GAMES OF HEARTS
BOOK ONE
SHE DREAMS OF OLYMPIC GOLD.
HE DREAMS OF THE GIRL
WHO'S ALWAYS BEEN HIS.
ONLY EVER YOU
ANASTASIJA WHITE

only ever you

A CHILDHOOD BEST FRIENDS TO STRANGERS TO LOVERS HOCKEY ROMANCE

GAMES OF HEARTS

BOOK 1

ANASTASIJA WHITE

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Edited by Caroline Knecht, https://reedsy.com/caroline-knecht

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To the dream chasers.
May you find someone who believes in you and your dreams as fiercely as they believe in their own. The right person will never make you choose between love and ambition. They'll always be the loudest voice cheering you on.

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author's note

Hi, hello, hey, lovely readers,

as you're reading this, the first thing I want to say is **THANK YOU**. I'm so incredibly grateful that you chose to read Michael and Isla's story.

Some of you have been with me since my debut, SIN-BIN, and watched Michael's parents, Ava&Colton, get their happily ever after. Some of you found me through Rules duet and fell in love with Bella&Xander's story before their daughter Isla was old enough to have a love story of her own. And some of you are meeting these characters and me for the very first time with this book. Whichever one you are, I'm so, so happy you're here.

Writing this book has felt like coming home and starting something completely new at the same time. I've learned so much since my debut, growing and evolving as an author with every book I've published. This is my eleventh book, and while I'm not one to play favorites, there's something about Michael and Isla's love story that feels truly special. Maybe it's because I'm finally back to writing hockey romance. Maybe it's because I got the chance to share my love for figure skating and just how mesmerizing it is to watch skaters on the ice, chasing their dreams and performing things that sometimes seem almost impossible. Or maybe it's because this story made me believe in soulmates more than any other book I've ever written.

Speaking of hockey and figure skating, I also wanted to add a quick note about the sports side of this story. I've done my best to keep both the hockey and figure skating in this book as true to their real-life counterparts as possible. However, I did allow myself a few small tweaks to certain

timelines, schedules, and logistical details to better serve the story. Unfortunately some real-life sports schedules refuse to cooperate when it comes to romance no matter how much I would've wanted it, so I allowed the fiction win at such moments.

Keep in mind, that this book contains some sensitive topics, so please check the trigger / content warnings before you continue. It includes: anxiety and panic attacks, bullying and public humiliation, motorcycle accident, underage drinking and intoxication.

For a full list, please visit: https://shor.by/OEY

Your mental health matters, so please take care of yourself and read with your own well-being in mind.

And with all of that said, I hope you fall in love with Michael and Isla and their story as much as I did while writing it, and they will find a special place in your heart.

Happy reading!

With love,
Ana

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playlist

“Ruin The Friendship” - Taylor Swift
“GONE” - NF feat. Julia Michaels
“that way” - Tate McRae
“People You Know” - Selena Gomez
“Nobody’s Home” - Avril Lavigne
“Fall For Me” - Sleep Token
“I Told You Things” - Gracie Abrams
“back to friends” - sombr
“End of Beginning” - Djo
“Friends” - Justin Bieber feat. BloodPop
“I Knew It, I Knew You” - Taylor Swift
“Euclid” - Sleep Token

Find the rest of Only Ever You playlist here: https://bit.ly/4hrjlbe

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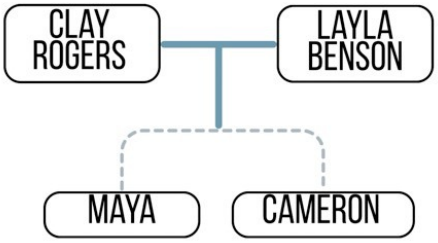

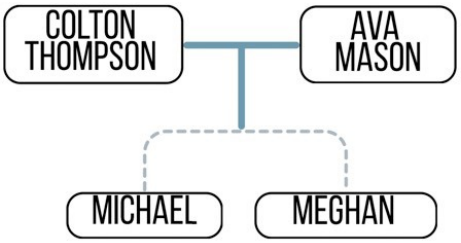

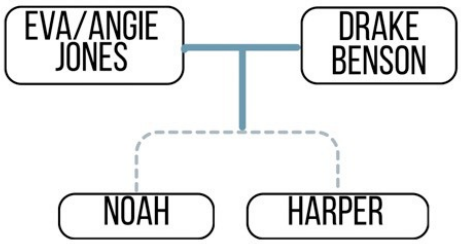

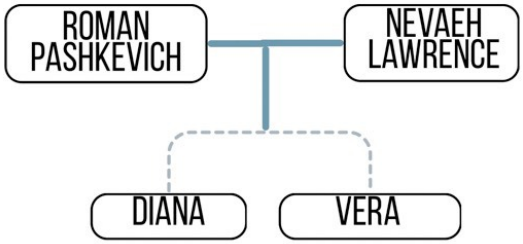

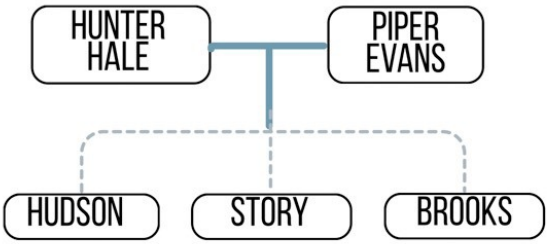

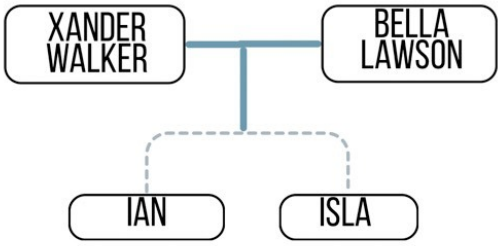

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part one

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CHAPTER ONE

you're amazing

MICHAEL

Eight years old

I PULL OFF MY HELMET, AND MY HAIR INSTANTLY FALLS INTO MY EYES. I try to blow it away, but it's no use. Maybe Mom is right. Maybe I do need a haircut.

Asher Vaughn grins at me from the bench, and I smile back. I'm friendly with most of the boys on the team, but Ash is my best friend.

The boards are decorated with fake snowflakes, the scoreboard lights set to red and green, and 'Jingle Bell Rock' plays during every stoppage. It's Christmas Cup Day, a little competition my dad and his friends organized for my team. It's meant to be a fun way to give us more playing experience. I'm excited, like the rest of the team, and maybe a little smug. Several players from the California Thunders are watching from the stands, and they are here because of my dad—Colton Thompson, their team captain.

The game is almost over, and the crowd is cheering and yelling like we're in the NHL playoffs. The score is 3–3, so either team could win, but I'll do anything to make sure we're the champions.

The last thing I want is to lose the game in front of my dad and his teammates, to embarrass him if I don't play well.

Coach taps my shoulder. "Go get us a win, Thompson."

With a nod, I strap on my helmet and skate toward the center of the ice. Usually, we play on half-ice, but Dad set it up so we have the whole rink for

the game. My stomach flips when I take my position, readying for the face-off.

The puck drops, and all my senses narrow. The stick in my hands, the puck on the ice. Nothing else. The arena disappears, and all I hear is the sound of my skates scraping the ice.

I win the puck and send it to my left, straight for Asher's stick.

When he easily takes control, I silently cheer. *Yes, we're so on!* He speeds up, I follow, and then, it's just me, my best friend, and a goalie.

"Go, Michael!" Mom yells from somewhere behind me. I'd recognize her voice anywhere. She's my biggest cheerleader.

"Take it all the way, boys!" Dad shouts. The encouragement fuels my movements, setting my skin on fire. His support always makes me push harder, do more. More than anything in the world, I want him to be proud of me.

Legs burning, I catch up to Ash. He fires the puck at the net. It hits the crossbar, and a zing of dread spreads through me.

The puck ricochets, and I catch it on the blade of my stick. I shift my weight from my back foot to my front, controlling the biscuit like I was taught. Then, with a quick flicking motion, I shoot it between the goalie's pads and into the net.

I look up at the scoreboard. My goal puts us ahead 4-3, and there's no time left on the clock.

The small crowd erupts with cheers and yells.

"Yes!" I throw my fist into the air.

"We won!" Asher rushes toward me and slams me into the boards. The next thing I know, our whole team is here too, dogpiling us, shoving us further into the boards.

"We did it!"

"Dude, your wrist shot was sick!"

"You're gonna be in the NHL, just like your dad!"

I'm only a kid, nowhere near as good as my dad and his teammates, but it's hard not to hope that last part is true.

“YOU WERE AMAZING, KIDDO,” Uncle Clay says, ruffling my hair. He’s one of my dad’s best friends and my godfather. “You have a bright future ahead of you, I have no doubt.”

“Thanks.” My cheeks hurt from smiling, even as warmth seeps into them. “I did my best.”

“You sure did.” He nods. “Your last shot? That goalie had no chance of stopping you.”

I inhale, ready to explain it was just luck, but before I can, a dad from the other team barrels into our conversation.

“Mr. Rodgers, is there any chance I can get you to sign my son’s helmet? He’s your biggest fan.”

Uncle Clay gives me a small smile and focuses on the man.

I shuffle away awkwardly, darkness dampening my mood. The teams are lining up on the blue line, so I take off toward them. The announcer stands between the two rows, medals with red ribbons hanging from his fingertips.

I stop beside Asher, and he leans closer to me. “Your dad came up to me when I was with Mom and said I was cool.”

I only now realize his dad hasn’t shown up again. He’s probably busy at work.

“You are.” I nod.

“And Drake Benson told me I’m good at stickhandling.” His green eyes sparkle. “Can you believe it?”

“Uh-huh.” I push my hair out of my eyes and scan the stands.

My dad and Uncle Drake are talking to a bunch of parents. Uncle Roman and Aunt Nevaeh stand off to one side, chatting with someone’s dad. Uncle Clay is still talking to the man who interrupted us.

Annoyance bubbles up inside me. Most of the time, I love it when Dad and his friends come to games, but when all the attention turns to them when it’s supposed to be about us, it’s frustrating.

But they came here to support us. I should be more grateful. Ugh, I’m stupid.

The announcer speaks, his voice booming through the arena, and the people in the stands focus their attention on us again.

My mood is all over the place, so I barely listen to anything he says.

“And now, for our very special award. The Holiday Spirit MVP goes to…number seven!”

I blink, my breath stalling out. *What?*

"That's you." Ash punches me in the shoulder with a grin. "Go get your cup. You deserve it."

The crowd breaks into applause, and my teammates clap for me too, even some of the boys from the other team. As I skate over, my pulse quickens, and my chest aches in a strange way. My face splits into a smile as I stop in front of the announcer.

He pats my shoulder. "Future superstar right here. With genes like his dad's, are we really surprised?" he says into the mic. "And on that note, of course we'd like to give a big thanks to Mr. Thompson for his generous sponsorship of today's tournament. Couldn't have done it without him!"

Everyone cheers louder at that part.

The announcer holds out the award—a little silver cup with *Holiday Spirit MVP* engraved on it. "You did great, kid. That last-minute goal? Priceless. I've been following your dad's career for years, and if you continue to progress the way you have, you might just be as good as him one day."

The tightness in my chest gets painful for half a second before I suck in a breath and smile again. This time, it takes effort. With a nod, I take the cup and skate back to the team, medal bouncing on my chest.

It should feel awesome. It *does*…mostly. But there's this weird pang in my heart that makes me feel like what I did on the ice today matters less than my last name.

I don't understand it.

AFTER A CELEBRATORY LUNCH of burgers and fries with my teammates, we went home. Our family friends came with us, so the house is full of people. My mom put my little sister down for a nap; she's asleep in her crib upstairs, not bothered in the slightest by all the noise. The house smells like the roasted chicken, baked potatoes, and the cinnamon cookies Mom prepared this morning. The lights on the Christmas tree cast a glow over blue and silver ornaments.

The comments from my dad's friends and my teammates' parents still play in my mind. Over and over, people would mess with my hair, ruffling

it and saying stuff like, *You're just like your father out there!* Or, *same skating stride! Runs in the family*. I laughed and smiled because it felt like the right thing to do, but the weird sensation in my gut only grew stronger, as if I'd swallowed a bunch of rocks, and they were pulling me down.

I don't like it.

So, I sneak upstairs to my room, needing a break from not only all the conversations, but also the thoughts running through my head.

I take off my medal and drop it onto the desk. My MVP cup is downstairs, and I don't really want to bring it up to my room. For reasons I don't understand, it feels like I don't deserve it, like it was a thank you award to my dad, not something I'd earned.

Ugh, even my thoughts are full of gloom.

Sitting on the floor, I dig the puck out of my backpack and twirl it in my hand. I liked scoring those goals. I like being on the ice. I like being one with the team.

But I don't like how the adults make it sound like all my accomplishments are because of Dad. I don't like how they keep comparing me to him either.

A soft knock on the door stops my musings.

"Yeah?" I call out weakly, not sure I want anyone to see me in this state.

"Can I come in?"

A tight knot in my stomach loosens. It's Isla, my best friend in the whole world. "Of course."

As she steps into my room, her brown hair spills over her shoulders. Her cheeks are a bit red from the cold, like she just got here. She's wearing a red Christmas sweater with a reindeer on the front, a black skirt, and black tights with white polka dots, and she's holding a cookie wrapped in a napkin.

"Hey," I say. "I wasn't sure you were coming."

She lowers herself to the floor in front of me, and the smile that plays on her lips makes me grin at her in return. Just like it always does, her presence makes everything better, even my mood.

"Dad let me leave practice early so we could be here to celebrate your win," she explains. "Are you okay? Why are you up here when everybody else is downstairs?"

I avert my gaze to the puck in my hand. "Yeah. I'm good. Just needed a break."

“You played really well,” she tells me. “I didn’t see much of the game, but I snuck out of practice for a few minutes and saw your last goal.”

Warmth blooms in my cheeks. “Thanks.”

She holds out the cookie. “For you.”

I put the puck down and take the cookie.

“You’re not happy?” she asks quietly.

Chest squeezing, I blink. “Why do you think that?”

“You look like my dad when the Mustangs lose.”

“But we won.”

“I know.” She tilts her head. “So why do you look upset?”

With a shrug, I take a bite of the cookie. She doesn’t rush me, doesn’t ask more questions. She just waits.

“They gave me an MVP award.”

Her face splits into a smile. “Yeah, I saw. That’s awesome.”

“But when that announcer dude gave it to me, he only talked about my dad,” I admit, head hanging. “It made me feel like the goal wasn’t mine.”

“But it *was* yours. You’re the one who scored.”

I look up, meeting her deep blue eyes.

“And you were the one on the ice, not Uncle Colton. You were fast and brave. I bet you didn’t fall once.”

My throat does a weird tight thing, getting lighter like my chest did. I lower the cookie, afraid I won’t be able to swallow it.

Isla reaches over and takes my hand, her expression serious. “You’re amazing. And you would be even if your dad weren’t famous.”

Warmth spreads all over my skin. My shoulders aren’t that tense anymore, and my heart beats slower now. I swallow around the lump in my throat. “Thank you.”

“Of course.” She smiles. “And I get how you feel.”

“Why?” I twine my fingers with hers and search her face.

“My coach told Mom I should start training privately when I get a little older. She said I’m very talented, and private training will help me develop skills quicker.” She bites her bottom lip, her cheeks reddening. “There’s a girl in my group…Sienna. You know her, right?”

“Yeah.” I dip my chin. Sienna is in my class at school.

“I thought we were friends, but then her mom overheard Coach talking to Mom and told Sienna I’m getting special treatment because of my dad.”

My stomach sinks. “That’s not true. What do figure-skating lessons have to do with Uncle Xander?”

She lifts a shoulder and lets it fall. “Mom said I shouldn’t pay attention to all that, but now, the girls don’t want to talk to me anymore, so practice isn’t fun.”

I squeeze her hand gently. “I’m sorry.”

She sighs, her eyes glimmering. “Thanks. I talked to Sienna during a water break because I do like her. Told her she’s very talented and that she’s faster than me.”

A snort escapes my lips. “You shouldn’t have said that.”

Eyebrows pulled together, she studies me. “Why? I wanted her to feel good. And I wanted her to know I think she’s talented too.”

“I get it.” I brush my fingers over her knuckles. “But you’re faster than half my team, and you’re definitely faster than Sienna. Everyone who’s seen the two of you practice knows it.”

“Oh.” Her eyes go big. “So she thinks I lied?”

I shake my head and lean closer. “You didn’t. You’re just…nice. You didn’t want her to feel bad.”

“It’s still gonna make the girls hate me.”

“I’ll talk to Sienna. She shouldn’t be mean to you. It’s not fair.”

Isla smiles, and the whole room lights up. “You don’t have to. I’ll figure something out.” She squeezes my hand. “You’re my *best* best friend in the world.”

A lightness I only feel around Isla takes over. “And you’re mine.”

Silence settles between us as we sit on the floor, and I pick up the cookie again.

“Michael?” she asks in a quiet voice.

“Yeah?”

“You think we’ll be friends forever?”

“Of course. I’ll be your forever best friend.” I duck my head so we’re eye to eye. “Will you be mine?”

A pink hue spreads over her cheeks. She lowers her attention to our clasped hands and then looks up. “Always.”

A warm and fuzzy sensation finds its way under my skin. The lightness turns into a feeling of complete weightlessness, like I could float away.

Isla Walker wants to be my forever best friend, and I know she will be.

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CHAPTER TWO

true or not true

ISLA

Ten years old

"LET'S TRY AGAIN." MY COACH LEANS ON THE BOARDS, HER ELBOWS resting on top. Elena is a former figure skater who won a silver medal for her home country, Russia, at the Olympics. She's been my coach since I was five. I was in a skating class at first, but this year, I started private lessons. Elena is tough. She pushes me to be better, but she's supportive and caring too. She doesn't ask me to do anything she doesn't think I can handle, and she compliments me when I learn a new skill. "Practice is almost over, but I know you can show me a well-done toe loop first."

Pausing, I take a deep breath and focus. She's right. I can do it. I thrive on the ice. When I've got a pair of skates on, the rest of the world disappears. I don't think about all the homework waiting for me after, about school, or the boys the girls in my class are suddenly obsessed with. This is where I can be myself, and I love it. My practices are long, five days a week, but that doesn't stop me from giving it my all. I want to be the best, and Elena thinks I can be, but only if I do the work.

"*Solnyshko*, we don't have all day."

A smile tugs at the corners of my mouth. *Solnyshko* is the nickname she gave me after my first practice. My dad freaked out big time at first because he had no idea what it meant and immediately went into overprotective dad

mode. But once Elena explained she called me a ‘little sun,’ he tried to learn how to pronounce it too.

I huff and push the thought away. That’s not what I should be focusing on right now.

With my arms held out, I skate forward on the inside edge of the blades, then switch to a backward-facing position. Elena watches me, her blue eyes piercing, one eyebrow arched as I place my left toe behind my right foot and take off from the back outside edge. I wobble on the landing, but Elena only gives me an encouraging smile.

She nods once. “Again.”

Grinning, I push off, determined to make it cleaner this time. *I can do it.*

After three more attempts, my toe loop is much better. Elena claps, her face bright, and my mom follows suit as she strolls down from the stands.

I skate over to them, fixing my ponytail and smoothing the flyaways. My breath is quick and shallow, but warmth settles in the pit of my stomach, making me smile wider.

Practice went well, and from the way Elena is smiling at Mom, she agrees.

As I near the boards, a commotion breaks out on the other side of the rink. One glance over my shoulder, and my stomach drops as my muscles tense. Without hesitation, I take off in the opposite direction.

Figure skaters are not supposed to share the ice with the hockey team. Too dangerous, according to basically every coach ever. But there’s a game scheduled tonight, so they shoved both practices into the same slot.

While I was on my side of the rink, the hockey boys were stuck on another half, doing drills only—no scrimmage, no shots flying everywhere. I can imagine them being bored, but fighting? It seems a bit too much.

Though, considering it’s Michael and Cade Turner again, I shouldn’t be surprised. They play on the same team, but they both want to be center, so they’re always competing.

Before I can get to them, Asher pulls Michael away. Another boy clutches Cade by the jersey and yanks him back too, but I don’t pay them any attention. That boy is trouble, and I don’t like him. He always picks fights with my best friend.

With his hands wrapped around Michael’s shoulders from behind, Asher grits through his teeth, “Stop. If Coach sees you fighting again, he’ll bench you.”

“Let me go!” Michael thrashes against his friend, his focus still fixed on Cade, his expression full of rage.

“No,” Asher huffs. His green eyes lock with mine, and the anger in them disappears. His face lights up, and a smile curves his lips. “Thank God you’re here.”

