The stretch after six weeks of forced celibacy was intense, and a shaky breath escaped me as I took him in inch by inch.

"I've got you," he said, his voice already wrecked. His jaw tightened and his hands flexed on my hips, but he let me set the pace, let me take exactly as much as I was ready for until he was fully inside me.

"Oh God." My voice came out thin and breathless. I could feel everything. Every inch of him, the heat of his skin against mine, the way

my body was gripping him like it had been starving for this.

His hands slid up my back and held me against him, while his mouth found mine, kissing me with complete and utter possession. I started to move, rolling my hips in a slow grind that made both of us groan. He broke the kiss, nuzzling where my neck met my shoulder. His breath was hot against my throat, and mine was ragged in his ear as every roll of my hips sent sparks of pleasure radiating up my spine.

“You feel so fucking good,” he said against my skin.

I gripped his shoulders for leverage and picked up the pace, grinding down harder, desperately chasing my release. His hands tightened on my lower back as another rough curse fell from his mouth. I loved when I made him swear because it was so rare for him. And it told me exactly how far gone he was.

“Fuck, Sam.”

I was so close already. Weeks of wanting him buried inside me had made me desperate. The angle and the friction of his body against my clit built the pressure inside me with every roll of my hips. I buried my face in his neck, breathing him in, and my entire world narrowed down to the feel of him inside me, the warmth of his skin, and the sounds he was making as we came together.

My orgasm hit me like a wave cresting, my whole body tensing as pleasure radiated from my core outward. I cried out against his neck and he held me through it, his arms tight around me, his mouth pressing against my shoulder while I rocked and shuddered in his lap.

Before I’d fully come down, he shifted. His hands gripped my thighs and he stood, lifting me with him. I gasped at the change in angle as he turned and laid me back on the bed. My hips were at the edge of the mattress, and he was standing between my legs, still inside me.

He pulled almost all the way out and then drove back in, hitting that spot inside me that had me crying out in bliss. My hands fisted in the sheets as he set a pace that was harder and faster than what we’d just done, his hands gripping my hips, pulling me onto him with every thrust. I could see all of him from this angle. His chest heaving, his jaw tight with concentration as he watched where our bodies met.

And he could see all of me. My long, pink scar. My flushed skin. My breasts bouncing with every thrust. I was completely bare and exposed to him, but I didn’t want to hide a single inch of myself.

Not from him.

Never again.

“Harry.” His name came out desperate. “Don’t stop. Please don’t stop.”

He reached for my hand and laced his fingers through mine, pinning it to the mattress beside my head. His gray gaze was locked on mine, filled with heat, need, and so much love.

“I’m close,” he ground out, his pace turning urgent, his grip on my hand tightening. “Come with me.”

All I could do was nod because I was already right on the edge. His hips snapped forward once, twice, and then pleasure erupted through me again, sharper this time, pulling a cry from my throat as my body clenched around him. He followed seconds later with a deep groan, burying himself to the hilt as he pulsed inside me, his hand gripping mine tight, keeping me grounded with him.

He shuddered as the last of his orgasm rolled through him, and then he leaned down and pressed his lips to the center of my stomach. Right on the scar.

“I love you, Harry,” I whispered because emotions were clogging my throat.

He smiled as he moved up my body and then collapsed beside me, immediately gathering me against his chest. His hand settled on my lower back, holding me close while our breathing slowly came down.

“Six weeks is way too long,” I said into his neck.

His chest shook with a quiet laugh. “Agreed.”

I lifted my head and propped my chin on his chest to look at him. His hair was a mess and his cheeks were flushed, but he looked sexy as sin.

And I knew by the way he looked back at me that he saw me the same way. No matter my scars.

FORTY-FIVE

Sam

The stadium for the Montana Thunder football team was going to be massive.

Being told it would be large enough to seat 60,000 people and seeing the bones of the structure were two completely different things. Construction crews moved across the site like ants on a mission as I drove up to the location Viv had asked me to meet her at.

Viv was waiting for me near the construction office, a temporary trailer that looked hilariously out of place next to the scale of what was being built around it. She wore a hard hat over her perfectly straight black hair and held a second one out to me as I approached.

“Safety first,” she said.

I put it on. “How do I look?”

“Like someone who’s about to get a very good job offer.”

My stomach flipped with excitement. She’d texted me two days ago asking if I wanted to come see the site and talk. I’d spent the time since debating the pros and cons before I couldn’t deny that the pros far outweighed the cons.

She led me away from the trailer, past a row of bulldozers and a crew pouring concrete, until we reached a spot on the eastern side of the site where the ground was elevated enough to give a panoramic view of the entire project. The mountains were visible on all sides, and the sky was a clear baby blue.

“This is where the main entrance will be,” Viv said, gesturing toward a gap in the steel frame. “The concourse wraps around the entire stadium. I want it to feel open when you walk in—like you’re stepping into something

big but it still belongs here. It shouldn't feel like it was dropped from another city. It should feel like Montana."

I could picture it. The wide concourse, the views of the mountains through the glass, fans streaming in wearing jerseys for a team that didn't exist yet but already had a home.

"It's going to be incredible," I said. Viv was really making her vision come to life, and that was inspiring as hell.

Viv turned to me. "I want you to help me introduce this team to the state."

She reached into her bag and pulled out a folder, handing it to me. Inside was a pack of papers, but it was the single sheet of paper on top of all the others with the franchise's letterhead that caught my attention. A job title was printed in clean black font.

Director of Community Relations and Brand Strategy.

I stared at it. My heart was racing so hard I could feel it in my throat.