Michael snaps his head in my direction, a frown etched onto his face. His deep brown hair is falling in his eyes, his helmet abandoned on the ice.

“Really? Fighting again?” I ask, stopping in front of him with my hands on my hips.

He deflates, his shoulders drooping. “He’s been acting like an ass all practice.”

“So nothing new then?” I quirk a brow. “He always acts like an ass. Guess that’s why you always get into fights, huh?”

He harrumphs. “Not true.”

“So true.” I chuckle.

He glares at me, but the expression cracks after a second, and he breaks into a smile. His brown eyes sparkle as he tells Asher he can let go of him.

Ash doesn’t loosen his hold. Instead, he arches a brow at me. When I nod, he finally releases Michael.

“You’re the best, Isla.” Asher takes off his helmet and pushes his blond hair out of his eyes. “If Coach caught him fighting again—”

“I’m right here.” Michael sticks his bottom lip out in a pout.

I glide closer and touch his arm. “How was practice?”

Michael takes a deep breath and smiles. “It was great. Coach made us race across the ice, and I beat everyone.”

My heart lifts in my chest. “That’s amazing.”

“And I got second.” Asher waggles his eyebrows.

“Wow. So practice really was good, huh?” I survey the two of them. Their chests are puffed out, their shoulders pulled back with pride. Behind them, movement catches my eye. Their coach is back, waving his team over to the boards. “You should go,” I say. “Looks like your practice is over.”

Asher nods and skates away.

Michael, on the other hand, lingers, tilting his head to the side. “What about your practice?”

A short laugh escapes my mouth. “It was good. Go. We can talk in the car.”

“Okay.” Grinning, he skates backward toward the bench.

Shaking my head, I move toward the other side of the rink, a smile on my lips and a strange fuzzy feeling forming in my stomach. I don't know what it is, but I kind of like it, and I'm pretty sure it's because of Michael.

WHEN I EXIT the locker room, Michael is waiting, expression pinched, foot tapping, and his whole posture rigid.

"Ready to go?" I ask.

He nods, jaw clenched, but he doesn't speak.

Side by side, we head down the hallway and find Mom waiting for us by the door. She smiles at me, and then her deep blue eyes land on Michael. "Did you get everything?"

"Yes," he replies, the word short and sharp.

"You sure?" Her lips tremble like she's suppressing a smile. "I don't want to get halfway home and find out you forgot your shoulder pads. *Again*."

A groan slips out of his mouth. "That's not fair. It happened only once."

"Yeah, but we were ten minutes from your house," she points out.

"Aunt Bella, I swear," he practically whines, "I didn't forget anything this time."

"Good." With a wink at him, she heads to our car.

Michael and I quietly follow her. With how annoyed he seems, something must have happened after practice. Rather than trying to get it out of him, I stay silent. I've known this boy since we were little, and he always needs time to cool off.

The hockey bag slung over his shoulder looks way too big for him, yet he walks like he owns the place: shoulders back, head high, eyes ahead. He's no more than an inch taller than me, but he won't stop reminding me about it. Lately, he's been going on about how he's not only one month older than me, but also taller. His teasing doesn't bother me, though. Plus, I like that we're not the same height.

Mom opens the back hatch of her SUV and helps Michael tuck his bag inside. When I sling my own bag off my shoulder, Michael takes it from me and hefts it in.

My cheeks feel hotter than they did a moment ago, and my voice is rough when I mumble, “Thanks.”

He sneaks a glance at me and nods.

Once we’re buckled up and on the road with the radio playing, I half-turn and peer at Michael. He sighs and mirrors me.

“What happened?” I ask.

“Nothing.”

“Can I take a guess?”

He rolls his eyes, but he doesn’t say no.

“You got into another argument with Cade—true or not true?”

“Not true.”

Huh. I figured that was a guarantee. But I guess not, so I go with the next most likely scenario. “Your coach saw the fight, true or not true?”

He sighs. “Not true.”

I bite my bottom lip, studying his pout. “Your coach…found out about the fight, true or not true?”

“True.” Eyebrows pulled together, he meets my gaze. “Turner’s mom saw it and complained to the coach about my behavior.”

“That sucks.” I pat his hand on the seat between us. “Did Coach bench you?”

“No,” he grumbles. “He said Turner will be playing center until the end of the month.”

My stomach sinks. Oh. This is bad. No wonder he looks so down.

“I’m really sorry,” I tell him quietly. “Could your dad talk to your coach and smooth things over?”

“Uh, no. I’d have a better chance of convincing my mom than my dad.” He plasters a serious expression on his face and mimics his dad’s voice the best he can. “*Michael, you need to learn to face consequences. Don’t expect me to get you out of trouble when you do something reckless*.”

Mom snorts, and we turn to look at her.

“Sorry,” she murmurs, peering at us in the rearview mirror. “You sound so much like your dad when you do that.”

The tips of Michael’s ears turn red; a sheepish smile blooms on his face. “Thanks. Um, can you please not mention this to him? Or Mom?”

My mom nods. “I won’t say anything, but you need to tell your parents about what happened at practice. *Your* side of the story.” She stops at a red

light and glances at him over her shoulder. “Cade’s mom has already texted yours.”

“Crap,” we say in unison.

Mom snickers, though she quickly schools her expression. “While I get it, let’s keep that four-letter word out of our mouths, okay?”

My heart sinks. “Sorry, Mom.”

“Yeah, sorry, Aunt Bella.”

Smiling, she focuses on the road again.

Michael turns away from me and rests his head against the headrest. “He got my position, and now my parents are gonna lecture me. *Great*.”

“What really happened?” I whisper, leaning closer.

“Turner tripped Ash when Coach stepped away to take a call. He also made dumb jokes all the way through practice, trying to get to us. I tried to ignore him, but after he messed with Ash, I flipped.”

Warmth spreads across my skin, and the floaty feeling in my stomach returns. He’s hotheaded, but it’s usually in situations where it’s understandable, like when he’s standing up for someone. He never loses his temper just because.

“I think if you explain it to your parents, they’ll understand.” I reach over again and take his hand. “It’s not fair, but I’m sure when you play center again, you’ll show your coach and the whole team you’re a thousand times better than Turner.”

He threads his fingers through mine, a slow smile blooming on his lips. “You really think so?”

“I know so.” I give his hand a light squeeze.

“You’re the best.”

My heart flutters again. “Thank you.”

With his head still leaning on the headrest, he fixes his focus on me. “How was your practice?”

“It was good.” A smile splits my face without my permission. “I managed a really great toe loop. Elena was happy with it.”

He smirks. “Kinda funny that if you hadn’t come to my practice when we were five, you’d probably be doing ballet or something right now.”

A laugh bubbles out of me. He’s not wrong. He was playing hockey by the time he was five, and one day, I begged my mom to take me to his practice. It was cool, seeing him in his element. But the moment I saw a figure skater, how graceful her movements were, how easy she made the

jumps and spins look, I fell in love. Less than a week later, I was stepping onto the ice with a group of girls under the sharp supervision of Elena. I still love it just as much, if not more.

"You're welcome, by the way," he teases, ruining the moment.

I scoff and tug my hand away from him. "You're impossible."

Rather than let go, he tightens his hold. "Not true."

My cheeks heat, and my heart thumps faster in my chest. It's a sensation I've never experienced before, strange but not terrible. I'll ask Mom about it. There's nothing she doesn't know.

Sighing, I rest my head against my own headrest. "Fine. Maybe you're right."

"I always am."

My responding snort is half-hearted, and we fall into a comfortable silence. My hand is still in his, and it feels like the most natural thing in the world.

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CHAPTER THREE

she's my best friend

MICHAEL

Twelve years old

WE'RE ALL LINED UP BY THE BOARDS WHILE COACH TALKS ABOUT tonight's drills, but I'm barely listening. My eyes keep drifting across the rink to where Isla's skating her program one more time before her time is up.

"Thompson."

I snap my head back toward Coach. He stares at me with an eyebrow raised. "Are you even listening?"

Asher snorts beside me, clearly finding the situation amusing.

My cheeks burn, and I shift uncomfortably. "Yeah," I lie.

Coach shakes his head and then focuses on other boys, continuing his explanations. The moment he isn't paying me any attention, I glance over my shoulder at the other side of the rink again. My heart misses a beat as I catch sight of Isla. She's no longer skating. Instead, she's sitting on the ice, cradling her leg.

Without thinking, I turn and hurry toward her. The guys call after me, but I ignore them.

She lifts her head as I approach. Her deep blue eyes are watery, and from the way she's pursing her lips, I know she's trying not to cry.

I kneel beside her and take off my helmet. "Hey. Are you okay?"

She nods, sniffling.

“Did you fall?”

“Kinda,” she mumbles. “I went for the Double Salchow. It was my fifth attempt, and I was getting better each time, but this time, my takeoff was wrong. I caught the edge too early and under-rotated, so my landing was awkward. I probably twisted my ankle.”

I tear off my glove and brush wild locks of hair from her face. “Do you need help?”

“Please.” She gives me a small smile.

As I help her up, Coach blows the whistle; based on the sounds of the skates scraping the ice, everyone pushes off the boards for the first drill. Everyone except me. A twinge of panic surges through me when Coach’s disappointed face flashes in my mind. He’s not going to be happy.

“Your practice just started.” Isla’s voice rips me out of my thoughts.

“Yeah, it did,” I murmur as I guide her to the boards.

She halts in her tracks and turns to look at me. “Did you leave your practice…” She glances over her shoulder. “Er, your coach’s whole speech for me?”

It’s weird how hot my cheeks become. “I’m…”

“True or not true?”

I sigh and drop my head. “True.”

And now I feel like a total idiot. Her coach is right here; she could’ve helped her instead.

Isla squeezes my hand, her lips tipping up in a warm smile. “Thank you so much.”

The warmth that spreads through my body makes me feel like I’m on a sunny beach instead of on the ice.

I grin back at her. “You’re very welcome.”

“Thank you, Michael.” Elena gives me a polite nod as we reach her. “I was headed onto the ice to help when I saw you rushing to your friend’s rescue.”

“That’s what he always does.” My dad’s voice comes from behind Elena, and he steps into view. Today is his turn to pick us up after practice.

His deep brown eyes are on me, the same shade as mine. I search his face, trying to read his mood, looking for anger or frustration. After all, I abandoned my teammates and missed the start of my practice. Yet, all he does is smile.

“Go back to your team,” he says. “I’ll take it from here.”

I give Isla’s hand a light squeeze and scurry to get my helmet and join the guys. When I get back, Coach doesn’t say anything, but the look he gives me says I’m probably getting a talk after practice.

COACH BLOWS THE WHISTLE. “Alright, last ten minutes. You all know the drill. Blue jerseys over here, white jerseys there.”

I grab a blue one before Cade can, and the scowl he gives me as he snatches a white one is enough to make my blood boil. I can’t stand the guy, but it only makes the win taste sweeter, even if it’s just during our short scrimmage.

Asher skates to my side, wearing a blue jersey as well, like I knew he would. He makes a terrific left wing to my center. With him on my team, we can totally win.

“How many do you want to score?” he asks me, pushing his blond hair out of his eyes.

“Two, maybe three.”

I take a deep breath and steal a glance at the stands. Dad is still here, and his presence always makes me a bit nervous. Not because he’ll yell or lecture me for my mistakes on the ice. He’d never do that. It’s because the pressure to do well goes way up when he’s watching. I want him to be proud of me. He had an incredible career, and I’d hate to be a disappointment. Not only to him, but to everyone else who expects Colton Thompson’s son to be a hockey prodigy.

Asher claps me on my back, garnering my attention. “Relax.”

“I’m fine.”

As the rest of the guys join us, I tap my stick on the ice. Cade is across from me, his gray-blue eyes flaring with anger. Lip curled, he pulls on his helmet.

“Centers,” Coach barks, “line up.”

Everyone moves to take their positions, Asher grumbling “good luck” as he skates to my left.

I breathe slowly, inhaling and exhaling to control my heartbeat. The whistle blows, and I easily win the face-off. I skate forward, pushing hard, heading toward the white team’s net, my blades cutting the ice.

Jones, a defenseman, cuts across, but I fake left and slip past him. The net is right in front of me. Ford, the white team's goalie, stands in front of it, but all I see is the net waiting for me.

From above the right hash marks, I lift my stick; with a slap shot, I send the puck flying. It flies past Ford, catching in the net.

A thrill of excitement goes through me. *Yes!* The first goal is mine. Asher and the other guys wearing blue surround me, clapping me on the back.

"One down, one more to go," Ash mutters in my ear.

"An assist for you would be great too," I tell him as we return to our positions.

"Just one? Stop being so greedy."

"Shut it, Vaughn," I tease, "or you won't get any."

He scoffs. "I'm your best friend!"

"And a pain in the ass."

He rolls his eyes as he skates away from me.

When the whistle blows again, Turner gets to the puck first and checks his shoulder into mine, pushing me away.

"Not today, Thompson," he hisses, skating away from me.

Luckily, our defenseman, Lloyd, intercepts him and easily steals the puck. He sidesteps to the middle of the ice and then sends the puck back toward the boards, banking it right to where Asher is skating. Ash catches it with ease and takes off toward the net.

I follow him closely. Do I want to score? Sure. But he is my best friend, my teammate, and, more than anything, I want to win.

"Come on—" My words are cut off as I'm hit from the right, and my stick flies out of my hands. I was too focused on what was happening ahead of me to notice Turner gaining on me. Damn him.

With a grunt, I turn back, grab the stick, then push toward the white team's net, keeping Turner from getting ahead of me.

Asher cuts to the net and, with a precise backhand shot, the puck sails over the goalie's shoulder into the net.

Two to zero. I did nothing to help with that goal, but I'm ecstatic to be on the winning side anyway.

I rush to celebrate with the team, cheering loudly as we always do. Asher's grinning at me, his blond hair falling into his eyes again.

“Even without my assist, you scored a goal.” I nudge him as we skate over to take our positions one more time.

“That’s because I’m awesome.”

“And smug.”

He lets out a laugh. “You’re one to talk.”

Coach blows the whistle, signaling the end of practice. We skate toward him, and I mentally brace myself for a lecture. There’s no way he’s not going to say something. But Turner gets to me first.

What a surprise…not.

He bumps his shoulder into mine and sneers, “Nice of you to ditch Coach’s speech for your girlfriend.”

I grit my teeth. His constant comments about Isla are getting on my last nerve.

“She’s my best friend.” I discreetly move my stick to my left hand. “And I’m not sure if you noticed, but my team won. That’s what matters.”

Before he has a chance to answer, I catch the back of his blade with my stick, and he stumbles forward. Rather than fall, he catches himself, but barely.

He glares at me, his face red with anger. “You…”

I wink at him. “Nice practice, Turner.”

With that, I join the rest of the guys, who have gathered around Coach. This dude doesn’t matter.

It’s kind of Isla’s and my thing—whoever finishes practice first sticks around to watch the other one. So now, I’m waiting for her as she goes to pick up her stuff. I stand with my back pressed to the wall outside the girls’ locker room when a woman I can’t see harrumphs.

“If anyone else left in the middle of the Coach’s speech the way that Thompson kid did, Coach would’ve benched them,” she says.

“That kid always gets special treatment,” a man replies. “I don’t get why. He’s nowhere near as good as his dad; based on what I’ve seen so far, he will never be.”

Hands balled into fists, I narrow my eyes as the couple rounds the corner. Turner’s parents. I should’ve guessed.

Mrs. Turner’s step falters as she locks eyes with me.

I don’t look away.

She thins her lips and focuses on her husband as they pass me in silence. I’m tempted to ask why they stopped talking. If that’s how they feel, why hide it? Probably because they’re cowards.

My mood plummets, making my chest ache. I run a hand down my face, trying to get myself together. The last thing I want is for Dad to notice I’m upset. He’ll start asking questions, and I’m terrible at pretending I’m fine. Somehow, Dad always knows when I’m lying.

Isla finally appears, dressed in black leggings, an oversized pink hoodie, and white sneakers, carrying her bag in one hand. She’s limping a little, her gaze focused on her feet.

My brain jumps straight to her, tuning out the negative thoughts. Good. I need that. I push myself off the wall and block her path.

Her deep blue eyes lift to meet mine, and she smiles. “Sorry it took me so long.”

“You’re fine.” I take her bag from her. For a while, she’d argue and insist she could carry it herself. I never let her. So, about a year ago, she gave up, and now, she lets me take it without a fight. “Dad’s waiting for us in the car.”

“Okay.”

As we head down the hallway side by side, I look down at her. A year ago, she was an inch or two shorter than me. Now, she barely comes up to my chin. As my legs are so much longer than hers, I often have to slow down so she can keep up with me. I do that now, and for the first time, she doesn’t argue about it.

She must really be in pain.

“Does it hurt?” I ask. “Your ankle?”

“Just a little bit.” She shrugs, her long brown hair brushing her shoulder. “My dad called while I was in the locker room. Your dad called him. Sounds like there’s a whole operation, ‘let’s heal Isla’s ankle,’ in motion at home.”

I chuckle, both thankful for our families and a little annoyed by them. “Parents love to fuss over us.”

“They do.” She clears her throat. “Are you in trouble for missing the start of practice?”

Hiking her bag higher on my shoulder, I give her a sheepish smile. “Miraculously, no. Coach wasn’t happy about it, and he roasted me a little, but he said he understood. Went on about how important it is to be there for our friends and all that.”

Her lips twitch in a small smile. “Good. I was worried he’d be too hard on you.”

“Everyone knows I’m his favorite.” My tone is light and full of humor, even though I’m still reeling over the crap Turner’s parents were talking about me.

Isla snorts. “One day, your ego is going to hit the roof.”

I push open the door, letting her out first. “Good thing the rink’s got high ceilings then.” I wink at her as we head toward my dad’s SUV. “I am Colton Thompson’s son. I want to be a legend like him. I want to be in the NHL one day.”

Isla pauses, and I stop too. She studies my face, a small smile forming on her lips. “I’m sure you will be. You were born for this.” She pats my forearm. “I wouldn’t be surprised if one day, you’re even better than him.”

My stomach does some weird flip thing that makes my smile falter. I swallow thickly, my chest expanding, my head swirling with confusion.

“Um, yeah, maybe.” I clear my throat. “You’re lucky your dad played football. Nobody’s expecting you to be the next him.”

The corners of her mouth drop along with her shoulders. “I don’t think Uncle Colton wants you to be the next him either.”

My heart sinks a little. “I know, but other people do. Don’t think I don’t hear what my teammates’ parents say about me.”

“Ignore them. They’re a bunch of nobodies. Their opinions don’t matter.”

“You don’t understand.” I tear my gaze away from hers and head for the SUV again, my mood darkening. Crap. I hate this. I hate being mad at her. Especially when she hasn’t done anything wrong.

Forcing myself to stop, I turn back and focus on her.

“I’m sorry,” I say as she catches up. “I shouldn’t talk to you like that.”

“Thanks.” She worries her bottom lip. “I also shouldn’t have said what I said.”

“Nah, you were right. I needed the reminder.”

“Good. I don’t like seeing you so down.” A pinkish hue creeps onto her cheeks. “A smile suits you so much better than a frown.”

Warmth builds in my chest. It’s not exactly unusual, but it only ever happens when Isla is around.

“Michael, Isla.” My dad’s voice cuts through the air, and I whip around. “How about you finish your conversation in the car?”

“Sorry, Dad.” I take off toward him.

“Yeah, sorry,” Isla says, following me a little slower.

I open the back door for her, and while she climbs in, I heft our stuff into the cargo area in the back. Her voice is soft and calming as she talks to my dad about her family’s plans for the weekend. It creates a lightness in my limbs that feels weird after such an intense practice.

It doesn’t feel bad, just strange. Hopefully, that means the sensation isn’t a bad one.

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CHAPTER FOUR

the kiss pact

ISLA

Thirteen years old

IT'S AUNT AVA'S BIRTHDAY, AND, LIKE EVERY YEAR, WE'RE AT THE Thompsons' house for a barbecue. The faces are all the same, just with more kids running around.

I'd never complain about spending time with our family friends, but the icing on the cake is that I get to hang out with my best friend, and we always have a lot of fun, no matter what we do.

I'm staying the night, which I don't usually do, and from all the hints Michael has given me, I think he's planning something. I just hope it's nothing scary; I'm not the biggest fan of horror stories.

"Isla!" Ian barrels toward me just as I step onto the terrace.

My brother is six, just like Meghan, Michael's little sister, who's on his heels. They stop in front of me, breathing heavily, eyes wild, smiles splitting their faces.

"What is it?" I tilt my head to the side, surveying their flushed faces.

"We were looking *everywhere* for you," Meghan says.

Ian narrows his eyes at me. "Where were you?"

I arch an eyebrow. "I was using the bathroom. What's the emergency?"