"The role would start after you graduate," Viv continued, her voice shifting into the same focused, commanding tone I imagined she used in boardrooms when she was working for her parents. "You'd be responsible for building the team's relationship with Montana—community outreach, local partnerships, brand identity, fan engagement from the ground up. I need someone who can translate what this franchise means into something people feel in their gut. You'd be at the forefront of connecting this team with the state, not just the Missoula area."

I looked up from the paper. "Viv, this is—"

"Before you say anything, I want to explain why I'm offering this to you specifically." She folded her arms and held my gaze with an intensity that reminded me so much of Harry it almost made me smile. "And I need you to actually hear me, because I think your instinct is going to be to deflect, and I'd really appreciate it if you didn't."

I closed my mouth.

"I didn't choose you because you're Harrison's girlfriend. I told you that before and I meant it. I'll be honest—when I first started considering candidates, I didn't even have you on my radar. I was looking at people with five, ten years of experience. People with résumés that could wallpaper a conference room." She paused. "But then I got to know you. And I saw your resilience and grit, which are two things that are hard to teach someone to have. Building a team from the ground up is not an easy feat,

and I've already had plenty of people tell me they're eager to watch me fail. I will have a team with experience, but when it comes to building the community around this team, I need someone who loves Montana as much as I do. Because at the end of the day, this team, this vision I have, is nothing if the community doesn't support it.

"Montanans know how to be strong and resilient better than almost anyone else. They work with the land and they support each other. I don't want to change this area in a negative way. I want to give them something we can all rally around and be proud of, which means I need someone who can guard and protect that vision and think outside the box. People with experience and mile-long résumés don't always want to do that. They know what's worked for them in the past and want to recreate that. But Montana is special, and I want to nurture what makes it unique instead of trying to fit into a box like everyone else."

I wholeheartedly agreed. It was what I loved about living here and why I never wanted to leave. Montana *was* special. It was home, and if we were going to bring this type of large-scale attention, it needed to be handled with care and respect to the community that already lived here.

"You see people," she said. "You connect with them in a way that can't be manufactured or trained into someone. And this team needs that. *I* need that."

I looked down at the paper in my hands. It was a big decision—life-changing—but I also already knew my answer. And it had only been solidified after hearing her talk with such passion about the project and her vision for this team and its future.

I looked up at Viv. "I'd like to accept."

Her tough composure cracked and a smile split her face. "Good. Because you were my only candidate at this point, and I really didn't have a backup plan."

I laughed loudly and Viv's smile widened before she extended her hand. I shook it.

"Welcome to the team, Sam."



I drove home with the windows down and the music loud, singing along to songs I only half knew the words to and making up the rest. The spring air was cool enough to prickle my skin but warm enough that I didn't care. The mountains were turning gold in the late afternoon light, and the sky was that specific shade of Montana blue that you couldn't find anywhere else on earth.

I officially had a job. A real, actual, grown-up job that started after graduation and was exactly the kind of challenge that made my pulse quicken in a good way.

I was practically vibrating when I walked through the front door of the hockey house. The downstairs was empty—Liam and Drew must've been out.

I found Harry in the kitchen, standing at the counter chopping vegetables. I leaned against the door and nibbled my lip, watching him work. God, I never got tired of seeing this man cook. He made it look so fucking sexy.

I didn't know I had a chef kink until Harry.

He looked up and set down his knife the second he saw my face. "How'd it go?"

I set my bag on the counter and leaned against it, facing him. "I accepted Viv's offer. You're looking at the new director of community relations and brand strategy for the Montana Thunder."

A smile lit up his face as he lifted me and spun me around in a circle until I was giggling. When he set me down, I told him more about the job.

"I'm going to help build a team from the ground up. I'm going to be the person who introduces this state to their football team. Like, this is crazy and so fucking cool."

"It's absolutely perfect for you." Pride was shining in his eyes, but he said the words anyway. "I'm so proud of you." He pulled me into his arms and held me close. I breathed him in, loving his woodsy scent mixed with the herbs he'd been cooking with.

I didn't know how badly I needed to hear those words.

I lifted my head and kissed him with all the love, joy, and excitement that was thrumming through me. His hands slid to my hips and mine went to his chest, gripping the front of his shirt. Our kiss deepened into something hungrier.

"Upstairs," I said against his mouth.

He didn't need to be told twice. He turned off the stove, because even mid-makeout, Harry was responsible about open flames, and then his hand was on my lower back, guiding me toward the stairs. We barely made it through his bedroom door before his mouth was on my neck and his hands were pulling my shirt over my head. I yanked his off right after and ran my palms over his broad and hard chest before reaching for his belt.

"Slow down." His voice was already a little ragged, and it made my thighs clench.

"I don't want slow."

"Too bad." He caught my wrists gently and backed me toward the bed until the backs of my knees hit the mattress. "I want to take my time with you tonight."

The look in his eyes—dark, focused, reverent—made my stomach swoop. He eased me down onto the bed and stood over me for a moment, just looking at me, and his gaze traced over my body with an intensity that made my skin flush.

"You're incredible," he said. "You know that?"

"I'm better with you by my side." It was the truth. I'd portrayed a strong, positive woman for years, but Harry made me actually feel that way.

His expression softened and he leaned down, bracing himself above me. He kissed me slow and deep, his tongue sliding against mine while one hand trailed down my side, over my ribs, across my stomach, over my scar, and down to the waistband of my jeans. He popped the button and dragged the zipper down, his knuckles brushing against me through my underwear, and I arched into the contact.

He peeled my jeans off, taking his time, pressing his lips to the inside of my knee, my thigh, the jut of my hip bone. When he hooked his fingers into my underwear and pulled them down, the cool air hit my skin and I shivered.

"Harry."

"I've got you."

He always did.

He settled between my thighs, and his mouth was on me before I could take a full breath. His tongue dragged flat and slow up my center, and my hips jerked off the bed at the contact. He pressed them back down with one hand splayed across my lower stomach, holding me in place while his

tongue found my clit and circled it with a pressure that made my vision blur.

“Fuck,” I breathed, my fingers twisting into his hair.

He groaned against me—a low, vibrating sound that I felt everywhere—and the combination of his mouth and that sound had my thighs shaking. He sucked my clit between his lips, and my back arched so hard I thought I’d snap in half. Then he slid two fingers inside me, curving forward until he found the spot that made my brain short-circuit. His mouth never stopped, his tongue working my clit in slow, devastating circles while his fingers stroked deep.

I was a mess. Gasping his name, pulling his hair, my heels digging into his back. He was making sounds against me like I was the best thing he’d ever tasted, and every groan and hum sent vibrations through my clit that had me climbing faster than I could keep up with.

He worked me higher with devastating patience. Every time I got close, he eased off just enough to keep me on the edge, and the tension coiled tighter and tighter in my belly until I was a writhing mess under him, begging.

“Please... Harry, I need—”

He sealed his mouth over my clit and sucked, his fingers curving deep, and my orgasm detonated. Pleasure rolled through me in waves that had my back arching off the bed and my thighs clamping around his head while I cried out.

He kissed his way back up my body as the aftershocks faded until his mouth found mine again. I could taste myself on his lips, and it sent a fresh spike of heat through me that had no business existing so soon after coming that hard.

But I was learning that my desire for Harry never really faded. I always wanted him.

I reached for his belt, and this time he let me unbuckle it. I shoved his jeans and boxers down, wrapping my hand around him. He was hard and thick, and the groan he let out when I stroked him from base to tip was guttural enough to make my core clench.

“Harry, if you don’t get inside me right now, I swear to God—”

He lined himself up and pushed in slow, stretching me inch by inch until he bottomed out and we both went still, foreheads pressed together, breathing hard. The fullness was perfect—he fit me exactly right, and the

intimacy of the position, face to face, chest to chest, made everything feel amplified.

He started to move in long, deep strokes that had me gasping on each one. His hand cradled the back of my head, fingers tangled in my hair, while the other gripped my hip. He kept his eyes on mine, and the intensity of being watched while being filled—hell, being seen while being undone—was nearly overwhelming.

“You are the best thing that ever happened to me,” he said, his voice strained and rough. “Every single part of my life is better because you’re in it.”

I wrapped my legs around his waist and pulled him deeper. “I love you.”

His pace quickened, his hips driving into me with a force that made the headboard tap the wall. My nails raked down his back and he groaned against my neck, his rhythm faltering for a beat before he caught it again. His hand slid between us and his thumb found my clit, circling in time with his thrusts, and the dual sensation sent me climbing fast.

I gasped, pulling his face to mine. “I want to feel you come.”

His jaw tightened and his thrusts turned urgent, deep and relentless, his thumb still working me. The pressure built to a breaking point, and I came with his name on my lips, clenching around him as the pleasure crashed through me. He followed seconds later, burying himself deep with a shudder and a groan, his forehead dropping to my shoulder.

His weight on top of me was grounding, and I held on, my fingers tracing lazy lines down his spine while our breathing slowly returned to normal.

He lifted his head and looked at me with those gray eyes that had seen through me from the very beginning.

“Director of community relations and brand strategy, huh?” he said. The pride in his voice was quiet and immense.

I grinned. “Has a nice ring to it, doesn’t it?”

He kissed me once. “It suits you.”

I pulled him back down, tucking myself into his chest, and let myself feel it all—the pride, the joy, and the certainty that this was exactly where I was supposed to be. With this man, in this town, building a life that I’d chosen for myself.

But most powerful of all was the acceptance that I deserved happiness without guilt.

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FORTY-SIX

Gordy

They hung a banner above the tunnel that read SENIOR NIGHT in maroon and black letters, and the sight of it stopped me mid-stride on my way to the locker room.

I couldn't believe it was already here. The last game of my college hockey career. Realistically, it was the last hockey game I'd likely ever play competitively unless I joined a men's league.

I'd braced myself for this night, but now that it was here, emotions were hitting me unexpectedly. Tonight would be my last night on the ice with this team. And even though I didn't really feel ready to say goodbye, the time had come.

It was time to close the book on this chapter in my life and open the next one.

The locker room was loud as usual. The freshmen and sophomores were wired with game-day energy. The juniors were hyped up about the passing of the torch and being the new team leaders. Meanwhile, the seniors were holding it together with varying degrees of success. We'd been the ones to rebuild this program after a fifteen-year hiatus. It was exciting to know we'd be leaving a legacy behind, but also heartbreaking to know this was basically where the train stopped with us for competitive hockey.

Foster was quiet. He'd already changed into his base layer and was sitting in his stall, staring at nothing, his captain's C visible on the jersey hanging beside him. I understood the silence. Some things were too big for words.

Drew was retaping his stick for the third time, which he only did when he was in his head. He'd been emotional all week about tonight—not

because it was his last game, but because it was ours and he knew without us, the team dynamics would change. Liam sat next to him, his leg bouncing, as he talked to Drew in a voice too low for me to catch the words.