They exchange a glance, and then Ian steps in and waves me closer, clearly ready to tell me a secret.

With a sigh, I bend at the waist so they can whisper in my ear. "Well?"

“Michael asked us to tell you…” Meghan murmurs.

Ian chimes in. “That he’s waiting for you on the second floor.”

Straightening, I blink. All this secrecy just for that?

“Why couldn’t he tell me himself?”

Ian rolls his eyes, as if the question is ridiculous.

Meghan is the one to answer me, hands on her hips. “Because he couldn’t find you, duh.”

I chuckle. “Okay. Thanks. I better go then.”

“Isla?” Ian calls as I’m stepping into the house. “Will you ask Mom if I can stay? We want to have a sleepover too.”

“We won’t bother you,” Meghan adds. “We’ll stay in my room.”

“Sorry, guys,” I tell them, giving them a smile. “If you want a sleepover, you’ll have to ask yourselves, just like we did.”

Ian frowns, crossing his arms over his chest. “You’re no fun.” He grabs Meghan’s hand and drags her into the house.

With a shake of my head, I step inside. On the second floor, Michael is standing at the threshold of his bedroom, one shoulder propped against the doorframe. His eyes are glued to his phone, so I take a moment to study him.

He’s grown again. He’s got to be more than half a foot taller than me now. His shoulders are wider under his white tee, and his jaw looks sharper than it did just a few days ago, I swear. His dark brown hair is shaggy, brushing the back of his neck. It’s messy, yet somehow perfect. He always runs his hand through it like he knows people are watching. And they are, especially the girls at school.

My chest twists at the thought. I don’t know when I started noticing it, but lately, thoughts about him have hit me constantly.

He’s a beautiful boy, with deep brown eyes, a straight nose, and full lips. Already, he’s a talented hockey player. His dad is an NHL legend. Of course, everyone likes him, but I can’t say *I* like *that*. I don’t want to share my best friend with anyone else.

But he’s not just *your best friend anymore*.

Mom’s words from three years ago come back to me, my heart thudding heavily. When I was ten, I told my mom about the strange feeling that would hit me when Michael was around. She sat me down and explained the butterflies in my stomach. She talked about attraction, crushes, and even first love.

My cheeks were on fire through the whole conversation, but when I was in bed alone later that night, I realized she wasn't wrong. I liked Michael. A lot. But I couldn't imagine telling him that. I worried he'd feel weird around me. We were already dealing with kids from school singing about us 'sitting in a tree.' So, I tucked all my feelings into a little box and stuffed it into the back of my mind.

And that worked. Until the start of this school year, at least.

"Isla?" Michael's voice snaps me out of my thoughts. "What are you doing?"

I blink and refocus on his face. His eyebrows knitted together, he assesses me. His phone is nowhere to be seen. Yikes. I was so lost in my own head, I didn't notice him put it away.

"Sorry, I zoned out." I stride closer, forcing a smile. "Ian and Meg told me you were looking for me."

His lopsided grin makes my stomach do somersaults.

"I thought we could start our sleepover early."

My heart leaps in my chest. "Really? The house is full of kids, and we're supposed to be watching—"

He presses his finger to my lips, silencing me. Unbidden, my cheeks flame. With any luck, the hallway is dim enough that he doesn't notice.

"We've been looking after the kids for years now," he says. "What's the harm in doing what we want once in a while? What do you say?"

Once I've nodded my agreement, he steps back, removing his finger from my lips. His touch lingers, though, like a brand.

I follow him into his room, and when he reaches for the doorknob and his hand brushes my shoulder, I jerk away. My emotions are too out of control to handle being touched right now.

Relief loosens a tight knot in my chest; his attention is already elsewhere. His room is so him—half chaos, half order. Even the colors suit him perfectly: dark gray carpet, white walls, dark blue curtains, and blue bedding with light gray throw pillows. The bed's never fully made, just kind of straightened, like he couldn't be bothered to put in actual effort. In the corner, three hockey sticks are propped against the wall, and his helmet sits on the desk next to his laptop. Above the desk are shelves crammed with books and hockey trophies. Wedged in among them are two photos. In one, the two of us are probably seven. We're standing on the ice with wide

smiles and gleeful eyes. In another one, he and Asher are decked out in their hockey gear, their helmets lying on the ice.

He's always on the ice, always smiling.

"What do you think?" Michael stops beside me and points at the folded throw blanket and paper bag on his bed.

"What's in the bag?"

"Marshmallows, peanuts, chips, and sandwiches." He nudges me with his shoulder. "There's also a thermos full of hot chocolate."

My favorite. Butterflies erupt in my stomach.

I can't hide my smile, not that I want to. "You thought of everything."

"I did."

"So we're having a picnic."

"We are."

"Where? The moment we leave your room, the kids will be on us."

He puts his hands on my shoulders and turns me to the window. "On the roof."

A nervous thrill zips through me. "Our parents are going to kill us."

"Only if they find out." He gently pushes me across the room. "Let's go." Warm air sweeps over me as he opens the window wide. It smells like cut grass and barbecue on the terrace. It's that kind of August night that feels alive, buzzing with crickets, conversations, and laughter, the heat leftover from the day just starting to fade.

He snags the paper bag and the thermos from the bed and hands them to me. Then, with the blanket thrown over his shoulder, he climbs out. His sneakers scrape against the shingles, the hem of his T-shirt brushing the window frame. Once the blanket is spread out, I pass our supplies to him. After he sets it all down, he returns to the window and holds out his hand for me.

The roof isn't that steep, and it's not the first time we've been out here, but my heart still beats quickly as I swing my leg over the sill and step out. The shingles are warm under my palms, holding on to the heat from the sun.

He steadies me, his fingers brushing my wrist, though he lets go quickly. My chest tightens, making it hard to breathe.

Only when he turns away do I collect myself. We sit on the blanket, our snacks between us, the evening sky stretched out in every direction. With

the gold melting into pink, pink flowing into purple, it's like the whole world has been dipped into watercolor.

The view brings with it a sense of calm, allowing me to relax.

Michael pulls out the food he smuggled, and we dig in, talking about the younger kids who tried to rope us into games all night and how his dad came to our rescue, sending them all to play soccer.

The mood is light, like it always is when we're together.

"How was school this week?" he asks as he pours hot cocoa into the plastic mug he brought for me. "I can't believe summer is already over."

"The same as yours, I'm sure." That's a lie, but I don't want to get into it.

"Really?" He arches an eyebrow. "My first week was full of shenanigans with the boys, but every time I saw you, you were alone."

My stomach sinks. I should know better than to try to hide things from him.

"I'm not a popular kid." I take the mug and hide behind its rim.

He scoffs. "Nonsense. Everyone likes you."

"Everyone likes *you*, Michael," I say, my voice dangerously close to cracking. "Your teammates and all the kids at school." *The girls especially.* Rather than say that, I take a sip of my drink. "I'm friendly with everyone, but I don't really have time to make friends. You and Ash are the only company I need."

"Sienna wants to be your friend. She was asking all about you in English class on Wednesday."

I lower my mug, the cocoa tasting bitter. "Sienna Hartman?"

"Yeah. You used to take lessons together, remember?"

Palms sweaty, I set my mug on the roof, afraid I'll spill the cocoa. If there's anyone I don't vibe with at school, it's her. Sienna Hartman has been a thorn in my side since the moment Elena suggested she train me privately when I turned ten. It only got worse when Sienna's parents asked for private tutoring for her too, and Elena recommended another coach.

Sure, the two of us are friendly. We smile at each other and make small talk when we see each other at the rink or in school, but those smiles are the fakest I've ever pulled off.

She was the one who pushed me out of our friend group and told the other girls not to hang out with me when I started training privately, so why does she want to be my friend now?

“Are you okay?”

I lick my lips. “Um, so she just randomly approached you and started talking about me?”

“Not randomly. We sit near each other in a couple of classes, and we talk from time to time.” He flashes me an easy smile. “She knows we’re best friends. That’s probably why she was asking about you.”

My heart stutters, and not in a good way. “You never mention her.”

He blinks, his mouth forming a little O. “I guess I’ve never really talked to her one-on-one until this year. I don’t think we’ve ever been put near each other in class before.”

I look away from him, chewing my bottom lip. My brain won’t shut up, replaying my run-ins with Sienna this week. One moment in particular stands out, making my pulse skyrocket: the day she tracked him as he approached my locker, asking a question about practice he probably should have texted.

My stomach twists. I know exactly why she was asking about me. She wants to get close to him, and pretending to be my friend is step one.

“You’re freaking me out,” Michael mutters.

Holding my breath, I turn to inspect him. I don’t know what to say. Sienna and I aren’t friends, but we aren’t enemies either. I don’t think I can bring myself to tell him my theory, because I don’t think I can explain why her sudden attention on him bothers me. At least, not without basically telling him I like him.

So, I swallow the bitterness that fills my mouth. “I don’t really know her anymore, that’s all.”

“Think you could give her a chance if she does approach you?” He ducks his head so our eyes are level. “Who knows? Maybe she’s your future bestie.”

“Who knows.” I lift my shoulder and pick up my mug, avoiding his gaze.

Laughter filters in from the terrace, cutting our conversation short. Below, my parents sit beside Uncle Colt. Dad has his arm wrapped around Mom, and she’s resting her head on his shoulder. Warmth spreads through my body at the sight, filling me with tenderness. I love them so much.

“Our parents are so lovey-dovey,” Michael comments.

“Not just our parents.” I chuckle, my mood improving.

He shudders. “Yeah, Clay and Layla are just as bad. So are Drake and Angie, and Roman and Nevaeh. None of them can keep their hands to themselves.”

“I think it’s sweet,” I argue. “They’re all so in love, it makes everyone around them happy.”

He grunts. “But all this kissing… Ew.”

I snort. “They love each other. What do you expect? And it’s not like they do anything more than give each other a peck on the lips.” I lower my voice, heat creeping onto the back of my neck. “Can you imagine kissing someone and then regretting it because it was so bad?”

Michael peers at me, one eyebrow raised. “Why are you so interested in kissing?”

The heat spreads, crawling up my cheeks. Shifting, I silently curse myself. Why did I bring any of this up in the first place? “I’m not. I’m just telling you there’s nothing wrong with what they do.”

“Maybe not.” He shrugs, resting his forearms on his knees. “I guess I’ve never really thought about my first kiss.”

“You’ve never worried you might regret it?” I tilt my head to the side.

“Not really.” He gives me a thoughtful frown. “Are *you* worried about it?”

“A little.” My words catch, nerves bubbling up inside me. “I think the first kiss should be with someone you trust. With someone you like.”

He shifts so he’s fully facing me. “When do you want it to happen?”

A laugh bursts out of me. “It’s not like I can plan it.”

“But if you could, when?”

“Maybe…” My heart pounds loudly in my ears. “At sixteen?”

He looks up at the sky, like he’s thinking. Then, he focuses on me. “How about a little pact?”

I set down my mug, my hands sweaty once again. “Pact?”

“Yup.” He dips his chin. “How about when we’re both sixteen, if neither of us has ever kissed anyone, we’ll be each other’s first kiss?”

I blanch. “You’re not serious.”

“I’m dead serious.” He inches closer to me. “You said yourself, you need to trust this person. And you trust me, just like I trust you.”

The butterflies fluttering in my stomach take off violently, the sensation strange. “Michael…”

“You trust me. True or not true?”

A thread of comfort works its way through me at the familiar question. “True.” I lick my lips. “But I also said you need to like this person.”

He frowns, rearing back. “We’re friends. Of course we like each other.”

That’s not what I mean, but my throat closes. There’s no way I’m getting into that.

“You like me. True or not true?” he asks, his voice a little higher than usual.

“Tr-true. As…a friend.”

A full-blown smile spreads on his lips. “I like you as a friend too.” He holds his pinkie out to me. “Deal?”

I hook my pinkie around his and nod. “Deal.”

Our fingers are still hooked and we’re both grinning when the door to his room opens, and Aunt Ava’s voice filters out the window. “What do you two think you’re doing, sitting on the roof? Get back in here. Now!”

Michael and I scramble to our feet, collect our snacks and the blanket, and climb back through the window. His mom stands with her hands on her hips in the middle of the room. She’s wearing a summer dress with thick straps, her dark brown hair down around her shoulders.

“The other kids have been looking for you. When they couldn’t find you, they got worried and came to me.” Her green eyes flare with concern and frustration. “Thank God Meg told me you were upstairs.”

“Mom, it’s no big deal,” Michael says. “We were taking a break from the little kids, having a picnic.”

“On the roof,” she hisses.

I fight the urge to giggle. “We were careful.”

Uncle Colton steps into the room, his eyes dancing between the three of us. “What’s going on?”

His wife turns to him. “You’re not going to believe where I found these two.”

He looks at Michael, then at me, a mischievous smile breaking over his lips. “On the roof again?”

Aunt Ava’s jaw drops. “What do you mean *again*?”

With a wink, Uncle Colton turns on his heel and strides out. “Nothing.”

Aunt Ava rushes after him, firing question after question, leaving us alone.

“Looks like your dad saved us,” I say under my breath.

“He totally did,” Michael whispers back. “He’s awesome.”

Just like you are. As much as I want to tell him that, I don’t say it out loud.

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CHAPTER FIVE

you like her

MICHAEL

Fourteen years old

THE BELL RINGS, SIGNALING THAT SCHOOL IS OVER. SECONDS LATER, Sienna asks, “Any fun plans for the weekend?” She twirls a lock of her blonde hair around her finger, her round blue eyes fixed on me.

I crook a smile. “Depends on what you consider fun. I’ve got a doubleheader this weekend, so yeah, I have fun plans.”

“Don’t forget, I’m an athlete too.” She pushes her workbook into her backpack. “I love being on the ice, especially when I get to compete.”

“Will you be at regionals with Isla this weekend?” I ask as I zip up my bag.

Sienna blinks, her cheeks reddening. “Er, no. My routine is far from ready, so I’m sitting regionals out.” She breaks into a slow smile. “Besides, I’m nowhere near as good as Isla. The girl is a star.”

“She is.” Nodding, I swing my bag over my shoulder. “Bye, Sienna. See you next week.”

“Bye. And will you remind Isla to call me? She promised she would so we can make plans to hang out next week.”

A few steps into the hallway, Asher catches up to me. He’s quiet, but he keeps sneaking glances at me. Finally, when I can’t take the scrutiny anymore, I stop and turn to him. “What?”

He smirks, his green eyes glimmering. “What did Sienna want?”

“She asked about my plans for the weekend; I told her about our games.” I shrug. “Why?”

“Why? She totally has a crush on you.” He shoulder-checks me.

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, and? I swear, half the girls in our grade do. Doesn’t mean I’m into them.”

“Must be nice being you.”

Annoyance flares in my blood. “Like it’s not the same for you.” I skirt him and head to my locker.

“Kinda, but I’m not *the* Colton Thompson’s son.”

That annoyance turns into real irritation, but I ignore the feeling. “Lucky for him. Your antics would have him climbing the walls.”

“But we’d be brothers.” He turns the combination on his locker a couple down from mine.

“I’m more than fine with just having a sister.”

Ash closes his locker and props his shoulder against it. “Sometimes, it feels like you have two sisters.”

Confusion rolls through me. Two?

“I mean Isla.”

My stomach bottoms out. “I don’t see Isla as my sister. She’s my best friend.”

“I’m your best friend too, but you and I have never been as close as the two of you are.”

“It’s different. I’ve known her my whole life.” I close my locker. “Ready to head out?”

He grimaces a little, but then his smile slips back into place. “Yeah. Mom is picking me up today. If I don’t get out there soon, she’ll be annoyed. Dad’s back from his trip, so…”

We walk toward the exit. Quiet giggles and the occasional “bye, Michael” follow us.

It puts a smile on my face. I’d never admit it out loud, but I like the attention. For once, people notice me for me, not as Colton Thompson’s son. Even if it’s only because of my face or whatever, it still feels good. It’s kind of funny when girls act like I’m some big deal. I’m not interested in any of them, though. Hockey’s the only thing that matters. School, too, I guess. And that’s enough.

“Isn’t that Isla with Turner?” Asher’s voice brings me back to reality as we step out of the building.

I turn, and that irritation is back. Isla is standing a few feet away, a small stack of books pressed to her chest and her backpack hanging over her shoulder. She's in a short black skirt, a white tee, and her favorite pair of Chucks.

Turner says something to her, and she smiles. The expression makes my stomach flip. Sizzling energy spreads under my skin, and, without thinking it through, I stride straight for them.

What the hell does he want from her?

"I promise it won't be that bad," Turner says as I approach, Asher hot on my heels.

Isla giggles. "I'm still not convinced, but I'll think about it."

Without hesitation, I wrap my arm around her shoulder and pull her to my side.

She gasps, stumbling a little, but when she looks up and sees it's me, her lips part slightly and her eyes light up.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to scare you," I tell her, then peer at Turner. "What's up, Cade?"

His gray blue eyes narrow as he clenches his jaw. "Nothing. We were talking about a history project we're working on together."

My stomach flips again, this time in an uncomfortable way.

"You were assigned to the project together?" I ask.

Turner slips his hands into his pockets. "Yeah. Why?"

Isla and I don't have a single class together. Our parents spoke to the principal years ago and made sure of it, thinking this way, we wouldn't distract each other. It sucked before, but now that Turner transferred schools and ended up in her class, I downright hate it.

I lick my bottom lip. "Isla is a straight-A student, so if you pull any of your usual crap and bring her down with you, we're gonna have a problem."

The words are out before I can think them through. *Shit*. She doesn't need me acting like her security detail. She can handle herself just fine, and I know that better than anyone in school.

Turner squares his shoulders, his chin lifted. He's maybe an inch shorter than me, and we both have broad shoulders and growing muscles. I'm not intimidated by him, and he doesn't seem to be intimidated by me either.

"Trust me, I know." He considers Isla, his eyes softening. "I'd never mess things up for her."

A burning sensation settles in my chest, and anger seeps into my pores, making me clench my jaw. He's always pissed me off, but this brings it to a whole new level.

"Glad it's settled," I mutter. "We should go." I grasp Isla's wrist and turn to the parking lot. "See you at practice." I throw over my shoulder to Turner and Asher.

Halfway to my mom's SUV, Isla stops, pulling me up short with her. She untangles herself, and I reluctantly take a step back.

When I meet her eyes, she's glaring at me. "What was that?"

I thread my fingers through my hair, the back of my neck feeling hot. "What was what?"

"The way you acted back there. Treating me as if I can't stand up for myself."

"That wasn't what I meant to do. I just…you know I don't like the guy. He hates me just as much." I fix the strap of my backpack, averting my gaze. "I just don't want him to mess with you to get to me."

She steps closer, forcing me to look at her. She's about five feet tall now. Petite. From what I overheard at the arena one day, Elena thinks she has the perfect build for figure skating. She's toned and lean, which makes all her movements light and balanced. She has bangs—new this year. They look perfect on her. Everything about her is perfect. She's one of the prettiest girls in our grade.

And for the second time today, I don't understand where my thoughts are coming from. Was I hit in the head too many times last season? Is that why my brain is producing so many wild ideas? She's my best friend. I don't care if she's pretty or not.

"I've never liked Cade either. He's always been rude to you. But we have a few classes together, and now that I know him, I think I was wrong. He's never been mean or rude to me. He's actually kinda nice."

With bitterness filling my mouth, I sneer, "Cade Turner is nice? Really, Isla?"

She swallows audibly but keeps her head high. "Yes. He *is* nice. To me." Eyes locked on mine, she takes my hand. "But he's not my friend. All I'm saying is that you don't need to worry about me. I can stand up for myself, and just because I'm friendly with him doesn't mean I trust him. Okay?"

“Yeah, sorry.” I twine my fingers with hers, giving her a small smile. “I’m being a jerk. True or not true?”

“True.” She snorts quietly. “An overprotective one.”

I wince. “Maybe a little.”

We fall silent, still standing in the parking lot, holding hands. Heat gathers in my stomach and travels through my body. The longer I look at her, the faster my heart beats. Something feels different, but I have no idea what or why.

“Should we go?” she asks. “Your mom is waiting for us.”

“Let’s go.” With Isla’s hand still cradled in mine, I guide her toward Mom’s car.

I’VE JUST FINISHED LACING up my skates when someone hovers over me.

“Do you have a moment?”

Glowering, I snap up at the sound of Turner’s voice.

What does he want?

“Can it wait?” I stand and lock eyes with him. “Practice is about to start.”

He steps back, giving me space. “It won’t take long.”

I twist around, grabbing my helmet, my stick, and my gloves, and then I straighten. “Okay. Talk.”

“It’s no secret we don’t like each other.” He slaps his helmet against his thigh and then runs his other hand through his chestnut hair. “But when it comes to Isla, you don’t need to worry. I’d never hurt her just to piss you off.”