Coach came in for the pregame talk but kept it short. He wasn't the type for speeches, and he knew this team well enough to know that tonight the motivation didn't need to come from him. I was relieved to know he'd be staying on to coach. Foster had recruited him our sophomore year after Drew and Liam recommended him because he'd been their coach back in Meadowbrook when they were kids. He'd become like a father figure to all of us and had definitely made our team stronger.

"We'll have the senior ceremony before puck drop. After that, let's go out there and play one last game of hockey." His gaze slid around the room, landing on each senior. "Enjoy tonight, guys. You've earned it. We wouldn't have gotten this far without you all. Thank you for playing with your hearts and always giving it your all."

We filed out of the locker room and lined up in the tunnel with all the seniors in front. Each senior would get announced and skate out to center ice to be met by the people who mattered most.

Foster went first. His name echoed through the arena and the crowd erupted. Abby and Mason were waiting for him at center ice. Abby was bundled in his jersey, and her smile widened as he skated toward her. Pride and tears filled her eyes, and when he reached her, they wrapped their arms around each other, and he kissed her forehead while the announcer listed his stats and the crowd cheered.

From beside me in the tunnel, Drew whistled and the guys around him joined in, cheering on their captain. The whole team was lined up behind me, sticks tapping the ground in a steady rhythm that built as the announcer transitioned.

The rest of the seniors followed until it was finally my turn.

"Number thirty-two—your starting goalie—Harrison Gordon."

The arena roared. I pushed off and glided through the tunnel, the cold air hitting my face as the lights opened up above me. The stands were packed with people waving signs.

And at center ice, three people were waiting for me.

Sam stood on the right, her blonde hair spilling over my jersey—the one I'd had dreams of her wearing. Next to her was Viv, impeccably dressed as

always and with her chin lifted and that famous Gordon composure firmly in place. Except her eyes were bright and her mouth was pressed into a line that I recognized as the face she made when she was trying very hard not to cry. And beside her was Pop, his gaze filled with pride.

My parents weren't here, but that didn't surprise me. They hadn't talked to me since I'd taken Viv's side. But I didn't need them here.

I already had all the family I needed in this arena.

And it felt like the hugest honor to stand with the woman I loved, the sister who'd chosen her own path the same way I was choosing mine, and the grandfather who taught me what real love and hard work looked like.

Sam grabbed the front of my jersey and pulled me down for a kiss that the crowd whistled at. Viv squeezed my arm once—the Gordon version of an embrace—and I covered her hand with my glove and held it there for a second longer than she expected. Her composure cracked just enough for a tear to slip through.

"I'm proud of you, little brother," she said, just loud enough for me to hear.

"I'm proud of you too," I said back.

Pop squeezed my shoulder and smiled. "I'm damn proud of you both. You're exactly the kind of people I want carrying on the Gordon name."

The announcer read my stats and I memorized this moment—the cold, the lights, the noise, the three people flanking me who represented the life I was building on my own terms. I would hold this memory close to my heart for a long time. It was an ending, but a beginning too.

Then it was time to play.

Montana State came to fight and we'd expected no less. They'd been our biggest rivals since we'd brought the CFU team back to life.

Within the first two shifts, they'd pressured our breakouts and forced turnovers in the neutral zone. They'd clearly game-planned to control tempo, and early on, it was working. We couldn't get clean zone entries, and our top line was spending more time defending than cycling.

Their first real chance came when a turnover at our blue line gave their winger a clean look from the slot. He had a quick release, and he fired it low to my blocker side. I kicked my right pad out and deflected it to the corner, but the rebound was loose and their center was crashing hard. I scrambled back to my post and got my glove down just in time to smother the second chance.

My heart rate spiked.

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This was going to be a battle.

Drew carried the puck behind their net with that deceptive speed he had—people underestimated how fast he was because he made it look effortless—and waited for the defense to commit before feeding Liam at the back door. Liam wound up for the one-timer but pulled it back at the last second, drawing the goalie down, then roofed a wrist shot over his shoulder. The arena shook.

1-0.

Montana State answered four minutes later when a cross-ice pass that our defenseman couldn't intercept found their sniper on my glove side. He didn't hesitate, ripping a wrister top corner over my glove before I could get there. It was a perfect shot. Sometimes you did everything right and the puck still went in. That was the cruelty of the position.

I reset. Tapped both posts and took a breath.

The rest of the first period was a chess match. Both teams trading chances, both goalies making saves that kept the game tight. I stopped a redirect in the crease that I had no right getting a piece of. It had been pure instinct, my glove shooting out before my brain registered the deflection. Their bench slammed their sticks against the boards in frustration. My guys tapped my pads on the next whistle, and I gave them nothing more than a nod.

The second period was where things got physical. Montana State's defenseman ran Eric into the boards behind my net on his first shift, and the hit was late enough that it drew a penalty. Eric popped up immediately, but I caught the flash of fury in Drew's eyes from the bench. Liam put his hand on Drew's shoulder to stop him, but I knew Drew well enough to know he'd be out for blood on his next shift.

On the power play, our unit cycled the puck low until the penalty killers started cheating toward the half-wall. Foster saw the lane open up through the middle and threaded a pass to Eric, who'd parked himself at the top of the crease. Eric tipped it out of the air and past the goalie's blocker before anyone on Montana State could react. The arena went loud and Eric pumped his fist on the way back to the bench while Drew reached over the boards to slap his helmet.

Montana State responded by throwing everything at us for the rest of the period. They crashed my crease on every rush, jamming sticks at loose pucks and parking bodies in my sightlines. One of their wingers tried a wraparound that I read early, sealing my post with my pad before he could get the puck across the goal line. He jammed at the rebound twice, but I covered it both times. On the next shift, their defenseman wound up from the point and I lost the puck completely behind a wall of bodies. I dropped into a butterfly and made myself as wide as possible, and the shot hit me square in the chest. I had no idea where it had come from, but my body knew what to do even when my eyes couldn't follow.

Their best chance came on a three-on-two rush that developed off a turnover at our blue line. Three Montana State forwards bore down on Liam and Drew, passing the puck between them in quick one-touch passes designed to pull us apart. The center dished it to the winger on my left, and I committed to the near post. The winger didn't shoot. He sauced it back across the crease to the trailing forward, and I had to throw myself laterally to get any piece of it. My pad caught the bottom half of the puck and redirected it into the glass.

Foster tapped my pads on the next whistle. "They're not getting past you tonight."

The third period opened with Montana State tying it up on a scramble in front of my net where the puck changed direction three times before squeezing through a gap between my arm and my body. I never saw the final touch. It was the kind of goal that was nobody's fault and everybody's frustration, and it stung worse because I'd been playing so well. That tied up the game, and the energy in the arena shifted from celebration to tension.

The next ten minutes were the best hockey I'd ever been part of. Both teams played with an urgency that made every shift feel like overtime. Montana State's goalie sprawled across his crease to rob Liam on a tap-in that looked like a sure goal. Drew took a puck off the ankle blocking a shot

and limped to the bench before coming right back out on the next shift like nothing had happened. I made a save on a knucklepuck from the blue line that dipped and wobbled so unpredictably I had to kick my leg out at the last second because my glove was in the wrong position entirely.

With four minutes left, Foster won a crucial draw in our offensive zone. Liam collected the puck along the boards and fired it toward the net, but the shot was partially blocked by a defenseman and the puck changed direction, floating lazily toward the far side of the crease. Eric was the first one to react. He charged the net from the weak side and got his stick on the puck before the goalie could slide across, poking it over the goal line with his whole body crashing into the post behind it.

Eric pulled himself off the ice and the guys mobbed him against the boards. This was his moment, and he'd earned every second of it.

We had four minutes to protect the lead. Four minutes between us and the last home win for the seniors.

Montana State threw everything at us. They pulled their goalie with ninety seconds left, giving them an extra attacker, and the final stretch turned into controlled chaos. I stopped a wrister from the circle with my pad. Liam blocked the next attempt with his body, and the puck ricocheted off the boards behind me. Drew cleared it before their forward could collect it, lifting the puck over his stick and out of the zone. They regrouped and came right back, firing from the point, and I caught it in my glove and held it until the ref blew the whistle and the clock ticked under thirty seconds.

They won the next face-off and got one more chance. Their center ripped a shot from the slot that I stopped with my chest, and I fell forward on the rebound, covering it with my body as players from both teams crashed the net around me. The ref's whistle cut through the noise, and the clock showed eight seconds.

The final face-off was in our zone and Foster won it cleanly, sending the puck back to the corner where Drew held it against the boards as the last seconds drained away.

The buzzer sounded and the arena erupted.

We'd won.

My last game as a senior and we'd won. The feeling was indescribable.

I stayed in my crease for one more second with my glove resting on top of the net and let the roar of the cheering wash over me. The crowd was on

their feet, and the bench was emptying as my teammates streamed toward me.

Foster hit me first, wrapping me in a hug that nearly knocked me off my skates. I grabbed his pads, pulling him back slightly so I could look at his grinning face. "I'm in. Let's open the restaurant."

"Are you serious?"

"Yeah, let's do it."

He hugged me again, clapping me on the back before Drew came rushing toward me, then Liam, then Eric and the rest of the team piling on in a mass of maroon. Someone was yelling and someone was crying. I was fairly certain it was Liam, but I'd never confirm it.

I looked up through the tangle of bodies toward the stands. Sam was on her feet with both hands around her mouth screaming for us. Viv was next to her, clapping with a grin that matched Sam's on her face. While Pop stood beside them both, smiling wide.

As the pile loosened and guys started peeling off to salute the crowd, Foster grabbed Drew by the collar and pulled him in close. I couldn't hear what he said over the noise, but I knew what it probably was. I watched Drew's grin fall away, his eyes going wide and then teary. Drew grabbed the back of Foster's neck and pulled him into a hug so fierce it nearly took them both off their feet.

Drew was the new captain now. Liam would be his alternate.

It was time to pass the torch, and no one deserved it more than these two.

FORTY-SEVEN

Sam

Graduation was finally here, and all I could think about was how much I'd changed in the four years I'd been at Clark Fork University.

I'd come to this school a broken girl trying to hide all the cracks in her façade. I'd been determined to pay penance by always smiling and never being a burden to anyone. But more importantly to never let anyone see the scars I was hiding underneath.

And yet somewhere along the way, I'd found people who truly loved me, even when I felt like I didn't deserve it. Who had never once held it against me that I'd lied to them for so long. They'd shown me what real unconditional love was and in the process had healed the lonely, broken girl I'd been.

As we prepared to embark on our life in the real world, I knew things would change. Change was inevitable. But I also knew with a certainty I could feel in my bones that the family I'd found here would always be my family.

I didn't have to fake it anymore.

CFU was small enough that our graduation wasn't split up by majors like larger universities. We got to sit with who we wanted, and we each had a slip of paper with our name on it that we'd hand to the speaker when it was our turn to walk across the stage. Harry was sitting to my left, Abby on my right, and Foster on her right.