I snort, even as my gut twists. “Sorry. That’s hard to believe, considering all the times you’ve gone behind my back and snitched to Coach.”

“I’m not proud of that, okay? If you haven’t noticed, it’s been a long time since I’ve done that. We were little kids. And that was about you.” His cheeks redden. “I’m telling you I won’t hurt Isla. I couldn’t.”

Lips pursed, I scrutinize him, taking in the nervousness in his eyes and the sweat already beading at his temples. The thought that comes to mind hits hard, making my breath hitch. “You like her.”

He lifts his chin, exhaling. “What if I do?”

“Stay away from her,” I growl. “I mean it, Turner.”

He moves closer, his chest puffed out. “Or what?”

I bark out a laugh. “You don’t want to know.” I take a step forward, bumping my shoulder into his, and head toward the door. “Conversation’s over.”

As I trudge to the rink, my chest is tight, and my hands twitch with the urge to hit something. I step onto the ice, starting to pull my gloves on, but I stop abruptly when Isla’s laugh rings out across the arena.

The moment the view registers, I blanch. Who the hell is the guy talking to her? I’ve never seen him before. He’s taller than Isla and broad, built a lot like me but probably older. He’s got one hand on her waist, steadying her as they move across the ice together. Her back is arched, her head tilted toward him.

Fury rolls through me.

Isla doesn’t skate with anyone. She’s a single, always has been.

Elena’s voice drifts over to me, but I can’t make out her words.

With a nod, the guy lifts Isla. Her skates leave the ice for a couple of seconds before he sets her down again. They move effortlessly, like they’ve done it a thousand times.

She laughs again, and my body temperature rises.

Why didn’t she tell me she was skating with a partner?

“I’ve never seen her skate with another person,” Turner says, his voice grating on my nerves.

I squint at him as he steps up to my side and sets his elbows on the boards.

“She’s a single,” I grumble, yanking my gloves on roughly.

“They look good together,” he murmurs. “And he makes her smile.”

I shrug, acting unaffected, even as my chest caves in. “So?”

He hums. “Just saying. Looks like she’s as good with a partner as she is on her own.” His eyes follow her every move.

“She’s amazing. Period.” I roll my shoulders, stepping onto the ice. “She doesn’t need anyone’s help for that.”

Turner snorts. “I never said she did.”

“We need to warm up.” Without waiting for a response, I skate toward Asher and the other guys.

I don’t look back to see whether Turner is following, but I also don’t hear anything other than Isla’s laughter echoing around the rink. My stomach roils, and my hands go slick inside my gloves.

This is ridiculous. It’s just practice. I don’t need to be so worked up about it. I can ask her about it later. Maybe it’s just a one-time thing.

COACH CLAPS HIS HANDS. “Alright, helmets on. Let’s go.”

The guys start skating toward the first drill, but I hang back for a second. Isla and the dude she was skating with finish up and move toward the gate on our side of the rink.

I grab my water bottle like that was the plan all along and linger near the boards, pretending to take a drink while trying to figure out who the hell he is.

When she spots me, she breaks into a smile and picks up her pace. “I figured you’d already be in the middle of the first drill.”

“Needed a drink,” I mumble, shifting my attention to the guy beside her. “Hey. I’m Michael.”

Up close, it’s obvious I was right—he’s older than we are, with a little stubble on his cheeks. His green eyes flick over me as he runs a hand through his dark brown hair.

“Dean.”

“I’ve never seen you skate with Isla before. Thought I’d say hi. She’s my best friend.”

His gaze snaps to Isla and then back to me before he breaks into a lazy grin that makes my skin hotter. And not in a good way.

“The infamous best friend. Coach warned me about you.” He chuckles.

My chest clenches. What does that mean? What did Elena say about me?

“Cassie, my usual partner, sprained her ankle. Elena suggested I come to Isla’s practice and skate with her.” He presses his hand to the small of her back. “I think we make a great team, don’t you?” he asks, his face tilted toward her.

The way her expression lights up when she looks at him knocks the air out of my lungs. That blush, the one usually reserved for me, appears on her

cheeks.

Why is she looking at him like that?

“We do,” she says. “But I still prefer being a single.”

Head thrown back, he laughs. “At least you’re honest.”

He drops his hand then, just in time. I was ready to yank it away from her lower back.

“Will you wait for me?” I ask her, forcing my tone to stay even.

“Of course. I just need to change into something more comfortable.” Nodding, Isla skates past me. I let her go, though I move a bit to block this dude’s path.

“Bye, Dean,” she throws over her shoulder as she hurries to the locker room.

Once it’s just us, I zero in on him. “Aren’t you a little too old to skate with her?”

He snorts. “Dude, I’m sixteen.”

Grunting, I look him up and down. “And she’s fourteen.”

“Two years.” He shakes his head, his lips kicked up on one side. “Coach was right about you.”

I blink. “About what?”

He waves a hand. “Relax, Romeo. It was one practice, maybe two. Cassie will be back next week, and I’ll be gone. You don’t have anything to freak out about.”

Freak out?

“If you’ll excuse me,” he drawls, stepping around me. “Later, Michael.”

My mind swirls with confusion as he disappears into the locker room.

Why the hell did he call me Romeo? All I did was make sure I had Isla’s back, like I always do. He’s weird.

With a shake of my head, I finally skate back to join the guys.

A question pounds in my head, dimming my mood further: why did she blush for him?

And more importantly, why do I care?

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part two

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CHAPTER SIX

i just don't want to lose my best friend

ISLA

Fifteen years old

THE AIR IS WARM AND PLEASANT ON MY SKIN, THE HEAT OF THE DAY almost gone. It's after nine, and the sky above grows darker by the minute. Laughter and conversations drift up from the backyard as I sit on the Thompsons' roof with my knees pulled to my chest. Michael's been gone way too long. I'm tempted to climb back inside, and yet, I don't move.

I love it here. This place holds so many memories, this spot especially. It's where we always sneak off to talk. I will miss it so much if…

"Remind me to never forget to bring snacks." Michael's voice stops my musing. "Diana caught me in the kitchen and refused to let me go until I helped her find Meg."

He tosses a pack of chips on the blanket and lowers himself beside me. His white T-shirt looks like it's about to burst at the seams as he gets situated, shifting his broad shoulders. He's wearing dark blue jeans tonight, and his deep brown hair is messy thanks to his habit of running his hand through it.

He's so familiar and so different at the same time. Some days, I barely recognize the boy I've known all my life. And it's not his looks and height that have changed, but his behavior and his habits too.

I chuckle. "Diana is just like Aunt Nevaeh. Always gets what she wants."

“Yeah, Uncle Roman told my dad Di had a full meltdown after she saw you skate. Now she’s obsessed and wants to be just like you,” he comments, resting his hands behind him. “And she got what she wanted… Like mother, like daughter.”

Sighing, I look out at the horizon again. “Something like that.”

“Is everything okay?” He tips my way, head ducked. “You’ve been pretty quiet today.”

I sigh. “Elena is moving to Boston.”

He blows out a breath beside me. “What?”

I pick at my nail and then ball my fist to stop myself. “She told me yesterday. I’m still processing. So yeah, my mood is all over the place.”

He moves, his scent enveloping me as he wraps his arm around my shoulder. I shift, cuddling into him. He’s warm and smells so good, his usual soap scent mixing with mint and citrus. I close my eyes, relishing the sensation. This kind of physical affection is rare, and it only happens when it’s just us. His reputation is too important now. He can’t be seen as soft… and somehow, I make him soft. That’s what he says, anyway.

“That sucks. You’ve been training with her for years.” The timbre of his voice is so deep these days. It reverberates through my body, soothing me even more. “Finding a new coach now won’t be easy, will it? Can she recommend someone?”

“Yeah, she did.” I lick my lips. “But I like Elena’s style, and she knows me better than anyone. I spend as much time with her as I do at school now that I’m doing half-day private training and half-day in-class schooling. Starting from scratch terrifies me. I want to compete at the Olympics one day, and with Elena, I really think it’s possible.” I take a deep breath and steel myself, because he’s not going to like what I’m about to say. Then, I close my eyes and go for it. “At least she’s moving to Boston… My grandparents are there.”

He stiffens. “I’m not following.”

“I could keep working with her if I moved to Boston and stayed with my grandparents. They’d be happy to have me.”

His warmth is gone the moment the last word leaves my mouth. He moves away, dropping his arm from my shoulder. I turn, eyes locked on his in an instant.

In the dark, his features are shadowed but still visible. “You’re not serious.”

“It’s just an idea. Mom mentioned it after practice last night.” I give him a small smile. “Nothing is set in stone yet. It’s all talk.”

Eyebrows drawn together, he shakes his head. “I can’t believe you’d even consider it.”

“Michael, I’ve been working since I was five to be where I am now. All the hours I spent on the ice, all the bruises, all the mornings I’ve woken up sore or numb.” I suck in a breath, my hands trembling. “I couldn’t have done it without Elena. So, if I want to continue improving, if I want a chance at the Olympics, I can’t just start working with a new coach now.”

“Why not?” he asks. “Sienna has worked with at least three coaches since she started practicing privately.”

A burning sensation in my chest sends my heart galloping. I puff out my cheeks, trying to control my tone. “No offense, but she’s not even close to my level.”

He blinks and rears back. “Wow. Some friend you are.”

My stomach sinks, but it’s the truth. Plus… “She and I may hang out sometimes, but I wouldn’t say we’re friends.” My shoulders sag. I could never be her friend, but I can’t tell him why.

We’re both crushing on the same boy…on him.

“I don’t understand.” He threads his fingers through his hair. “What about me? What am I going to do without my best friend?”

The tension in my muscles loosens a little, and warmth spreads through my veins. “I’m not moving anywhere yet. And even if I do eventually go to Boston, we can still talk to each other. We can text and FaceTime every day.” I smile gently. “Plus, you have Asher and the guys from the team, all your classmates. You have no shortage of friends.” I lower my gaze to my skirt, surveying the pink floral pattern. “It’s different for me. I might be ‘popular,’” I say, using air quotes, “but that’s only because of who my dad is. And with my busy schedule, it’s hard for me to get involved in anything. I don’t have time to make meaningful connections with my classmates. I know almost nothing about what’s going on unless *you* mention it. All the parties you go to and dances…I haven’t been to a single one. Not even birthday parties for my classmates. No one invites me.”

Except Cade, but I know better than to bring him up.

“That’s because you come across as unapproachable. You know that, right? To the guys *and* the girls.”

My heart sinks. “So the ‘Ice Queen’ nickname is because I’m unapproachable? Not because I’m a figure skater?”

Cringing, he threads his fingers through his hair. “I’m sorry. I made sure no one called you that around me. Kinda hoped it’d just…stop. I had no idea you knew about it.”

I blow out a breath, ignoring the pain in my chest. How could I not know? Some of the kids even call me that to my face.

“Unbelievable.” I shake my head and then take his hand in both of mine. “Please don’t be mad at me. All this talk about me moving to Boston is just that—talk. You know how my dad is. He won’t want me to be so far away. And if he says no, then I won’t be going anywhere.”

“I’m not mad at you… I just don’t want to lose my best friend.”

“You won’t lose me. Ever.” I take a deep breath. “And I won’t lose *you*. True or not true?”

“True.” He wraps his hand around my wrist and pulls me into him, shifting and moving me like I weigh nothing until I’m sitting between his legs with my back settled against his chest. “And we’re going to work on your social status this year. I’ll take you to some parties. They’re usually pretty chill. Definitely something you need to experience at least once.”

“I’ll take your word for it.” I giggle, melting into his embrace. If anything, my crush on him has only grown stronger…and he’s oblivious, like he’s always been. “Your birthday is coming up. Are you excited?”

He grunts. “Uh-huh. You don’t turn sixteen every year.”

“Planning something big for your sweet sixteen?” I tease.

He trails his fingers against my ribs, tickling me, and a burst of laughter escapes my lips. As I try to scoot away from him, he tightens his grip, pressing me closer to his chest.

“My only plan right now is to get my driver’s license.”

“Do you know what kind of car you want?”

“I want a motorcycle. A Ducati, but a Kawasaki would be good too.”

I let out a loud laugh. “Yeah, I can totally see your dad saying no.”

He pinches my side, making me yelp. “Don’t burst my bubble like that. It’s cruel.”

“I thought you loved it when I’m honest with you.”

“Usually,” he grumbles in my ear, the sound sending a shiver through me. “But this is one of my biggest dreams we’re talking about.”

“Sorry.”

“You’re fine.” He puts his chin on my shoulder. “And honestly, I’d be happy with any car.”

His heat seeps into me, sending tingles down my spine. I’m tempted to move away, to put space between us, while wanting to stay close at the same time.

“Isla?” His voice in my ear sounds sweet like honey.

“Mhm?”

“Do you remember our pact?”

My breath catches, and my heartbeat speeds up. “What pact?” I ask hoarsely, worried he can tell how that single question is affecting me.

“About first kisses?”

“Oh.” I force a light laugh. “Yeah, I remember. What about it?”

“I’ll be sixteen in November, and you’ll be sixteen in December. If neither of us has kissed anyone before then, how long should we wait for our kiss?”

Butterflies erupt in my stomach. “You’re really planning on that?”

“Um, yeah. Why not?” He shrugs. “Every pact should have rules. A deadline, maybe. It’s only logical.”

Good thing he can’t see my face, because my cheeks are impossibly hot. “A first kiss is supposed to be romantic and maybe spontaneous. Setting a deadline seems strange.”

“What if we don’t make a plan, and after you turn sixteen, you get tired of waiting and kiss someone else? Or what if that happens to me?”

My throat tightens, making it hard to speak. I don’t want him to kiss anyone else. And I don’t want to kiss anyone else either.

I swallow and force myself to respond. “You think you’ll have trouble resisting if another girl wants to kiss you?”

He huffs in my ear. “That’s not what I said at all.”

“Okay, sorry.” I take a deep breath. “How about we wait a month? If there’s no one else we’d rather kiss, then we kiss.”

“My birthday is a month before yours. Does that mean we’re waiting a month after yours, or after mine?”

Heart fluttering, I use all my strength to keep my voice even. “After mine?”

“No. After mine,” he says. “That way, you’ll get your first kiss on your birthday.”

I snort. “You make it sound like kissing you is a reward.”

He chuckles. “Maybe it is.”

“You’re ridiculous and way too arrogant.”

“Not true.” He pinches my side again.

“So true,” I taunt him.

The words have barely left my mouth when he slips his arms to my waist, laying me back, and kneels beside me. The shingles are rough beneath the blanket as he relentlessly tickles my sides and my neck. Laughing, I swat his chest and try to kick him, but he blocks my attacks.

“Michael…we are…on the roof…” I force out between uncontrollable fits of laughter. “If our…parents see…us…they’re gonna…”

“Fine, fine.” He finally stops, but rather than move away, he sets his hands on the blanket on either side of my face, his eyes glued to mine.

The intensity in his gaze sends a zing of excitement right through me. Breath catching and heart thundering, I drag my focus to his lips. Is he going to kiss me? Now?

Abruptly, he pushes himself up and settles into a sitting position again.

I sit up too, reining in my wild thoughts and my breathing. For someone who’s known this boy since he was little, I have no idea what he thinks of me.

“I think we need one rule,” he mutters.

“What rule?”

“If we end up kissing someone else before our deadline, there will be no hard feelings or holding grudges. And we will be honest about it.”

A pang pierces my heart, making it almost impossible to breathe. Is he thinking about kissing someone else?

I ignore the storm brewing inside me, put on a smile, and extend my pinkie.

“Deal,” I say.

He curls his pinkie around mine and gives it a tiny shake. “Deal.”

In four months, I’ll have the sweet sixteen party I’ve always wanted, and if I’m lucky, I’ll get my first kiss from my best friend.

Sounds like the perfect plan.

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CHAPTER SEVEN

only ever a best friend

ISLA

Fifteen years old

"I STILL DON'T GET WHY WE NEED TO WRITE AN ESSAY ON SYMBOLISM," Cade groans as we head down the hallway. "Sometimes, a fire is just a fire, not a metaphor."

I chuckle. "Ms. Roberts doesn't agree, I guess. But we've got almost a week to work on it. It'll be fine."

He squints down at me. I'm only five one, so that's no surprise. He's giant already, all muscle, his chest impossibly broad, just like Michael. My best friend is an inch or two taller and a bit bigger, though. Not that I'm comparing or anything.

"You're only okay with this essay because you loved *The Great Gatsby*."

I grin up at him. "It's an amazing book. I couldn't put it down."

"I'm afraid we have different definitions of the word 'amazing.'"

"Probably." I nudge him with my shoulder. "I can help you brainstorm for your essay if you want. It's not a big deal."

He smiles, his features softening. "I'd love that."

"Deal."

He reaches the door first and opens it for me. I pass him, his musky, heady scent invading my nostrils. While it's pleasant, I can't help but think about Michael again. They couldn't be more different if they tried.

The courtyard buzzes, trays clattering, sneakers scraping against concrete, bursts of laughter and conversations from every direction. It's warm for October, the kind of California day that feels like summer even though the calendar says fall. But when a cloud passes over the sun, a gust of cool wind washes over me, making me shiver. I pull down the hem of my tee, hiding the sliver of skin above my waistband, then shift my backpack on my shoulder and scan the tables for an open seat. That's when I spot Michael.

He's sitting on the edge of the picnic table, his bomber unzipped, a black tee underneath. With a green apple in his hand, he listens to the other boys at the table, and when Ash cracks a joke, an easy smile spreads across his lips.

When I look away, I realize I wasn't the only one watching him. What a shocker. More than one girl is looking at him with hearts in her eyes.

We used to sit together every day, sharing sandwiches while I rolled my eyes at his and his friends' antics. I could join him now, I guess, but it no longer feels comfortable. I never know what they're talking about. Not the parties, not the people. Our worlds drift farther apart every day.

"How about over here?" Cade says, pulling me back to the present. He points at an empty table across the courtyard.

"Let's go." I square my shoulders and follow him.

As I pass Michael, he gives me a smile. Warmth glimmers in his eyes as he looks me up and down, his attention lingering on my skirt and my legs.

My cheeks heat up. I'm not used to this type of attention from him. It's new and exhilarating. The fluttering in my belly grows, just like the tingles spreading all over my body. I never want him to stop.

"Hey, Thompson," Cade greets him, shattering the moment.

Michael inspects Cade, the corners of his mouth dropping. "Turner." For a second, he looks at me again, but then he quickly focuses on his friends. He's kind of accepted that Cade and I are friends, but he still isn't a fan, and I don't think he ever will be.

If I were alone, he probably would've asked me to join him, but…oh well. There's no point dwelling on it.

I sit with my back to Michael's table—the less temptation the better—and pull out the turkey and avocado sandwiches I brought for us.

Cade sets an orange on the table, then two bottles of water, one for each of us.

“Are you going to the party tonight? At Jones’ house?” Cade asks with his mouth full. “I swear, the dude invited everyone to his birthday party.”

I shake my head. “Nope. I have practice, and I won’t be done until nine.”

Not to mention, I wasn’t invited, but that’s not something I want to admit aloud.

“You should come after. Everyone will be there.”

“Have you ever seen me after practice? When Elena is done with me, I can barely walk.”

He snorts, his gray blue eyes shining brightly. “I envy your ambition. You really are on track to make it to the Olympics, aren’t you?”

Warmth spreads across my skin at his words. The friendship that’s blossomed between us is still surprising to me. With all the animosity between him and Michael, I never gave him the time of day, and I never imagined he’d be someone I trusted, let alone liked hanging out with. But then he transferred to our school, ended up in my class, and…I realized there’s more to him than meets the eye. He’s handsome and kind, and he always sticks up for me. He’s popular, just like all the athletes are, but he treats his popularity like an annoyance while Michael and Asher enjoy theirs almost too much.

I suspect Cade likes me, and I’m flattered, sure, but unfortunately, the feeling isn’t mutual.

My heart chose Michael a long time ago, and now, I’m patiently waiting for him to catch up. Hopefully, that’ll happen on my sixteenth birthday.

I’m really counting on the first kiss I’ve been promised.

Somebody drops onto the bench beside me, and the scent of caramel hits my nose. Sienna, her long blonde hair streaming down her shoulders, tucks a few flyaways behind her ear and fixes her blue eyes on me.

“There you are.” She plants a kiss on my cheek. “I’ve been looking everywhere for you.”

“We’ve been here since lunch started.” I grab the bottle of water Cade opened for me and take a sip. “What’s up?”

“Are you coming to the party tonight?”

“Already asked, and the answer is no.” With a huff, Cade takes a bite of his sandwich.

“Ugh. Why does she always miss the fun stuff?” Sienna pouts.

“Erm, guys? I’m right here.”

Cade winks at me. “We know, but I like to tease you.”

Sienna puts her head on my shoulder, taking a deep breath. “Another late practice?”

“Yeah.”

“Sucks.” She straightens and peers at me, her eyes narrowed. “But you’re not bailing on the sleepover at my house on Saturday, right?”

I still have no idea why I said yes to that. Okay, that’s a lie. I just don’t want to admit it. A couple of hours before she asked me last week, Michael had been going on about how he wanted me to have friends like he does so I’m not alone at school, since he and I don’t have any classes together. He sounded so reasonable that when Sienna approached me about girls’ night at her place, I blurted out yes without really thinking it through.

Hopefully, I won’t regret it.

“I’ll be there. I promise.”

She squeals and kisses my cheek again before she stands, eyeing Cade, then me. “I gotta go. Have a few people to catch up with before class starts.”

“Bye.” I wave and turn to Cade. “Do you like your sandwich?”

“It’s delicious.” He smiles at me.

“I’m glad. My—”

A burst of laughter interrupts me. Snapping my mouth closed, I look over my shoulder. Instantly, my heart sinks a little. Sienna is standing in front of Michael, her hand on his bicep. The way she angles her body toward him leaves a bad taste in my mouth. Jealousy rears its ugly head, urging me to stomp over there and push her away.

Instead, I tamp down the emotion. With a shake of my head, I return my attention to Cade. Though I don’t look away again, I spend the rest of lunch fighting the desire to listen in on Michael and Sienna’s conversation.

I’m hopeless.

“Аннн, I’m so happy you’re here!” Sienna hugs me as I step into her house. My mom’s headlights sweep along the driveway as she pulls out, reminding me I can’t back out now.

“Thank you so much for inviting me.” I hug her back briefly and then quickly take a step back. “Sorry I’m late. Practice went a bit longer than I expected.”

“You’re fine. Lola only got here, like, twenty minutes ago.” She scurries for the stairs. “Let’s go to my room.”

When Mrs. Hartman appears in the kitchen doorway, I give her a quick wave. “Hi.”

“Hello, Isla. Make yourself at home.” She smiles warmly. “If you need anything, just find me.”

“Yeah, yeah, Mom. Thanks,” Sienna mutters, already bouncing up the stairs. “You’re the best.”

I nod at her mom and finally give in, following Sienna to the second floor.

Confusion swirls inside me. Why is she so eager? Is she always like this? Maybe so. After all, I don’t actually know her that well.

“Look who’s finally here!” she singsongs as we step into her bedroom.

Lola is lounging on the bed. She and I don’t have any classes together, but I see her in the halls.

“Hi, Isla.” She climbs off the bed, her curly red hair bouncing, and holds her hand out to me. “I’m Lola.” Her cheeks pinken, and her brown eyes lower. “You probably know that already, but since we’ve never really talked—”

I take her hand and give it a shake. “It’s really nice to meet you, Lola.”

She breaks into a smile. “You too.”

Sienna clasps her hands, her eyes dancing between us. “Okay, how about you change into your pjs, Isla? I’ll get the movie ready, and we can eat pizza and gossip.”

“Maybe we can skip to the gossip right away? I’m dying to know what happened at Jones’ party after I left.” Lola, who’s already in her pajamas, a green set with witches and cauldrons all over them, bounces on her toes.

Sienna grins. “No, I’m saving that for later. Because trust me…the goss is worth the wait.”

I’ve never felt more out of place. I’m used to spending time with boys, Michael, Asher, and Cade being my closest friends and all. And the girls I see the most are my competition, and rivalries don’t exactly foster close relationships. Sienna is a great example of that.

“Isla, go change.” Sienna’s voice rips me out of my thoughts.

I dig my pajamas out of my bag and head toward the bathroom she pointed out. At the doorway, I turn back. “Is there any chance you have fruit? Maybe avocado toast?”

She arches a brow at me, her eyes narrowing slightly.

“I don’t eat pizza this late,” I explain. “I don’t really eat *anything* this late.”

“Oh. Okay, yeah, no problem.” She flashes me a tight smile. “I’ll ask Mom.”

“Thank you.” I close the door and press my back to it, taking a deep breath. I’ve been here for ten minutes, and it’s already harder than I anticipated.

MICHAEL:

how is the sleepover going? bored yet?

ME:

I don’t know why I agreed to this

MICHAEL:

FOR YOUR NEXT ROMANCE NOVEL.

VISIT LOKEPUB AND FIND A STORY TO READ.

lol why am I not surprised?

MICHAEL:

want me to rescue you? I can walk over. You can stay at our house for a sleepover instead

ME:

didn’t you say I need to socialize more?

MICHAEL:

I meant I want you to hang out with me and my friends more

ME:

wish you'd told me that. It's too late now. I just need to survive a few more hours. Hopefully, they don't want to stay up too late. I'm leaving first thing in the morning

MICHAEL:

wanna hang out tomorrow?

I SMILE AT MY PHONE, not paying attention to the movie Sienna and Lola are watching on her laptop. I tuned out the moment I realized it was *Mean Girls*. It's a classic, and I liked it the first time I watched it, but it's not what I'm typically into. Anime would've been so much better, but Sienna and Lola looked at me like I was speaking another language when I suggested it.

Their loss, honestly. Not a single anime has ever disappointed me. The same goes for manga.

ME:

I'll text you if I'm in the mood to hang out

"Isla, you promised you'd stay off your phone," Sienna whines.

"Sorry." I put the device down and slide it away. "It won't happen again."

She studies me in silence, quirking a brow. "Who were you texting? Not your parents, I hope? You like being here, right?"

"Of course," I lie. "Don't worry. It was just Michael."

The way her smile slips makes me uneasy.

Before I can decipher the look, Lola yelps and smashes the laptop closed.

"Oh my God! I totally forgot—you promised us the goss!" She wiggles on the bed, making room for me, and then peers at Sienna. "How was the party?"

Bottom lip caught between her teeth, the blonde rolls her shoulders back. She tucks a few strands of hair behind her ear, her eyes full of excitement and a little smugness.

My heart clenches in my chest, as if it expects the worst.

"The party was amazing. Everybody was there, but it was chill. No fights, no scandals," she says, wearing a sly smile.

Lola groans. “Get to the good stuff already. I’m bored! What happened after I went home?”

“Fine, fine.” Sienna laughs. “After most of the crowd cleared out, we played Truth or Dare.” Her gaze homes in on me, the sudden predatory look sending a chill down my spine. “Asher dared me to kiss the guy I have a crush on, and I kissed Michael.”

A sharp pain strikes my chest. I’m vacillating between disbelief and hurt, my brain refusing to let her words sink in. I want to be alone. I want to be away from this house, these people. I dig my nails into my thigh, welcoming the sting. I’m sure it’ll bruise, but I don’t care.

Lola yells and launches herself at Sienna, but I can’t make out a word she’s saying. I don’t cry. I don’t show a single emotion, thanks to how often I’ve had to smile through pain over the years.

And this pain is as physical as any injury on the ice. Though, after a moment, coldness seeps in, and my body goes numb.

“How was it?” Lola asks as she moves away from Sienna. “That was your first kiss, right?”

“You should’ve heard the way everybody was cheering us on. I had no idea so many people wanted us to end up together.” She presses her hands to her pink cheeks, as if cooling the heat rising there. “As for the kiss, it was good. Just a little peck on the lips.”

The knots in my stomach loosen a little, and I press my hand flat to my thigh. Okay, that’s not such a big deal? He has a reputation to maintain. Maybe that’s why he didn’t say—

“But we snuck outside later, and he kissed me again. Like, *actually* kissed me. He wasn’t gross about it or anything. It was nice.”

She smiles brightly while I feel like the blade of a skate has just cut through my skin and pierced my heart.

“No,” she corrects, “it was perfect.”

My mind spins. Did he really do that?

I can’t ask Michael. I just…can’t. He’d read every emotion on my face. He’d see how crushed I am, how stupidly hopeful I’d been about our pact. I’m not ready for that.

But what hurts more is that he didn’t tell me about the dare, even if the kiss afterward didn’t actually happen. We promised to be honest, yet he hasn’t mentioned a thing.

I could ask Cade about the party, ask if he saw what happened during Truth or Dare or afterward.

But why would Sienna lie? What would she gain from it? She's liked Michael for ages, and she knows he and I are close. Maybe, in some strange, roundabout way, she's trying to figure out whether he's talked to me about her. If that's the case, she's going to be very disappointed, because he hasn't said a word.

Unless he kept it to himself because of our pact. It was supposed to be special, and now, it can't be.

My stomach twists. I don't know what hurts more: the kiss itself, or the fact that he didn't tell me.

"Aww, I'm so happy for you." Lola hugs Sienna again. "You've been crushing on that boy for years, and to have your first kiss with him? It's, like, straight from a movie." She turns to me. "Right, Isla?"

I soften my expression, somehow donning a smile. "Right. He's a great guy."

"You've known him for so long." Sienna smiles, seeming to buy my act. "Do you think it was his first kiss too?"

The painful stomach twisting is back. I clear my throat. "I don't know. We're close, yeah, but there are some things he doesn't talk to me about." I lean in and hug her briefly, holding my breath so I won't catch the scent of caramel. "But honestly, I'm happy for you. If he kissed you twice, I'm sure he really wanted it."

"Thank you so, so much," she gushes. "You have no idea how much it means to me that you see that."

"Of course." I settle back, my hand brushing my phone. A sense of betrayal I've never known grows in my chest at lightning speed. It's not fair. It's not rational. This isn't something I should hold against him. Or Sienna. We never made a promise we wouldn't kiss other people, even if I thought that was the underlying message.

With every breath, hurt swamps me even more.

Sienna is beautiful and popular, just like Michael. The two of them together make sense, honestly. She fits into his world in a way I never could.

She's part of his crowd, always at the same events and parties. And me? I'm always leaving early for training, always tired, always missing birthdays and school events.

Sienna is the kind of girl people expect to see next to him. I'm the kind of girl who watches from the sidelines.

It's just…only a few moments ago, he was texting me as if nothing had changed. He knows I'm at Sienna's, yet he chose not to say anything to me. He chose not to be honest. I am his best friend…and he chose to keep this from me.

I've been waiting so long for him to catch up, for him to realize he likes me too. But tonight, I finally realized I've never even been on the roster.

I'm just a best friend.

Only ever a best friend.

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CHAPTER EIGHT

hey, stranger

MICHAEL

Fifteen years old

THE ARENA IS MOSTLY EMPTY WHEN I WALK IN, MY BAG SLUNG OVER ONE shoulder. Stick in hand, I head toward the rink instead of the locker room. Practice doesn't start for twenty minutes, which means I have time to check on Isla.

There's no shouting, no pucks slamming against boards like there is when my team is on the ice. The only sounds are the scrape of her blades and the soft music floating through the empty space. Chin lifted, I strain to make out the song. When I do, a smile breaks over my face. It's a melody from *Howl's Moving Castle*. I shouldn't be surprised she's skating to it. Her love for anime and manga comes from her mom. Aunt Bella is obsessed with Studio Ghibli.

I pull up the hood of my sweatshirt and prop one shoulder against the plexiglass. The other night, my parents were talking about the junior circuit, about how Isla is going to qualify, and I couldn't help but swell with pride. She's so talented and hardworking. Sometimes, when I look at her, I think I lack ambition.

Dressed in black leggings and a black, long-sleeved shirt, her hair collected into a neat bun on top of her head, she picks up speed, arms tight to her chest, knees bent at the perfect angle. Then, she launches herself into

the air. A Double Axel, clean and fast, and she lands the same way, no wobble, no hesitation.

Elena says something, but I'm too focused on Isla to catch it. In response, Isla nods and skates backward to the center of the ice. Arms in the air, she takes a few deep breaths. Then, she starts a sequence. I've spent so many hours on the ice with her and listening to her talk about her practice and routines, so, right away, I know she's going for a triple toe loop. She's still working on it, but she gets better with each try.

She goes for it but misses the landing and falls, her knees hitting the ice with a dull thud. I suck in a breath, stepping forward on instinct. Before I can make it to the cutout onto the rink, she's up and skating again.

It's no surprise. That is Isla at her core. She falls, she gets up, she skates, she jumps, she falls again. It's a circle, and she never gives up.

A strand of hair slips from her bun as she lands her second attempt perfectly. She pushes it back impatiently before diving into a layback spin. Body arched, she extends one arm, curving the other over her chest.

I'm mesmerized. All I see is her. All I hear is the scraping of her blades over the ice.

She used to joke that I look like I own the place when I'm on the ice, but truthfully, she's the one who belongs here, and she's the one owning the ice. It's hers. Always.

My stomach flutters like it always does when she's around. Damn, she's beautiful. Not just in the pretty-girl-at-school way. She's the kind of beautiful that makes me forget what I'm doing.

Isla is the prettiest girl I've ever seen, and I don't think that's ever going to change.

Elena claps, calling, "Well done, *Solnyshko*."

Isla smiles, her face lighting up, her eyes glimmering.

It's like a shot to the heart. I miss her smile. She's been distant all week. She's always been busy, we both have, but it feels like she no longer has any time for me at all.

I shift my stick from one hand to the other, trying to shake off the sinking sensation in my gut. This guilt thing is playing on my nerves. The kiss with Sienna wasn't a big deal. It was a party, a stupid dare from Ash, who absolutely knew who she'd pick when he gave her the dare. It meant nothing to me. Less than nothing.

All our friends cheered and clapped, acting like it was the highlight of the night. But while Sienna's hot, I felt nothing for her.

I didn't want anyone to know it was my first kiss ever, so I didn't say no and acted nonchalant, but I didn't actually want to kiss her. At the last second, I turned my head a little, just enough for her lips to land on the corner of my mouth instead of straight on.

Even that tiny almost-kiss felt wrong.

Since that night, I've been telling myself Isla doesn't know about it. She wasn't there, and I can't see anyone telling her. Sienna definitely wouldn't. Why would she? It wasn't even a real kiss, and she didn't look thrilled about the way I turned my head before she made contact.

But why else would my best friend be avoiding me? Why won't she look at me? Did I do something wrong? Say something stupid? Miss something important?

She's never hidden her feelings from me before. She's always been an open book. This not knowing is torture.

Then, there are the implications that come with that stupid dare-kiss. Did I mess everything up by not rejecting Sienna? Am I still allowed to want our pact kiss?

I don't have a clue. I want it, I do, but that doesn't mean I deserve it.

"You're stalking her?" Turner's voice breaks through my thoughts.

Annoyance surging through me, I turn.

He's already in his gear, helmet tucked under his arm and a stick in his other hand, smirking at me.

"Shouldn't you be stretching?" I ask.

He shrugs. "Eh. I'd rather watch what's going on out there."

"She's practicing. Don't be a creep."

"Look who's talking." He barks out a laugh. "But honestly, she's great, on and off the ice. She's been helping me with my essay, and damn, even her brain is brilliant."

I clench my teeth, making my jaw ache. "Didn't know you were into being a girl's charity case."

"Think whatever you want. I don't really care about your opinion."

Before I can snap back, the music stops, and I whip around. Isla is skating toward the boards now, pushing the loose hairs at her temples away from her face.

Her chest rises and falls as she grips the boards, listening to Elena. Then, her coach pats her arm and walks toward another girl who's lacing up her skates.

Isla turns, headed for the opening that'll lead her off the ice—but she halts in her tracks when she notices Turner and me.

My heart lifts, hoping for a smile. Instead, all I get is a polite nod as she steps off the ice.

"Hey," I say hoarsely.

"You were amazing out there," Turner adds.

She holds my gaze for a moment and then shifts her attention to him. The smile that blooms on her face when they make eye contact is like a dagger to the heart.

"Thank you, Cade."

"Of course. You deserve all the praise in the world."

"And now you're being a kiss-ass." Her giggles are light and melodic, but they land like sucker punches because he's the one making her laugh. "I better go. Mom's waiting for me."

"See you tomorrow," he calls as she heads toward the locker room.

Without looking back, she lifts her hand and waves.

Once the door to the locker room shuts behind her, Turner turns to face me. He's wearing a shit-eating grin. "I don't know about you, Thompson, but I don't think Coach'll be happy when he sees you're still in your clothes."

Dammit.

"Thanks for your concern." I push past him, bumping my shoulder into his. "I'm touched."

"It's not concern. I don't want practice to go to shit because our star player is too busy being a stalker to get changed and stretch."

With a grunt, I lift my hand and flip him off. He's going down tonight.

"YOUR BIRTHDAY IS COMING UP, RIGHT?" Sienna asks as she lowers herself onto the bench beside me. Even though we're outside, her strong caramel scent attacks my nostrils. I shift away, searching for fresh air, but that only makes her move closer.

My stomach hardens, and I pinch my lips together.

“Yup,” I bite out, my throat closing to shut out the offending air.

“What are your plans?”

What are my plans? Fuck if I know. Isla and I usually plan my birthday together, and she’s drifting farther away each day. Pulling back. Avoiding me in the hallways, pretending she doesn’t hear when I call her name.

I’ve told myself a hundred times it can’t be because of the dare. She wasn’t there. She doesn’t talk to anyone who was there that night except for me, Ash, and Turner. And Turner was gone by then, wasn’t he? I don’t remember. Asher? He wouldn’t have said anything. He was just stirring the pot. Even if somebody mentioned it to her, it’s not like it meant anything, and if she knew, she would’ve asked me about it.

Even so, the energy between us is off, like I’m missing the last piece of the puzzle. And that pisses me off, because I know I’m messing things up, but I don’t know how.

“He’s probably going to throw a party,” Asher mumbles, still chewing.

“Swallow before you speak,” I rasp under my breath. Clearing my throat, I watch the door, assessing each person as they step out, looking for Isla. “But yeah, I’ll probably throw a party. I just don’t know the logistics. Don’t really have time to plan.”

“Do you want me to help you?” Sienna chirps, grasping my hand. “It’ll be so much fun to do it together, you and me.”

No. And if she doesn’t let me go, I’m going to blow up.

“Um, listen…” I turn her way, but when my eyes lock on the person I’ve been searching for all along, I lose my train of thought.

She’s sitting across the courtyard, her attention glued to my hand in Sienna’s.

My stomach clenches. Could it get any worse?

“I gotta go.”

I stand and head toward the farthest table, where Isla sits alone. She doesn’t have any food, only a cup of something steaming—tea, maybe—and a book on the table. She’s no longer looking at me. No, her attention is fully fixed on her book.

I take a deep breath and drop onto the bench across from her. “Hey, stranger.”

She looks up, and when her striking blue eyes meet mine, I nearly topple back. Her expression is completely unreadable, and I don’t know

what to do with that. She's never hid her emotions from me before. Ever.

And now, that's all she does.

She slips her fingers under her hair and takes out an earbud. "Hey. Did you say something?"

"Yeah, I said hi." I swallow the lump clogging my throat. "Why are you here?"

Eyebrows pulled together, she takes out the other earbud and puts them both into their case. She closes her book, and once her hands are resting on top of it, she looks at me again.

"I'm here to have lunch and read."

"Where is your food?"

Slowly, she tilts her head, frowning. "I already ate. Why? Is it a crime to sit out here without food in front of me?"

"N-no, no. Not a crime." I set my hands on the table, my heart thumping unsteadily in my chest. "Did you not see me? You could've sat with me and Ash."

"I was here before you. Yet, you didn't join me." She purses her lips in annoyance. At least she isn't shielding that emotion.

"Oh." I thread my fingers through my hair. "I didn't see you. Now I feel like a total fool."

"You're fine. I wanted to be alone anyway."

I huff out a breath and lean forward. "Isla, what's going on? You've been avoiding me for over a week."

"Nothing's going on, and I'm not avoiding you. I'm busy with school and practice." She shrugs, her gaze sliding away from me. "Plus, with Elena moving to Boston, I have a lot to think about. I'm under a lot of pressure."

Unease rolls through me. Why isn't she talking to me about this stuff? She always tells me about the things that are bothering her. "Have you started looking for a new coach?"

She tucks her chin, fiddling with the corner of her book. "Mom is looking into it."

"Good. I'm sure she'll find someone as great as Elena."

"Uh-huh."

"What else is new with you?" I rest my forearms on the table between us. "Turner said you were helping him with an essay."

"Yes, I was." A hint of a smile plays at her lips. "He got an A."

I smile too, despite how weirdly nervous I am. “That’s awesome. Thanks to you, he has a shot at becoming an A student.”

“Maybe.” She tilts her head to the side. “What’s new with you? Anything interesting to report?”

I open my mouth to tell her about the dare. It’s time to get it over with. I heave out a breath, but the words won’t come. Because what if I tell her, and it ruins the pact? Fuck, I’m not ready for that. The kiss meant nothing. It wasn’t even really a kiss, and I absolutely didn’t want it.