Harry's hand rested on my knee, his thumb moving in a slow circle that eased some of my nerves. I was excited to graduate, but it was also a little scary at the same time. I'd always been in school, and this was the end of the known rhythm of what came next.

I glanced at him and found him watching the stage with that quiet focus he always had, like he was taking it all in. His gaze shifted to mine, and the corner of his mouth lifted in a small smile.

The future felt a lot less scary knowing he'd be with me.

I squeezed his hand and turned my attention to the stands.

Montana had given us a perfect May day. The sky was a blue so vivid it almost looked fake, and the mountains stood sharp and clear behind the stage. The whole ceremony was outdoors and the sun was out, but it wasn't so hot that the gowns were completely miserable.

I found our people almost immediately. Drew was in the third row with Rory on his lap, and Harper sat beside him. Mason, Liam, and Ava were next to them. Mason was bigger than the last time I'd really looked at him, and broader through the shoulders. He was also turning out to be one hell of a football player.

Eric and Jordan sat with Viv and Pop in the row above them. Eric caught me looking and gave me a thumbs-up.

I was still amazed that Jordan had flown here for this. We hadn't talked about my parents at all, but there really wasn't much to say. They'd made their choice and I'd made mine. Knowing my brothers still wanted a relationship was enough.

Ava had said that she'd happily share her parents with me, which had made me laugh.

The dean gave a speech about new horizons and the future, and then the names began. I cheered for people I didn't know because we'd all made it through the same four years. Each name called was someone else's victory, and there was something beautiful about celebrating that with strangers.

Then it was our turn. They tapped our row and we filed toward the stage. Harry was first, standing tall and confident. He'd embraced his decision to open the restaurant with Foster, and once Harry made a decision, he was all in. I'd never realized how much the pressure of his family had weighed him down until he called them and told them about his plans. He didn't back down when they pushed, not even when they threatened to disown him. Not that it would've done much. I'd learned that Harry's money was all protected and they couldn't touch it. It was something Pop had insured when he set up all the trusts because he didn't trust his kids' greed. Vivienne and Harry never had to rely on their parents again if they didn't want to. And as far as I could tell, they didn't want to.

I'd asked Harry if he had any regrets or worries about it, but he'd been certain. Like me, he felt like he had all the family he needed here in Montana.

My heart swelled with love as I watched him walk across the stage, shake the dean's hand, and then move his tassel and walk off the stage. Our section in the crowd erupted, and Drew whistled loudly. Viv was clapping with a smile on her face. She'd made it clear how proud she was of him, and she'd really put in an effort to maintain their relationship despite how busy she was with getting the new football team off the ground.

It was my turn next.

I handed my slip of paper to the speaker, and then walked across the stage toward the dean. I shook his hand, grabbed my diploma, then stopped to look out across the crowd as I moved my tassel from one side of my cap to the other.

As I stepped off the stairs of the stage, a hand appeared, palm up. I glanced up to find Harry, his gray eyes warm with love and devotion.

God, I'd gotten lucky to find a man who loved me so completely.

"Shall we?"

"We shall," I said with a smile, placing my hand in his as we walked together back to our seats.

It might've been the end of our chapter at Clark Fork University, but I knew the next chapter would be even better.

EPILOGUE

Sam

FIVE YEARS LATER

I'd spent five years helping build a football team from nothing, and in exactly forty-seven minutes, fifty thousand people were going to find out if we'd pulled it off.

The stadium was alive in a way I'd only dreamed of up to this point. I'd walked these concourses hundreds of times during construction, hard hat on, dust on my boots, watching steel beams go up while Viv pointed at empty air and described what it would become. I'd been here for the first concrete pour, the first glass panel installed, the day the field was laid. I'd stood in this building when it was nothing but empty bones.

But it wasn't empty tonight because it was our inaugural game of the season and the team.

The stadium wasn't quite at capacity, but fifty thousand fans packed the stands wearing brand-new forest green jerseys for our new team. The concourse hummed with energy. There were kids on their parents' shoulders, college students in face paint, and ranchers in boots and ball caps who'd probably driven hours to be here. The mountains were visible through the glass panels that lined the upper deck, exactly the way Viv had always described.

She'd really made it happen. She'd brought her vision to life.

"Sam, the news crew needs someone at Gate 12. They're having issues with their satellite truck placement."

I pressed the button on my headset. "Copy. Sending Briggs now." I pulled up Briggs on my phone and fired off a text with the gate number and

the issue. He responded in seconds, which was exactly why Viv had hired him. He was fast and didn't rattle easily.

I made my way to the owner's suite where Viv would likely be, saying hi to people as I passed them and keeping an eye on how things were running. We needed this first game to go off without a hitch.

Viv stood at the window in the owner's suite with her arms crossed, watching the field below. She wore a fitted black blazer over a silk blouse, her dark hair straight and perfect, and she looked every inch the woman who'd spent billions of dollars and half a decade building this franchise from the ground up.

She also looked exhausted, but you'd only know that if you knew where to look. The subtle tension in her jaw. The way her thumb kept pressing against her index finger, a nervous habit most people probably never noticed. I'd thought that I was good at faking it, but Vivienne Gordon was on another level. Some people had called her an ice queen, but I understood now why she was so guarded. People weren't always kind to a woman in power. She had to work three times as hard for the respect her male peers seemed to earn in one golf game. It frustrated the hell out of me, but she always seemed to take it in stride.

I still worried about her.