Because I still want my first kiss to be with her.

“Nothing, really. School, practice, games.” I crook a smile, hoping it doesn’t look as forced as it feels. “Dad is helping me with driving lessons. All good.”

Silently, she examines my face. Then, she pulls her scrunchie off her wrist and twirls her hair into a messy bun. That unreadable look is back. “That’s really good to hear, Michael.”

My heart is lodged in my throat, but I barrel on, determined to break through the awkwardness. “Did you see the announcement? About the Harvest Ball?”

“Yeah.” She laces her fingers. “Some girls in class were talking about it.”

“Aren’t you interested in going?”

She lifts a shoulder. “Not really. You know parties and dances aren’t my forte.”

“But you promised you’d give at least one school event a chance. Have you already forgotten that?” I quirk an eyebrow.

Her eyes flare, her mask finally cracking a little, her jaw clenched tight. She’s definitely holding back, keeping something from me.

“I remember every promise we’ve made.” She tsks. “I’ll think about it.”

Sweat breaks out at my temples, but I continue. “That’s good,” I tell her. “I’d love it if you came.”

She traces her finger over the title of the book, her gaze downcast. “You were at Jones’ birthday party, right? Cade told me it was fun.”

My stomach drops. For just a second—one tiny, stupid second—I wonder if she knows about the dare. The sweat has spread. It’s now dripping down my back, making me fidgety. Does Cade know? Did he tell her? What if he made it sound like more than it was? Or someone else did? The thought alone makes my pulse spike. This isn’t a conversation to be

had in the middle of lunch, with people walking around and breathing down our necks, but I don't want to lie to her either.

I clear my throat. "It was—"

"Lunch is almost over." Sienna's voice is like nails on a chalkboard.

Wincing, I snap my mouth shut.

"And I still have so many things to discuss with you." She plops herself down beside me, her thigh pressed to mine. "Hey, hey, Isla."

"Hi."

Asher rounds the table, his movements stiff. As he sits, he shrugs, as if he's apologizing for not stopping Sienna from butting in.

"Hey," he says to Isla. "I hope we're not interrupting."

"No, you're not." She flashes him a smile and then peers at Sienna. "What did you want to discuss with Michael?"

"His birthday party," she chirps. "I promised to help him."

If my stomach sank any lower, it'd be on the ground. When did I tell her I wanted her help?

Isla's small smile grows, and my heart stutters. I've known her since we were little, and this is the fakest smile I've ever seen on her.

"If you're helping him, I'm sure the party will be a success." She snags her book and her cup from the table and stands. "Sorry, I forgot a book in my locker. I better get it before class starts."

She locks eyes with me, and the pain and anger swimming in her gaze make my heart split in two. There's another emotion there too, one I can't name, and it's all directed at me. In this moment, it's like our lifelong friendship is collapsing, and I have no idea how to make it stop.

"Good luck with party planning, you two." She twirls, her skirt flipping around her, and strides away.

This is a fucking disaster.

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CHAPTER NINE

do you like isla?

MICHAEL

Sixteen years old

DAD STANDS BESIDE ME, ARMS CROSSED, PRETENDING HE'S NOT AMUSED BY the chaos unfolding in our backyard.

Steam rolls off the pool, the heated water the only reason half the hockey team willingly jumped in, since the bite of the November air is a little harsher than usual. Ash yells, "Bro, it's like a hot tub!" before cannonballing in and drenching the concrete.

A group of girls are sprawled across the sunbeds, wrapped in towels after their quick swim. A couple of my classmates are acting like fools on the dance floor, which is really just the part of the patio Dad cleared to set up speakers. They are jumping around to some punk rock mash-up I made.

At the buffet table, the appetizers have been mostly demolished, and a trail of brownie crumbs marks the path of whoever stole the last one. Mom keeps weaving through the crowd with a tray, offering food like we're starving athletes who haven't eaten in days.

I should be excited. Carefree. Instead, my mood is in fucking shambles.

Dad clears his throat. "Are you having fun?"

Shrugging, I take a sip of my drink—homemade lemonade with mint.

"You could've chosen anything you wanted for today, and you picked a pool party. Yet, instead of hanging out with your guests, you're brooding in our kitchen."

“I’m not brooding,” I say, though my rough tone belies my words. “The party is great. Mom outdid herself. Everybody out there is having a blast.”

He huffs and turns to look at me. “Kid, that’s not what I’m asking.” He puts his hand on my shoulder. “Are *you* having fun?”

My chest tightens, but I nod. “I am.”

He zeroes his gaze on me, lips pursed. “Does this sullen attitude have anything to do with Isla not being here yet?”

It has everything to do with Isla, but I have no idea how to tell my dad that.

“No, not really. She had a competition today, but she promised to come after.” I lift my cup to my lips and lower it immediately. “But things kind of aren’t great between us. I dunno…”

“What happened?”

I lock eyes with him and shrug. “I don’t know. She’s been distant lately. When I text her, sometimes it takes her a whole day to reply. Yeah, we’re both busy, but that’s not new. We’ve always found time for each other before.” My shoulders sink. “Now? She’d rather hang out with Turner or stay home.”

“Is she dating Turner? Could be why she prefers his company over yours.”

The thought sends my pulse into overdrive. I clench my hand around my cup and then quickly force my muscles to relax. The last thing I want is for my dad to see me lose my temper.

“No. She’s not.” I swallow the boulder lodged in my throat. “I asked her what’s going on, and she said she’s busy. And she’s stressed about Elena moving to Boston.”

Dad nods, his eyes softening. “Yeah, they’re all nervous. Xander is losing his mind at the thought of Isla moving across the country and living with his parents.”

A wave of nausea washes over me as I process his words. “What do you mean? I thought it was just an idea.”

“An idea they’re seriously considering, yeah.” Dad slips his hands into his pockets. “Nothing’s been decided yet. I think it all comes down to what Isla wants. Xander can’t say no to her.”

Despite all the nervousness, I snort. “Like you aren’t the same way. Especially with Meg.”

With a smile, he shakes his head. “Mocking your dad won’t get you anywhere, kid.”

“Please, I’m not mocking you. You’re the best dad in the world.”

“Wow.” Mom whistles as she appears in the doorway. “What did I miss? And what did you do?” She arches a brow at me.

Dad rolls his eyes. “You think he’s sucking up to me so I won’t punish him? Is that what you’re saying? Like that’s the only possible reason for him to acknowledge I’m the best?”

“Apparently, someone in this family can’t take a joke.” Mom comes closer and snakes her arm around Dad’s torso. He wraps his arm around her shoulder, now both staring at me.

Awesome.

“So, is one of you gonna tell me why you’re in here instead of hanging out with your guests?” Mom asks.

“That’s what I’ve been trying to find out.” Dad runs his hand up and down her arm.

“I’m fine, promise. Just needed a moment to myself.”

Mom taps her index finger to her lips, her emerald-green eyes narrowing slightly. “Is that Sienna girl your girlfriend?”

My jaw unhinges. “Er…” It’s the only sound I can force out, my voice betraying me.

“Which one is she?” Dad glances out the floor-to-ceiling windows at the group of kids.

“Long blonde hair. Blue eyes. She’s wearing a denim dress and cowboy boots.”

Frowning, Dad looks from me to my mom. “The one who singsonged, ‘Hi, Mr. Thompson, you look great for a dad’ when she walked in?”

The snicker that leaves my mom’s mouth is diabolical. “That’s the one.”

“Goodness.” He shivers, not bothering to hide the way his face is scrunched. “*Is* she your girlfriend?”

“No. She’s not.” I set my cup on the table with a sigh. “I’ll go and spend time with my guests.”

As I walk out onto the terrace, my parents burst into laughter.

Head hung, I force myself to join the crowd. Mom and Dad are amazing, and I love them, but they can be such a pain in the ass.

I scan the yard, noting where everyone is. Sienna is dancing with several girls from school. Asher is in the pool with other guys from the

team. Turner sits on a sunbed, away from the group. I only invited him because I invited all my other teammates, but now I'm glad I did. Dad's comment about Isla and Boston still bounces around in my head, and Isla has been spending a lot of time with Turner, so maybe he knows something I don't.

"Why aren't you in the pool with the guys?" I ask, plopping myself on the sunbed next to him.

He fixes his gray-blue eyes on me and threads his fingers through his damp hair. "I was, but it's safer here. Vaughn is a fucking menace."

"Yeah, sounds like Asher."

He dips his head, typing out a text, and when he notices me watching, he clears his throat. "Sorry, man. Just checking on Isla." In the glow of the string lights my mom decorated the patio with, the tips of his ears redden. "I wanted to know how sectionals went."

Heart panging sharply, I rest my elbows on my knees and lean forward. "And how did they go?"

"Second place. She said the landing of her Axel wasn't clean, so the judges took off points."

"Still, second place is great. I hope she's not beating herself up over it."

He chuckles. "Do you even know her? She's her own harshest critic. Yesterday, she was so nervous she was this close," he holds his thumb and index finger an inch apart, "to fainting."

I know how anxious she gets, but that he knows it too makes my blood run hot. I flatten my lips. "Trust me. I know her. A whole lot better than you do."

He stands and fixes his shirt, giving me a cocky smile. "You sure about that?"

I jump to my feet, blocking his path. "Seriously? You're a guest here. If I were you, I'd watch my mouth."

"Or what?" He squares his shoulders. "You'll kick me out?"

"Believe me, it's tempt—"

"Hey."

The soft voice behind me stuns me silent. Breath held, I turn on my heel.

Isla stands a few feet away, holding a little box. I take her in, my breath hitching. She's in a pastel pink dress that ends above her knees, a jean jacket over it and her pastel pink Converses. Her long brown hair is down,

glittering under the string lights. Her face is done up with makeup. I can tell she didn't wash it off after her competition like she normally does, and it makes her blue eyes look fathomless.

She's the most beautiful girl at my party, and she's not even trying.

"Hi." I clear my throat. "You're finally here."

The corners of her mouth tremble. "Yeah, sorry for being late." She steps closer, craning her neck to look at me. "Happy birthday, Michael."

Without thinking, I wrap my arm around her shoulders and pull her into me. "Thank you," I murmur, inhaling her scent. Her hair smells like peaches and vanilla, sweet and intoxicating all at once. "Thank you so much for coming."

"I wouldn't miss it," she whispers. "If it weren't for sectionals, I promise I wouldn't have been late."

"I know." I hold her tighter, my chest constricting. I don't want to let her go.

"Isla, hey." Turner's voice ruins the moment. Dammit. He's still here?

I take a step back, and he instantly lines up with me.

"Wow, you look absolutely fantastic."

She blushes, eyes glimmering as she takes him in. "Thank you, Cade."

"Turner here told me you took second place. Congratulations," I say, desperate for another moment of her attention. "I'm sure you were incredible. And," I gesture to her dress, "you look beautiful as always."

A deep crease appears between her eyebrows, but she quickly relaxes her features. "Thank you." She looks down at the box she's still holding. "This is for you. I wasn't sure what to get you because you have everything, but I really hope you like it."

She holds the box out toward me, and I take it. "Thank you. It's from you, so of course I'm gonna like it."

"Isla, girl, you're finally here," Asher says as he wanders over. His hair is dripping wet, but at least he put on a shirt. He drapes his arm over her shoulders and looks down at her. "Took your sweet time, but with how gorgeous you look? I have zero complaints."

I tighten my grip on the box, my knuckles aching in the same way my chest is. Is he for real?

"Isla's here?" a girl squeals in the distance. A second later, Sienna beelines straight to us, a huge smile on her face, her gaze trained on Isla.

“I’ve been waiting for you to show up. Where have you been?” Sienna grabs her hand and pulls her away from us.

My scalp prickles, and I shift uncomfortably. Sienna is always asking about Isla, but she’s never been quite so bubbly when she’s around. Something feels off.

I STAND with my back pressed to the wall, people watching yet again. My mood is all over the place, and I’m even more fidgety than I was before Isla showed up. She’s sitting with Turner on the sunbeds, but since Ash is with them, it doesn’t piss me off so much.

“Michael?”

I snap my head to my right and find Sienna standing a little too close. Jeez, when did she get here?

“I said your name three times. Are you okay?” Eyes narrowed, she tilts her head.

“Yeah, just tired. Practice yesterday was rough, and, with all the party prep, I didn’t have much time to rest.”

“I understand,” she says, stepping closer. “But you only turn sixteen once. You should be enjoying yourself.” She puts an arm on my bicep and brushes up against me. “Can I ask you something?”

I hold my breath, her overly sweet caramel scent making me nauseous. “Sure.”

“Do you like Isla?”

My whole body jerks, and my neck burns instantly. “What? No. Why would you even—”

She lifts her brows. “You’ve been staring at her since she walked in.”

I swallow hard, willing my pulse to slow but having no such luck.

I do like Isla. I like her more than I should. But there’s no way in hell I’ll tell Sienna that before I tell Isla herself.

“It’s not like that,” I say, too quickly. “She’s just my friend. That’s all.”

The lie is like sandpaper on my throat. My shoulders lock up, and I look anywhere but at Sienna.

“Yeah?” she says, her tone deceptively light. “Kind of hard to believe, considering how you clench your jaw anytime she talks to Cade.”

I take a step back and glare at her. “Since you’re so observant, you must have noticed Cade and I don’t get along. We never have. Of course I don’t like my best friend hanging out with him, but it’s her choice, not mine.”

Her eyes flare. “I’m observant, all right. You, not so much. Don’t you notice how she looks at him?”

The hair on the back of my neck rises. “Turner is her friend.”

“You sure?” She gives me a sympathetic smile. “Just a friend?”

What is she talking about?

Before I can figure it out, she shifts closer again and grips the front of my T-shirt.

“If you want to prove she’s just your friend,” she whispers, “then kiss me. For real this time, and not whatever the hell that was at Jones’ party.”

My ears ring, drowning out the sounds of the party as she looks up at me expectantly.

Maybe it should be tempting to lean down and press my lips to hers. She’s a beautiful girl. But I feel nothing. There’s no spark, no curiosity, no urge to discover more. Just a quiet but firm no.

“Sienna,” I say gently, taking her hand off my shirt, “I’m not gonna do that.”

Eyes narrowed, she studies me. “Why not? You’re not dating anyone. You like me. Everyone knows that.”

Everyone knows we’re friendly. That’s it.

“You’re a great person,” I say. “And I’m not dating anyone. You’re right on that account. But I don’t want that. Not with you.”

The corners of her mouth drop, and a look of hurt flashes across her face. “Is it because of Isla?” she asks quietly.

A sharp breath leaves me. “I told you we’re just friends. I’m not repeating myself.” I duck my head so we’re eye to eye. “And I’m definitely not kissing anyone to prove a point.”

She chews her bottom lip, gaze downcast. “I really thought you liked me,” she whispers.

“Liking someone as a friend isn’t the same as wanting to kiss them. You’re great, Sienna, but you’re not the person I want like that.”

“Okay,” she says, nodding. But when she looks up again, her expression is filled with what I swear is determination. “I guess it’s pointless to invite you to the Harvest Ball then, huh? I hoped we could go together.”

I sigh. “I can’t go with you.”

With any luck, I can convince Isla to go with me. If not, then I'll go with the guys.

"Not the answer I hoped for," she murmurs, "but I get it."

As she walks away, I drag my attention back to the sunbeds. It takes effort. That conversation took a lot out of me. This time, when I zero in on the people sitting over there, my heart sinks.

Asher is no longer there; it's only Isla and Cade. They sit close, watching something on her phone, both smiling. Dammit.

This is the worst birthday ever.

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CHAPTER TEN

that's not fair

ISLA

Fifteen years old

LEGS ACHING, I SIT ON THE FLOOR IN THE SCHOOL LIBRARY, BACK PRESSED to the bookshelf. This morning's practice hit me harder than usual. It's always like this when I'm on my period. I get tired more quickly, and everything hurts more.

"Hey." Sienna appears out of nowhere, sliding to the floor beside me. "What are you doing here?"

"Hi. I got to school a little early after practice, so I came here to read for English class. It's quiet. Exactly what I need."

"Yeah, it's hard to find a quiet place in this school." She catches a lock of her hair between her fingers. "How have you been? We didn't really talk at Michael's party on Saturday."

"I'm fine. A bit overwhelmed with school and skating at the moment." I shrug. "How are you? Did you have a good time at the party?"

She sighs dreamily. "Yeah. The party turned out even better than I'd hoped."

"Yeah, Michael's parties are always a blast."

"So…the Harvest Ball." She shifts and clears her throat. "Are you going?"

"I'm not sure. I need to talk to Michael first." I trace my finger over the spine of the book. "And I don't know how easy that will be. I can't

remember the last time we talked normally."

Her eyes flash, her brows knitting together. Then, a small smile pulls at her lips. "Oh," she says softly, like she feels bad for me. "Well, I don't think asking him is a good idea."

"Why not?"

She nibbles on her bottom lip, averting her gaze. "Because he already asked me."

An icy sensation sweeps down my spine. "You?"

"Yeah, at his party." She wrings her hands, her cheeks going pink. "I figured you knew, since the two of you are so close."

My chest aches, and it feels impossible to breathe. "I…I didn't know," I choke out.

I've been avoiding him since he kissed Sienna and didn't tell me, but it's more than that. The stress of deciding what to do about my skating career has gotten to me, making it hard to sleep and putting most of my other concerns on the back burner.

"Sorry." She pats my hand. "After Jones' party—and you know, our kiss—people wouldn't stop talking about us. Saying how cute we looked together, how perfect we'd be. I think it finally got to him. Sometimes, guys don't realize what's right in front of them until someone else points it out."

I hold my breath. *Don't cry. Don't cry. Don't cry.*

It takes everything in me to hold it together. The urge to burst into tears is strong, but it's nowhere near as powerful as my desire to bolt out of here.

I want to go home. No, I want to go back to the rink. At least there, I can lose myself in the repetition—the jumps, the spins, the endless laps and clean landings until my legs burn and my head clears.

Michael still hasn't told me about the kiss. The kiss that, according to Cade, really did happen right before he left the party.

So why am I surprised Michael didn't tell me he asked Sienna to the ball?

He probably doesn't want me to know.

No, he probably doesn't think it matters.

Because by the way he's been acting, I no longer matter to him. Not enough to know about these things, at least.

I swallow hard against the bile rising in my throat and somehow manage a smile that feels like it might crack my face.

“I’m happy for you,” I say, voice miraculously steady. “I’m sure you’ll make a really cute couple.”

She throws her arms around me, pulling me in for a hug. Her caramel scent is even stronger than usual.

I hold my breath, afraid that, between her scent and the way my stomach is roiling, I might actually throw up.

“Thank you so much,” she whispers. Then, she leans back. “I hope this doesn’t make things awkward for you.”

“Everything’s fine.”

As her smile brightens, the bell rings. She stands and looks down at me. “I better hurry. I don’t want to be late for History.”

“Have fun.”

With a wave, she walks off, her ponytail swinging with every step. I sit on the floor, numb to all sensation except the despair growing in my chest.

That conversation created another positive to add to my pros and cons list—the things that will impact my decision about whether to follow Elena to Boston. It hurts, knowing the list of pros is growing exponentially thanks to the last person I’d expect.

Thanks to Michael.

My mood is awful as Cade and I head toward our lockers after English class. I can’t wait to finally leave this place. Ms. Roberts spent the last ten minutes of class talking about the Harvest Ball, making my already crappy day even worse. My palms still hurt from how hard I dug my fingernails into my skin while listening to her.

“What do you think about Harvest Ball?” Cade asks.

Jaw clenched, I shrug. “It’s great that the school board organizes so many events.”

He chuckles low, one side of his lips kicking up in a smile. “That’s not what I meant, but I agree with you. They’ve all been great.”

Dread swirls in my stomach, but I force myself to continue the conversation. “What did you mean then?”

“I know you don’t usually go to dances, but I was wondering if I could convince you to go to this one.”

“I don’t go because I have two practices a day, six days a week. By the time I’m done, I’m usually too tired to do anything but go to bed or do homework.”

“I get that,” he says. “But maybe just this once? I can promise you a good time.” With a smile, he waggles his brows. “You know I’m fun, and we always have a good laugh. I’ll make sure you won’t regret it.”

My heart lodges itself in my throat. “Cade…”

“Come with me to the dance,” he says sincerely. “We’ll have a fucking blast.”

I snort, even as a dull pain radiates through me. How do I tell him the only person I want to go to the dance with is Michael? Without him, there’s no point.

Gently, Cade takes my hand. “Please, Isla. We can go as friends. I’m not trying to make it weird, I promise.”

I bite my bottom lip, studying our hands. With an exhale, I drag my focus to his face.