"Ticket sales capped at 50,238, but for an opening game for an unproven team, that's not too shabby," I told her, coming to stand beside her. "The local news crew is set, and social media engagement is already triple what we projected."

She nodded once. "Good."

I studied her profile for a moment. She'd changed in the five years since she'd walked into the hockey house and announced she was starting a franchise. She'd always been driven, but somewhere along the way, the drive had consumed everything else. She'd lost friends when she'd broken from Gordon Holdings. People she'd known her whole life had chosen her parents' side, especially after her parents painted Viv as the ungrateful daughter who'd spurned her family's legacy. The betrayals had calcified her. She ran this franchise with eighty-hour weeks and no one waiting for her at the end of them.

At least when I worked myself to the bone, I had Harry at home to hand me a glass of wine when I walked in the door and give me a foot rub.

Viv didn't have anyone.

“Hey, you okay?”

Her chin lifted with that stubborn Gordon tilt that Harry had too. “I’m fine.”

“Viv. Remember who you’re talking to.” Not only did I know I was one of her closest friends—apart from her bestie, Addison, who lived in LA—I was also her sister-in-law.

She exhaled through her nose and some of the composure dropped. “My mother called this morning.”

I blinked. That was new. The Gordon parents hadn’t spoken to either Viv or Harry in nearly five years. “What did she say?”

“She wished me luck.” Viv’s voice was carefully neutral. “I don’t know what to do with that.”

I didn’t either.

“You don’t have to do anything with it right now,” I said. “Tonight is yours. Everything else can wait.”

She looked at me, and a little bit of the tension around her eyes loosened. “Thank you, Sam. For everything. I couldn’t have done this without you.”

“You absolutely could have. But I’m glad you didn’t have to.”

Her mouth twitched and she turned back to the window. Down on the field, the coaching staff was gathered near the fifty-yard line on the sidelines, and my gaze snagged on the man at the center of the group.

Tanner Russell stood with his arms folded across a broad chest, clipboard tucked under one arm, watching his players get into position. He was tall, just like his brother Ty who’d played on the LA Wolves as part of the famous defensive group known as the Fierce Four. Tanner had retired from playing football two years ago after a shoulder injury, and Viv had hired him as head coach six months later.

It had been a controversial pick. A lot of people discouraged her from choosing a first-time head coach for a brand-new franchise. The sports media had been brutal about it, calling it a vanity hire and a sign that the Montana Thunder weren’t serious. But Viv hadn’t flinched. She’d said Tanner understood what it meant to build something from nothing, and she’d been right. He’d assembled a coaching staff that had turned heads across the league, and the players respected him.

I also wondered if she’d chosen him because he’d already weathered a public scandal when he played a role in exposing his brother’s wife’s

history to the media. It had been a mess back then, but he'd handled it with grace and taken accountability for his mistake. I suspected that was a big reason Viv chose him, as much as it was for his understanding of the game.

Tanner glanced up toward the suite, and for a fraction of a second, his gaze caught on the window where Viv was standing. She didn't react and didn't look away. But her thumb pressed harder against her index finger.

Interesting.

My phone buzzed. I looked down and grinned.

ERIC

Are you kidding me with these seats? Talk about best sister ever!

I looked across the stadium to the VIP level where I'd gotten seats for him and some of his teammates. They were in the same box as Harper, Rory, Liam, and Ava. Drew was down on the field as the head athletic trainer.

My little brother was leaning against the railing in a Henley and jeans, looking tanned and relaxed in a way that only the off-season allowed. A scout had spotted him at a CFU game his junior year and invited him to an AHL development camp that summer. Two years of grinding through the minors, a call-up, and he'd never looked back. He was twenty-four now, playing professional hockey, and loving every second of it.

He caught me looking and raised his beer toward me.

I texted him back.

Don't spill that on the seats. I'm the one who'll hear about it.

ERIC

Love you too, sis.

"Don't stay in here the whole game. Come down to the club space and hang out with everyone. Enjoy today. No one has earned this more than you," I told Viv, who was still staring out the window as the game started. She gave me a small smile and a nod. I'd take it.

I slipped out of the suite and into the hallway, weaving through staffers and security until I found the door I was looking for. The corridor that led from the luxury level down to the club spaces was quieter, the noise from the stadium muffled to a deep, ambient roar that vibrated in my chest.

I found Harry leaning against the wall outside the club entrance, his phone in his hand, looking like he belonged on the cover of a men's magazine. He was wearing dark jeans and a green Montana Thunder T-shirt that showed off his arms in a way that nearly had me drooling. God, my husband was sexy as fuck. Five years hadn't changed him much. He was still broad and had a calm about him that always grounded me. But there were small differences. He had more laugh lines at the corners of his eyes that hadn't been there at twenty-two. And now he had an air of confidence that came from building something with his own hands rather than inheriting it.

He and Foster had opened their restaurant a year after graduation. It had been a rocky first year, but they'd stuck it out. Foster handled the operations and the business side while Harry ran the kitchen, and somewhere along the way, the place had become the hardest reservation to get in Montana. Food critics had started making the trip to Missoula specifically to eat there, and last year a national magazine had named it one of the best restaurants in the West.

I was so stinking proud of him.

"Hey," I said, and his gaze lifted from his phone.

The way he looked at me still made my stomach flip. Five years together and the man still looked at me like he couldn't quite believe his luck.

"Hey." He pushed off the wall and met me halfway, his hand finding my hip like two magnets drawn together. He was always touching me if we were in a room together, and I loved it. "How's it going up there?"

"Controlled chaos. Viv's holding it together. The stadium's nearly full."