He’s a handsome guy—soft curls falling over his forehead, gray-blue eyes always filled with interest, like he’s actually listening. That lopsided grin he wears when he’s trying to cheer me up.

More importantly, he’s kind. He’s never pushed. He’s never made our interactions uncomfortable. And he’s never made me feel like I should be someone other than myself when I’m around him.

Also, he’s right—I always have fun with him. And maybe, just maybe, going with him will help me stop conjuring the image of Michael going with Sienna.

Besides, if I do end up leaving for Boston, this will likely be my first and last dance here. Cade is always good company, so I can count on him to make the night go well.

I inhale slowly, steadying myself. “Okay, I’ll go to the ball with you.”

“We’ll have a great time.” He brushes his fingers over my knuckles, a beautiful smile playing on his lips. “I’ll make sure your first dance is one you’ll never forget.”

“Careful making such big promises,” I tell him, trying to sound as enthusiastic and cheerful as he does.

“I can back them up.” He shoots me a wink. When we reach my locker, he stops and leans against the one beside it. “Is your mom picking you up today?”

I nod, the dread in my stomach stirring to life again. “I can’t wait to go home. Today has been a long day.”

MY HEART GALLOPS, my chest heaving as I force oxygen into my lungs and skate toward the boards. A few pieces of hair have escaped my neat bun, so I blow them out of my face as I slow down. I’m thirsty, my whole body aches, and I’m pretty sure a nasty bruise is forming on my right knee after my fall during that last jump’s landing.

I was distracted at the end of practice. Of course I was. Because Michael could walk in at any minute. His practice is set to start soon. My mind was on him when it should have been on my routine. As a result, my blade caught the ice a fraction sooner than it should have. I hit the landing on one foot and wobbled, trying to maintain my balance with my hands outstretched, but I still dropped to my right knee. The pain that shot through my leg was intense. I’m afraid to even look at it.

“What happened in the last couple of minutes?” Elena asks, holding my gaze. “You were locked in, focused and determined, but then, it all fell apart.”

I lick my dry lips. “I’m sorry. Just got in my head a bit. I’ll do better tomorrow.”

She smiles warmly. “You’re incredible on the ice. You know that, right? If you want something, you make it happen. Single or pair, it doesn’t matter. Dean still asks about you, by the way.”

I stand a little straighter, surprised.

“It’s impressive, really,” she says with a soft laugh, “considering you two only skated together twice, and that was a year ago.”

Heat crawls up my neck, and I fight back a shy grin. Dean is nice. And insanely talented. Skating with him felt…good. Comfortable in a way I didn’t expect.

“Thank you,” I say, sticking with responding to the compliment only.

“You’re most definitely welcome.” She nods. “Have you talked to your parents about Paloma? She would be a great fit for you if you choose to stay here rather than come to Boston.”

“My parents and I are still talking.” I clasp my hands in front of me to keep them from trembling. “We want to make a decision before winter break.”

“Good. That’s good.” She tucks her tablet under her arm and glances at her watch. “I’ve got to get a couple of things done before Krissy gets on the ice. Bye, *Solnyshko*. And don’t forget to show your parents your right knee.”

“Will do. See you tomorrow.” As I skate away, a couple of hockey players come into sight.

Dammit. I really don’t feel like seeing Michael today.

Mom sent me a text to let me know she’s running a few minutes late, so I take my time changing into blue jeans, an oversized pink hoodie, and pink sneakers. Instead of redoing my bun, I let my hair down and hide most of its length under the collar of my hoodie.

The moment I step into the hallway, my eyes meet Michael’s, and my heart stutters.

He’s in his hockey gear, his helmet under his arm, the number 7 on the side of it. His hair is a mess, as if he’s been running his fingers through it more often than usual.

“Hi.” I give him a tentative wave. “Shouldn’t you be at practice?”

“I was waiting for you.”

“Why?”

“Really, Isla?” he grits through his teeth, stepping closer to me. With his blades on, he looms over me, making me feel tiny. “Don’t you have anything to say to me?”

I blink up at him, focusing on keeping my breathing steady. “What are you talking about?”

“I walked into the locker room and caught the tail end of Turner’s conversation with the boys. He said you agreed to go to the Harvest Ball with him.”

Heat floods my face and neck. “Yeah,” I say, lifting my chin. “I did.”

He drags a hand through his hair, groaning. “Dammit. Don’t you know how he is?”

That makes my hackles rise. “And *how* is he, exactly?” My voice trembles—not from fear, but from frustration with the boy who’s supposed to be my best friend but who feels more and more like a stranger every day.

“You’re the one who told me to get out more. Attend school events. Make friends.”

“I did,” he responds, his tone sharp. “Just…not with him.”

That stings more than it should. Heat pricks at the backs of my eyes, and my vision blurs as I fend off tears.

“If who I went with mattered so much to you,” I whisper, “then maybe you should’ve asked me yourself.”

His eyes go wide, his chest rising as he sucks in a fast breath. “I thought I already did. We’ve talked about the ball. I assumed that meant we’d go together as friends. I didn’t think I had to *officially* invite you.”

His words hit me in the lungs like a slap. I laugh, but it sounds broken. “Right. Friends. *Best friends*. Who apparently don’t tell each other things anymore.”

He stiffens. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

I should stop now, before I fall apart in front of him, but I can’t take the hurt anymore. I’m too weak to fight, and the words escape me.

“It means,” I say softly, “that I know you’re keeping things from me.”

He blinks, his lips tugging down in a frown. “What are you talking about?”

My throat tightens. I want *him* to say it. I want him to look at me and admit it. All of it—the dare, the kiss, the comments, the excitement. His feelings for the girl who fits into his world so much better than I do.

Instead, I say, “I know about Sienna.”

His whole body goes still, his jaw slack, and that makes it hurt even more.

“I know about the kiss.” My voice comes out thin, shaky. “Sienna told me.”

He blanches, and then hurt flashes across his face. “So that’s why you’ve been ignoring me.”

“I wasn’t—”

“You were,” he grits out, his tone low and gravelly. “You shut me out for weeks. *Weeks*, Isla. And you didn’t think to maybe, I don’t know, talk to me?”

My heart hammers against my rib cage. “I didn’t know how.”

He laughs once, the sound disbelieving, harsh. “Right. But you knew how to say yes when Turner asked you to the ball.”

“That’s not fair.” I lift my chin even though all I want to do is run.

“No?” His eyes burn into mine. “What’s not fair is that when you heard something about me, you didn’t come to me and ask. You just disappeared. Like I’m supposed to read your mind and magically figure out what I did wrong.”

My throat closes. “It didn’t once cross your mind that I’d hear about the kiss? When I did, I hoped you would tell me eventually.”

He blinks, stunned. Then, his voice drops, frustrated and somehow wounded. “If it mattered that much to you, why didn’t you ask me about it?”

I look down. My chest aches, like my heart is shredding itself inside me. “Because I wanted you to tell me yourself,” I whisper. “Without me having to ask.”

He exhales sharply, dragging a hand through his hair. “If it was important, I would’ve told you. But it wasn’t. And when you heard a rumor, you immediately believed it without asking me. Then, you froze me out for a month. *Then*, you said yes to the one guy you *know* I can’t stand.”

I force myself to breathe in. “I’m not doing it to hurt you.”

“Then why does it feel like you are?”

The words hang heavy in the air between us.

“We’re supposed to be best friends.” My voice breaks.

“Yeah,” he says softly. “I thought so too.”

I take a step closer and crane my neck, holding his gaze. “I’m not upset because you kissed her.” A shaky breath claws its way out of my throat. “I’m upset because *she* told me. Not you. It’s been a month, Michael. A whole month, and you didn’t say a single word. I thought we told each other everything.”

His expression falters, anger shifting into sadness and maybe a little shame. “I just…didn’t think it mattered,” he mutters. “Not like that.”

“Yeah,” I whisper. “I got that.” Because I’m a friend. Nothing more. Clearly, the pact didn’t matter to him the way it mattered to me.

The pressure behind my eyes is unbearable. I curl my fingers, digging my nails into my palms until it hurts. Anything to stop the tears. “Mom is probably waiting for me.” I nod toward the rink. “You should go too. Your coach won’t be happy if you’re late.”

I skirt him, and he lets me, stepping back. With my head held high, I walk away. I don’t need to turn around to know he’s watching me. His attention is a heavy weight, pulling me down.

As I reach the door, he says my name, his voice strained and hoarse. Instead of turning to look at him, I push the door open and walk out.

After today, I've got another pro to add to my pros and cons list, and I'm afraid this one is a deciding factor.

I'm leaving for Boston.

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CHAPTER ELEVEN

we're kind of growing apart

ISLA

Fifteen years old

KNEES PRESSED TO MY CHEST, I SIT IN THE SWING CHAIR ON THE TERRACE, holding a mug of tea, earbuds in, listening to *Tender is the Night*. I probably shouldn't be sitting out here listening to an audiobook when Cade will be here in three hours, but I can't make myself move. Milo, our family's ancient corgi, is fast asleep beneath me. He's been my shadow since I was born. Mom and I are his favorites.

The last two weeks have drained me of energy. All that's left tonight is a shell of the person I used to be. All I do is go to practice, go to school, go to practice again, come home to do homework, and sleep, then repeat the cycle again. The days have blurred together, so much so that on Sunday, I woke up at 6 a.m. and got ready for my usual weekday practice and school. I was genuinely confused when Dad wandered into the kitchen in his sleep shorts. We had a laugh, though there was concern hiding behind his smile too.

I'm running on empty, and my stress levels are as high as ever, but I don't know how to fix it.

I'm lost in my thoughts, my focus on the liquid in my cup, when a mass appears in front of me, blocking out the sunlight. When I look up, I find my mom smiling at me, so I take out my earbud, pausing my audiobook.

"Shouldn't you be getting ready?" she asks, lowering herself onto the chair beside me. It wobbles a little but stills quickly. "We need to do your

hair and makeup."

"I have plenty of time. It'll be fine."

"It's your first school dance." She gives me a hopeful smile. "Are you excited?"

I shrug half-heartedly. "I think so."

With a sigh, she wraps her arm around me and pulls me to her side. "You've been so quiet lately. Is something bothering you?"

"Other than the move to Boston, you mean?" I snuggle into her, and the scent of coconut and strawberry envelops me, so familiar and comfortable. "All my days are the same. Practice and school, school and practice. I'm overwhelmed."

"When you got into figure skating, your dad and I didn't have any expectations. You loved it, and you were good at it, so we encouraged lessons. But it was a hobby. Now, it's turned into something that makes me so, so proud of you, yet it scares me because it consumes your life so completely. You live and breathe figure skating, and you're phenomenal, but I feel like you're missing out on your childhood, on your teenage years. On making friends, falling in love."

I stiffen at that last word.

By the way Mom holds me tighter, she notices. "Do you really want to continue training at a professional level?"

"Yeah, I do." My chest tightens, but the sensation is anticipation more than fear. "I'm doubting a lot of things right now, but I'm certain of that. I want to go to the Olympics. And I want to keep putting in the work to make that dream come true."

Shifting, she looks down at me, her dark blue eyes shining. She tucks a few strands of hair behind my ear. "I love you so much, honey, and I believe you can achieve anything you set your mind to, including qualifying for the Olympics." She presses her lips to my forehead. "Your dad and I are sad you're going to Boston, but we support your decision because that's what you want."

"Grandma and Grandpa are happy." I giggle. "And Nana Millie and Uncle Tom and Uncle Ben too. And even Damon!" I kind of thought my cousin didn't really like me, but once he heard the news, we started texting, and I realized I was wrong. He's excited to not be the only kid everyone fusses about.

“Damon loves you. Everyone does. Especially Tom. When we told him you were thinking about training in Boston, he was ecstatic. I’m afraid you’ll have a very enthusiastic cheerleader at every practice and competition.”

“I don’t mind. I love my uncles.” I chew on my bottom lip. “Do you think I’ll see Aunt Audrey?”

“That will be up to you,” she says. “Your dad may not talk to her, but your grandparents do. And Dad has a good relationship with her husband. Uncle Ryan has always been incredibly kind to you and Ian. Just like we are to Mason.”

“Our family dynamics weird me out.”

Mom laughs, the melodic sound reverberating through my body. “You ain’t seen nothing yet.” Sighing, she hugs me tighter. “Can I ask you something? It’s not about figure skating or Boston.”

“Sure.”

“How are things between you and Michael? I haven’t seen him around in a while.”

Tears I’ve been holding back well in my eyes. The heaviness in my chest expands. “Um…we’re kind of growing apart.”

“What happened?” she whispers.

“Nothing.” I sniffle, burrowing my face in her neck, the pit that splits in my stomach every time I think about him opening wider. “He did something…and hid it from me. Kept acting as if nothing happened, as if it wasn’t important.”

“But it was? Important, I mean.”

I take a shaky breath and let it out slowly. “To me—yes.”

“Did you talk to him about it?”

“T-two weeks ago.” I hiccup, my tears suffocating me. “He’s texted me a few times since then, but I don’t know what to say, especially now that I’m going to Boston. So I haven’t responded.”

“Oh, honey, I’m so sorry.” She drags a hand up and down my arm, soothing me. “Do you want to talk about it? Maybe I can give you some advice?”

Dread works its way through me. Embarrassment too. “I don’t know…”

“Do you still have a crush on him?”

I do. I have no idea how she knows that. Regardless, I lie. “I don’t know.”

“Is he going to the Harvest Ball too?”

“Yeah. With Sienna Hartman.”

For a moment, Mom is quiet, still moving her hand over my arm. Then, she asks, “You went to a sleepover at her house a couple of months ago, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Is that where you found out about whatever it is Michael did? What he kept from you?”

Sniffling, I pull away, looking at her through my tears.

She smiles and hauls me back. “Stop pouting. I’m trying to put two and two together.”

That makes me giggle, despite all the tears and the pretty strong ache in my chest. I forget how well she can read me. “Maybe it would be better to tell you rather than let your mind come up with possibilities.”

She hums. “Maybe.”

With a deep breath, I close my eyes, snuggle into her chest, and tell her everything, starting with the pact and ending with the falling out we had when he found out about Cade.

“The saddest part? I don’t even know if I want to talk to him.” I wipe my tears with the back of my hand and pull back so I can see Mom. “He kissed Sienna. He’s taking her to the dance, and yet he has a problem with me going with Cade?” My voice cracks, frustration spilling out. “Then he tells me he didn’t think he needed to *officially* invite me. Like…what does that even mean?” I shake my head, the lump in my throat growing. “Did he expect me to tag along with him and Sienna? Be the third wheel to their perfect couple?”

She lets out a disappointed breath. “Boys can be stupid.”

“Tell me something I don’t know,” I huff, crossing my arms.

Snickering, she shakes her head. “I’ll be the first to tell you that if someone hurts you with their actions or their words, they don’t deserve your time and attention. Even Michael. And don’t ever let anyone tell you that ‘he’s mean to you because he doesn’t know how to talk about his feelings.’ That narrative is one of many things that lead to domestic abuse. Because girls are told from a young age it’s a form of love.” She looks away, her fingers trailing over her tattoo of Haku from *Spirited Away* hidden in peonies.

My throat closes. I know what that tattoo covers up. She and Dad sat me down not too long ago and told me about how her ex-boyfriend attacked her. It was hard for them to bring up the subject, but Dad was still playing football then, and Mom's ex was too, so it was publicized, and all the information is available online. They were worried I'd stumble upon the story myself, or that someone might bring it up with me when the man was released from prison. Mom has a restraining order against him, and thankfully, he's never tried to contact her, but she was terrified when she got the news he was eligible for parole.

"I don't think Michael really wanted to be rude to you. I've known him since he was six months old, and I've seen him with you and Meg. And with other girls. He's always been very protective of you, very caring, and very kind. But he has a temper. And he's a bit arrogant, thanks to Colt's reputation. Like he feels the need to maintain it for himself." She gives me a sad smile. "Even I know he and Cade have never gotten along. It's obvious to anyone who's ever watched them practice. So I can see him having reservations about the boy, but I also think he likes you—"

"No. He doesn't." I shake my head hard, my jaw tight. "If he did, he wouldn't have asked Sienna to the dance. And then to act like I should've gone with him anyway? Like a pathetic friend tagging along because she doesn't have anything better to do? He made it clear he'd never actually choose me."

Mom studies me for a long moment, her eyes softening. "I can understand your feelings. And you've always had good instincts." She reaches over and tucks another strand of hair behind my ear. "You know him better than anyone. If something feels off, then trust your gut, even if it hurts. I'm sorry you're going through this."

"Thank you." I smile at her, though a new concern flares to life, and my cheeks heat. "Can you please not tell Dad? About Michael, I mean."

She zips her lips and throws away an invisible key. Then, she puts her hands on her thighs with a clap and stands. "How about we start getting you ready? You've got about two hours."

With a surprised huff, I snatch my phone from the little table to my left and check the time.

"Will you help me?"

A bright smile lights up her beautiful face. "I thought you'd never ask." She crouches and ruffles Milo's fur.

He opens his beady eyes and yawns.

“Hey, sleepyhead. It’s time to go inside. We gotta help Isla get ready for the ball.”

“YOU LOOK BREATHTAKING,” Dad says, one shoulder propped against the doorframe. “You are the epitome of ‘like mother, like daughter.’ It’s like your mom copied herself, and you were born.”

Head thrown back, I laugh. “You’re so dramatic. Everyone says I have your nose.”

“My nose?” He quirks a brow. “The one that’s been broken at least five times since I started playing football?”

“Dad.” I groan, standing up from the stool in front of my vanity. “Can you be serious for a moment?”

He straightens and takes a deep breath, then exhales. “Okay, I’m serious. I promise.”

With an eye roll, I pad over to him.

He’s in great shape, still all muscle even though he’s retired from the NFL. The tattoos that cover about eighty percent of his body may make him look like a bad boy, but in reality, he’s nothing but soft and caring, especially with us. He’s a constant reminder that looks can be very deceiving.

“It’s my first school dance.”

Dad nods.

“I’m going with a guy from my class, and he’s also…Michael’s teammate.” I shift from one foot to the other, nerves rolling through me. “So you’ve probably seen him a few times.”

“I’ve seen him fighting with your best friend quite a few times, yeah.”

As heat creeps up the back of my neck, I peer down at my feet. “All I’m saying is, please be nice to him, okay?” With an exhale, I meet his blue eyes.

Dad holds my gaze, his expression more serious than I thought possible. But after a moment, a smile breaks across his lips, and he nods. “I promise. The last thing I want is to cause issues before your first-ever school dance.”

I wrap my arms around his torso and hug him tight. “Thank you so much.”

As I step back, the doorbell rings.

My heart pitter-patters in my chest, and my knees go weak. I might be way more nervous than I realized.

“I’ll let your date in.” Winking, Dad takes a step back into the hall. “We don’t want him to change his mind.”

“Dad,” I grumble as I hurry back to the full-length mirror to take one final look at myself.

The new red dress falls to just above my knees and hugs my waist tightly. The top fits like a modest corset, with laces up the front and ribbons tied into cute little bows at my shoulders. The fabric shimmers slightly under the light, kind of playful but still sweet. Per Mom’s recommendation, I’ve paired it with satin black platform heels. They definitely add a few inches to my height, and I think I look nice.

I’ve donned bright makeup hundreds of times in my life, thanks to all the championships and competitions, but tonight, I stuck with winged eyeliner, black mascara, and red lipstick. The look is still bright but definitely not overloaded. My hair is mostly down, the top pulled up in a waterfall braid, with a few shiny strips of tinsel Mom added.

“Isla, your date is here,” Dad yells.

“You’re making him wait,” my brother adds.

I slump and huff out a breath. They are impossible.

With one last look at myself, I grab my phone and my little black purse and hurry downstairs.

I’m still a ball of nerves, but there’s excitement there too. With any luck, I’ll have a fun night. I deserve it.

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CHAPTER TWELVE

because i like her

MICHAEL

Sixteen years old

THE PLACE IS PACKED. I'M NOT SURE I'VE EVER SEEN SO MANY PEOPLE AT A school dance. The gym is decorated with gold and red streamers and paper leaves, pumpkins positioned here and there. The dance floor is already half full, though it holds no appeal to me. Maybe it will after a little punch. According to Ash, it's been spiked.

Hopefully the alcohol will improve my shitty mood.

Despite my attitude, the music is great. I'm surprised the administration approved this remix of Falling in Reverse's "Fashionably Late," but I'm not complaining.

"Here's your punch." Ash stops in front of me and holds out a red cup. "And it's punching."

I snort from where I'm seated on the first row of bleachers and take the offering. "Did anyone ever tell you how horrible some of your jokes are?"

"You don't know what you're talking about. Girls love my jokes."