"I'm so proud of you both." His thumb traced the curve of my hip. "You look happy."

"I am happy."

His gaze narrowed onto my face. "No, you look happier than just about today. What is it?"

I couldn't help the smile that stole across my face. I should've known I couldn't keep it a secret for long. I could never hide anything from him, not that I wanted to.

"I need to tell you something," I said.

His brow shifted almost imperceptibly. He was fully locked in.

I took his hand and pressed it flat against my stomach. His eyes dropped to where his hand rested. Then back to my face. I watched the understanding dawn as his eyes got a little misty. We'd been trying for a year to have a baby, and when the tests kept coming back negative, my doctor thought it might be the stress of my job and for us to hold off until the stadium opened. But apparently we weren't meant to wait.

"Sam." His voice was rough.

"We're going to have a baby," I said, my voice getting a little watery. I was going to blame my hormones.

He didn't speak. His hand pressed harder against my stomach, fingers splaying wide and his jaw working like he was trying to hold back tears, even though his glassy eyes gave him away. He pulled me into him, burying his face in my neck and holding me tight. I held on, my fingers in his hair.

Not a single day passed when I wasn't grateful for this man and the life we'd built together.

He pulled back just enough to look at me, and then his lips met mine in a slow, deep kiss that had me melting against him. When he pulled away, he kept his forehead pressed against mine.

"I love you, Sam."

"I love you too. For forever and a day."

His hand stayed on my stomach.

My headset crackled. "Sam, the governor's detail is asking for a photo op with Viv at the half. Need a yes or no." I would need to coordinate with Viv before I answered.

"Duty calls."

I pressed one more kiss to his mouth and stepped back, straightening my blazer and my expression. He watched me shift back into work mode with that quiet pride I'd never get tired of seeing.

"Go," he said. "I'll be here waiting when you're done."

"You always are."

Thank you so much for reading Campus Fake! I hope you loved Sam and Gordy as much as I do. If you want to see their wedding day and have one last hurrah with the CFU fam, [grab this bonus epilogue!](#)

If you're already subscribed to my newsletter, grab it [here](#).

If you're not quite ready to say goodbye to these characters, don't worry, I'm not either, which is why you'll get to see them in the background

of my next series, Montana Thunder Football. I hope you'll join me for Viv and Tanner's story, releasing 2027! [Preorder now.](#)

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This book took the longest of all four in the series for me to figure out how the story was going to go, and then once the pieces fell, they clicked into place and I couldn't stop writing. I literally wrote the first fourteen chapters while waiting on Campus Secret edits from my editors because once Sam and Gordy started telling me their story, I had to get it down.

I'd known since Campus Crush that there was so much more to Sam than the bubbly sorority girl who was fiercely protective of Abby and left blue dildos on their couch (it was clean!). I knew I wanted her to have been an incredible figure skater, and that there had been an accident, but the rest of the details were blurry for the longest time. I knew she had a deep hurt that she was hiding that Gordy would help her confront, but I didn't realize quite how brutal it would be until all the pieces clicked into place.

Sam is the epitome of someone whose bright smile holds the deepest pain. You'd never know from looking at her surface the pain and guilt she carries because she doesn't want you to. To see it, she has to let you in. I think everyone experiences this to some extent at some point in their life, and I wanted Sam to show that there is light at the end of that dark tunnel. That you don't have to fake the happiness forever. That there is someone out there who loves you and will be your rock. I hope everyone can find a partner like Gordy and a found family like the CFU crew.

It's hard to say goodbye to a series that's so heavily built on found family because I feel like they became part of mine (or I became part of theirs, who knows?). It's bittersweet to say goodbye to Clark Fork University, but I'm so excited about what comes next. I'm thrilled to give Tanner his redemption story (if you don't know about Tanner, go read Closing the Distance) and for Viv to find the partner she deserves while she chases her dream in a world dominated by men.

There are a few people I want to thank for making this book and this series possible.

My incredible editors who have been with me from the very beginning. Ann Suhs and Ann Riza, thank you for always making my book the best possible version it can be.

Jenna Taplin at Lyric for producing four absolutely incredible audiobooks and to the narrators who have brought my characters to life: Celia Stone and Christian Fox (Campus Crush), Rose Dioro and Grayson Owens (Campus Rival), Vanessa Vasquez and Ryan Stone (Campus Secret), and Veronica Pace and Noah B Perez (Campus Fake). You are all truly so talented and I am blessed to have you bring my work to life. THANK YOU!

Lindsey Vandehey at Lily Bear Designs for your wonderful illustrated covers for this whole series.

Tara and Ciana at FMC Books in Missoula for your never ending support of my books. Thank you for forcing me out of my introverted cave for my release days. I love celebrating with you ladies. And thank you for telling more people about them. I truly appreciate you more than words can say.

Heather Douglas who runs my ARC/ALC team and my content team. Thank you for taking that stress off my shoulders so I can focus on the stories.

My miracle babies who are the reason I chase this crazy dream of mine. I hope you always know how much I love you.

To my husband, J. Thank you for believing in me when I doubt myself, for telling literally everyone you meet about my books, and being my biggest hype guy. Thank you for giving me my own happily ever after. I love you so much.

And last, but never least, to you, the reader for buying my book. Thank you for taking a chance on an indie author. I couldn't do this without you and for that I will always be grateful beyond words for you. 💜

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Cadence Keys is a bestselling sports romance author. When she's not coming up with plots for her books, she's chasing her rambunctious kids around or cuddling with her husband. She loves writing heartfelt stories with relatable characters and a guaranteed happily ever after.

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