I open my mouth to taunt him a little, but Sienna chimes in, so I take a sip of the punch instead.

"If you only knew how delusional you are." She pats him on the chest. "The girls love how you look. They don't even listen to your jokes."

As the flavor of the punch registers, I have to fight the urge to spit it back into the cup. What the fuck? This isn't spiked. It tastes like straight

alcohol.

Asher doesn't get riled up easily, so he shrugs and flashes Sienna a big smile. "I know I'm handsome. I don't mind using it to my benefit."

"Your ego is ginormous," she mutters and then looks straight at me. Her blue eyes look icy under the flashing lights, and her hair is loose around her shoulders, sparkling every time she moves. She put glitter in it, apparently. At least, that's what she told us the moment she found our group.

She and I didn't come together, but minutes after we showed up, she slid into our circle like she belonged there, just like she always does.

"Wanna dance?" she asks, tilting her head.

Why would I want to dance with her when I turned down her invite?

"Not really."

Her pink-glossed lips flatten for a second, irritation flashing in her eyes. But then, her smile returns. "Well…maybe later." She says it like she's sure there will be a later.

Tyler, a guy who used to play hockey with me and Ash, wanders closer. "Dude, what you did on the ice last game was insane," he says, eyes bright with excitement. He broke his leg when we were ten and never came back to the team. "My dad heard college scouts are coming to town next month. I'm pretty sure you're on their radar."

My stomach tightens. Everyone keeps acting like this is great news, like getting scouted at sixteen is a huge honor. And I guess it would be for most people.

But for me? It's a whole different story.

Because what these scouts really want to know is whether the son of an NHL legend is actually worth anything.

I want to prove I am. That I've earned my place on the ice because of my talent, not because of the last name on my jersey. But part of me is terrified they'll look at me and think exactly what Turner's parents think—that I'll never be like Dad.

I force a smile, lifting my cup. "Maybe I am. Guess I'll need to make sure no one survives my slapshot during our next game."

The guys around us laugh. A few girls from the cheer squad wave at us, giggling as they pass. Another guy yells my name from across the room, and I raise my cup in response. I have no clue who it is, but I enjoy the attention. The alcohol hits me quickly; after a few more sips, my skin heats up. I talk more, laugh louder, my mood improving quickly.

Sienna plucks the cup from my hand and takes a sip. Then, she edges closer, way closer than necessary. Her perfume is too sweet, too heavy.

"You're different tonight," she murmurs, tilting her head. "Relaxed. Not so guarded. It's nice."

I blink slowly, the world around me warm and hazy. "I'm just tired."

She drags her fingers along my forearm. "You're always so serious, but underneath…there's this whole other chill side of you. And it's pretty hot."

I huff out a sound that's not quite a laugh. "You think I'm hot?"

Her eyes brighten. "You know I do," she says, scooting even closer. "I've liked you forever."

I tip my head back, threading my hand through my hair. "Forever's a long time."

"Not long enough."

Her words run together and fade out, and then an image of Isla materializes in my mind. Her dark blue eyes and thick dark lashes. The green specks in her irises when the sunlight hits just right. Her straight but slightly upturned nose. Her smile after a clean landing, the way her cheeks flush when she's excited, the soft curl of her bottom lip. That stupid, perfect bottom lip I think about way more than I should.

I've never wanted to kiss her more than I did the night of my mom's birthday, when I had her on her back on the roof. I've never wanted to kiss anyone more than I wanted to kiss her.

My gut turns over. Why didn't I just tell her the dare kiss meant nothing? Why did I let it happen at all?

"Michael?" Sienna presses her hand to my cheek.

I jerk slightly, blinking at her.

"You're spacing out," she says.

"Yeah." My voice is rough. "Probably need a break." I down what's left in my cup, push to my feet, and stumble. The room tilts. Hard.

Shit.

I've been drunk before, but damn, the punch hit like a freaking truck. Too strong. Great. My parents will kill me if I show up smelling like this.

Sienna rises too, hovering. "Let me help you—"

"I'm fine," I say, the slurred words telling a different story. I need some distance from her and some fresh air.

I round her and head toward Asher, who's dancing nearby with not one cheerleader, but two, his arms wrapped around their waists. One is blonde,

the other is a redhead. Both are a year older than us.

“Dude, I’m having so much fun,” he slurs.

“I can see that.” I rough a hand down my face. “Wanna get some fresh air?”

“Who needs fresh air when we’re surrounded by such stunning girls?” He pulls both girls closer, making them giggle. “Just dance. Have fun.”

“Dance with us.” The blonde holds her hand out to me, stepping away from Ash.

I hesitate, my mind whirling.

Asher opens his mouth, but he snaps it shut again quickly, his focus flying to something behind my back. He lets out a whistle. “Wow. She finally showed up.”

I turn on my heel, and the sight knocks me back a step. Isla stands at the threshold of the gym with Turner by her side. Even from here, under this shitty light and in my not-so-sober state, her little red dress stands out. It fits her perfectly, as if it were made for her. Her hair is down, streaming over her bare shoulders. So petite and so girly, but with every step she takes, her muscles flex, a reminder of how strong she is. A homing beacon drawing me in. In that short skirt and those shoes, her legs look endless.

Without a doubt, she’s the most beautiful girl in our school. This is her first dance, and yet, I’m not the one at her side.

Regret and shame and anger and jealousy all rush through me, making my head spin more.

“I’m gonna say hi,” Asher announces, making a beeline toward Isla and Turner.

I shift my weight from one foot to the other. What the hell am I supposed to do now? The urge to go talk to her is ripping me apart from the inside, but so are the hurt and jealousy.

She hasn’t said a word to me since I confronted her about Turner, since she told me she knew about that stupid kiss with Sienna. She hasn’t replied to my texts, hasn’t tried to find me. It’s as if I don’t exist to her anymore.

“I didn’t know she was coming.” Sienna’s voice snaps me out of my thoughts. She steps up to my side like she belongs there. “She never comes, so I figured she’d skip this one too.”

“Yeah.” My tone is flat.

Across the room, Ash lifts Isla off the ground, spinning her like she weighs nothing. She laughs, her head tipped back. Turner is smiling too,

relaxed, not tense like he gets around me.

That stupid, soft smile on his face makes my stomach twist so violently, I worry I'll throw up. Why him?

"Do you want to say hi?" Sienna brushes my arm with hers. "She's your best friend, after all."

Best friend. The term sounds funny now.

"Yeah," I manage, my throat tight. "Why not?"

Truth is, my brain isn't working. The room is too loud, the lights and decorations and people around me too vivid. It's all too much. Sienna's presence kind of provides normalcy. A distraction. A person to talk to while I try not to fall apart watching Isla with someone else.

So when Sienna falls into step beside me, I don't have the energy to tell her to leave. And maybe I don't want to walk over there alone, looking desperate and pathetic.

But as we cross the dance floor, every step feels wrong. My stomach twists. My hands shake a little. What am I going to say to her? The closer I get, the harder the words forming at the back of my throat pound, needing to escape.

You should've been here with me.

You should've been here with me.

"I'm so happy you're here!" Sienna exclaims, throwing herself at Isla. "And you look so good."

I stop and stuff my hands into my pockets, balling my fists. Turner locks eyes with me, his jaw clenching. "Hey, Thompson."

"Turner." I lift my chin.

He looks me up and down, brows lifting like he's assessing damage. "How much have you had to drink?"

"Are you my mom?" I snap before I can stop myself. The words come out slurred. Even I hate how I sound.

He doesn't take the bait. Instead, he exhales through his nose and mutters, "Whatever, man," like I'm a problem he's tired of dealing with.

He shifts closer to Isla and places his hand on the small of her back. The touch is easy, familiar. Like he has the right to do it. Like he knows exactly what he's doing. I swear, a bomb detonates inside my chest.

The room spins. My heartbeat spikes, the vein in my temple throbbing hard enough to make my vision pulse. I can't tell if it's the booze or the jealousy. Either way, my body goes blistering hot.

Get your fucking hand off her.

She should push him away. She should step aside.

My voice comes out rough, guttural, as I bark, “Isla.”

She jerks her head up, eyes widening the second they meet mine. The flicker of worry there guts me.

I swallow back the nausea. “Can we talk?”

The delicate column of her throat twitches as she swallows.

Turner says, “Look, it’s not my place—”

“Exactly.” I take a step closer, now chest to chest with him. “It’s not your place, so shut your fucking mouth.”

Asher drapes his arm over my shoulder, drawing me to his side. “Easy, man. We’re all here to have fun.”

“I just want to talk,” I grit out. “Isla, please.”

She holds my gaze, flattening her lips. Then, she jerks her head no. “I’ll talk to you tomorrow. When you’re sober.”

I open my mouth, but when no words come out, I close it. Deflating, I stagger back. The pain in my chest is intense, like my heart has cracked in two. Sweat drips down my back, and my head spins even more violently.

“Let’s get you out of here, Michael.” Sienna’s voice cuts through the ringing in my ears. Suddenly, she’s at my side, slipping my arm over her shoulder. “Come on. Fresh air will help.”

I don’t fight her. Not because I want her help, but because my legs are unsteady, and standing here while Isla looks at me like I’m an inconvenience is tearing me apart.

Ash steps closer, brows furrowed. “Do you want me to go with you?”

Sienna steers me through the crowd without responding, and I let her. If I stay here another second, I’ll fall apart.

The hallway stretches in front of me, blurry and too bright. My vision goes spotty. Nausea hits me in waves. If I don’t stop moving now, I’m going to throw up.

“Stop, please,” I choke out. I brace my hand against the wall, relishing the cold of the cinderblock. “God…I’m gonna be sick.”

Sienna turns to face me, shifting her grip.

Why did I drink that punch? Why the hell did tonight have to go this way? Why does seeing Isla with Turner make me feel like I’m losing the ground beneath me?

Sienna turns me so my back is against the wall. Eyes closed, I hang my head and focus on breathing. Anything to calm myself down.

“What did you want to talk to her about?”

The question tears through the fog in my skull. For a second, I think I imagined it.

“Michael,” Sienna says. “What did you need to talk to Isla about?”

I push myself upright, letting the back of my head thud against the wall. The world still spins.

Sienna stands in front of me with her hands on her hips, eyebrows raised like she’s waiting for some big confession.

“What?”

“Why was it so important?”

I scrub a shaky hand over my face. “Because she doesn’t talk to me anymore. It’s been two weeks since she’s even said hello. And I’m drunk. Isn’t that…isn’t that reason enough to screw up?”

“But why her?” she snaps, stepping closer. “Why is it always her?”

Because I like her. Because I have for years, and I can’t turn it off.

“You and Cade hate each other,” Sienna goes on. “And she’s dating him. Is it really that weird that she doesn’t talk to you?”

I blink hard, my mind clouding. “They’re not dating.”

“They are.” She takes another step, stopping when her face is only inches from mine. “Think about it. She never comes to school events, but tonight, she’s here. With him. Of course they’re dating.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” I rasp.

“Maybe not to you.” Her voice softens, turns syrupy. “But to me? It’s obvious. Though, if I had the choice, I would’ve chosen you.” She rises onto her toes, resting her hand on the back of my neck.

“Sienna…” It comes out like a warning. My hands stay glued to the wall; I don’t trust myself to stay upright if I move. That’s why I don’t push her away.

My head is so jumbled, I can barely formulate words. She’s lying about Isla and Turner. She’s twisting things. But the images in my head won’t go away—Turner’s hand on Isla’s lower back. Her soft smile. The coldness in her tone when she told me she’d talk to me when I’m sober. The way she looked right through me.

Fuck, it hurts.

It shouldn’t. People grow apart. Best friends drift away from each other. It happens. So why does my chest feel like it’s collapsing? Why does it feel like losing her is the worst thing that’s ever happened to me?

“Michael, please,” Sienna whispers. Her caramel perfume wraps around me, cloying and sickly sweet. “Just…let me take care of you.”

She looks at me like I’m the only thing she wants, but the part of me that still hopes Isla might care is screaming to push her away. My stomach hardens. My pulse throbs violently.

I don’t want this.

I don’t want her.

But when Sienna slides her hand deeper into my hair, pulling me down, I’m too drunk, too dizzy, too gutted to stop her. So, I let her kiss me. I don’t kiss her back. I don’t touch her. I just…let it happen.

Because Isla is with Turner. Because as much as I want her, she doesn’t care.

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CHAPTER THIRTEEN

you don't need to see this

ISLA

Fifteen years old

I CAN'T FOCUS ON ANYTHING CADE AND ASHER ARE SAYING. MY MIND IS too preoccupied, replaying my interaction with Michael, questioning every part of it. How weird and painful it was. What he'd want to talk to me about. How wasted he was. I've seen him drunk once or twice, but that was nothing compared to how he looked tonight. Asher might not be sober, but he's nowhere near as out of it as Michael.

Bottom lip caught between my teeth, I glance at the door. I don't want to talk to him when he's in that state, but I need to know he's okay. He's my best friend, for Christ's sake. We may not be seeing eye to eye lately, but all these years of friendship are important to me. He's my person no matter what. This rift between us kills me a little more every day, and our conversation a couple of minutes ago has only made it worse.

I touch Cade's arm to get his attention.

He pauses midsentence, both he and Ash turning to look at me.

"I need to use the bathroom. I'll be quick."

Cade ducks his head, focus locked on mine. "I can go with you."

My cheeks heat as warmth spreads through my veins. "No. Stay here. Have fun." I give him a quick smile and then glance at Ash. "I won't be long."

"Okay."

I wave at Ash. “If you’re not here when I get back, it was good to see you.”

My usually jovial friend looks more serious than I think I’ve ever seen him. “You too.”

I push a few locks of hair behind my ear and head toward the door. I need a minute to make sure Michael is fine, and then I’ll rejoin Cade. After all, I came here to dance and have fun. So far, I’ve done neither.

Outside the gym, I pause and consider where Sienna might have taken Michael. To the bathroom? Possibly. Or maybe the courtyard.

Deciding to check there first, I square my shoulders and walk down the hallway. The music still blasting from the gym drowns out my footsteps. The closer I get, the deeper my worry feels. Hopefully, Michael isn’t throwing up. It’d suck for Sienna to have to deal with that.

She looks beautiful tonight in her pink dress, her blonde hair down. I might not be her biggest fan, and yeah, I’m jealous of her connection with Michael, but I can’t deny she looks good.

I round the corner and instantly halt in my tracks, stumbling back as if I’ve been struck. My lungs seize up. I don’t remember how to breathe. As my knees wobble, I slap my hand against a cool wall to center myself.

I’m such an idiot.

She didn’t lead him to the courtyard. She didn’t take him to get fresh air either. No, the two of them found an empty hallway and are pressed up against each other.

His back is against the wall, shoulders slumped like he can barely hold himself up. She’s the one closing the distance, one hand behind his neck as she drags his face down to hers.

He doesn’t touch her. His hands hang uselessly at his sides.

But he doesn’t push her away either.

And that hurts more than anything.

I dart around the corner, out of sight, and press my back to the wall. I should leave, but my legs won’t move. The music from the gym sounds like white noise now, the sounds of their kisses somehow amplified. They’re loud and messy, accompanied by heavy panting. Every sound they make hammers another nail into my heart. I squeeze my eyes shut, but it doesn’t help. I can still hear them. And for some awful reason, I remain frozen.

It’s one thing for Sienna to have told me they kissed. Yes, it’s heartbreaking, but it’s nothing compared to witnessing it like this. The pain

radiating through my chest is so sharp, I'm surprised I can still stand up straight. With tears blurring my vision, I hide my face in my hands, my whole body shaking. I'm ruining my makeup, I'm ruining *everything*, but I can't even make myself care.

A pair of thick arms wraps around me and pulls me into a solid chest. I stiffen, ready to pull away, but when Asher speaks quietly, I slump against him.

"You were supposed to be in the bathroom."

"I just… I wanted…"

He presses me closer and rests his chin on top of my head. "You wanted to do the same thing as me. You wanted to make sure he's alright."

"Yeah, and h-he's alr-right." *I am not.*

"How about I get you out of here? You don't need to see this."

I nod against his chest.

With gentle movements, Asher leads me away from Michael and Sienna. I'm lost in hurt, not even aware of where I am until cool air hits my face. With a breath stuck in my throat, I look around. We're at the back exit of the school. It's dark out here. Quiet, too.

I untangle myself from Ash and sag against the wall. My heart feels impossibly heavy in my chest, and I'm too weak to even stand straight. I wipe away my tears with my fingertips, trying not to think about how terrible my makeup probably looks.

"I'm sorry," Asher murmurs. "I should've realized where you were going and stopped you. I hate that you had to see that."

"You don't need to be sorry." I shake my head, looking down at my feet. "And he didn't do anything wrong. I was the one who made a mistake. I should've known…"

"Do you like Michael?"

With a shuddering breath, I wrap my arms around myself. "Would I be crying in the hallway at my very first dance if I didn't?" I raise my eyes to the starless sky and shiver. I want to call my dad and ask him to pick me up, but before that, I need to find Cade and apologize.

"Why haven't you told Michael how you feel?"

"Because he doesn't feel the same way. He doesn't see me as anything more than a friend." I pluck my phone out of my purse and turn on my camera to check the damage. "Oh my God." I suck in a breath. "I look terrible."

“No, you don’t.” Ash steps up to me and puts his index finger under my chin, gently forcing me to look at him. “You’re a beautiful girl, and a little mascara under your eyes doesn’t change that.”

“You’re trying to cheer me up,” I mutter, locking my phone’s screen.

“Nope, I’m being honest.” He tilts his head to the side. “And you should’ve told Michael.”

“No, and I don’t plan to.” I narrow my eyes at him. “And you’re not going to tell him either. This is my business. No one else’s.”

“But Isla, he doesn’t—”

I press a finger to his mouth, successfully shutting him up. “I’m leaving for Boston after winter break. It’s better if he doesn’t know about my feelings. It’s better for me.”

His eyes go wide, and he bats my hand away. “What are you talking about? What do you mean you’re leaving for Boston?”

“Just what I said.” I shrug, picking at my nail. “Elena is moving to Boston, and I’m going with her. It’s what’s best for my career.”

He blinks, his jaw going slack. “Your parents are okay with you moving to Boston alone?”

“They’re from Boston. And I won’t be alone. I’ll live with my dad’s parents, and my mom’s family is there too.”

“Does…does Michael know?”

I lift a shoulder. “I told him it was a possibility, but we haven’t talked in a while.”

“So he doesn’t know.” Ash nods, his lips pressed together in a hard line. “And you don’t want him to know you like him because you’re moving away.”

“Yes. Please, Ash. Don’t tell him anything.”

With a huff, he rakes his hand through his blond hair. “Fuck, Isla, you’re putting me in an impossible position.”

“Ash, please.”

“Fine.” He sighs, his shoulders sinking. “I promise I won’t tell him, even though I don’t like it.”

“Thank you.” I give him a small smile. “I’m gonna text my dad. I think I’m ready to go home.”

“Damn. This was your first school dance. It was supposed to be a fun night. I’m sorry it got ruined.”

“It’s okay. Honestly, I wish I’d stayed home.”

I unlock my phone again and type out a message to my dad.

ME:

Can you please pick me up?

DAD:

Why so early?

ME:

I want to go home

DAD:

ADD A NOVEL TO YOUR READING LIST.

BROWSE LOKEPUB AND CHOOSE YOUR NEXT BOOK.

👀 did your date do something that bothers you?

ME:

No, Cade's been nothing but nice. I'm just tired

DAD:

Can one of your friends confirm nothing has happened to you? Michael, maybe?

My heart pangs. Without knowing it, Dad hit me where it hurts the most. I grit my teeth as I reply.

ME:

Asher can. Can you please pick me up now?

DAD:

Be there in fifteen

ME:

You're the best 😘

I slip my phone back in my purse and peer at Asher. "My dad will be here in fifteen minutes. I need to find Cade and apologize for disappearing on him."

“Let’s go.” Ash pushes himself off the wall and opens the door for me. “However you wanna explain your absence, I’ll back you up.”

“Thanks for the offer, but I can handle it. Don’t worry.”

“Suit yourself, sweet Isla.” He winks at me.

We walk down the hallway in silence. He stays close, his shoulder brushing mine occasionally. When we make it back to the gym, we find Cade pacing in front of the doors, his hands fisted at his sides.

As we approach, he snaps up straight and locks eyes with me.

“Thank God. I was worried sick something happened to you.” He rushes to me and grasps my hands. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.” I peer over at Asher, who is still at my side, then focus on Cade again. “Can we talk? Somewhere private?”

His face lights up with a smile. “Of course.”

With my hand still in his, he leads me away from the gym doors. Asher watches us leave, rooted to the spot. I don’t know if he’ll keep his promise, but I really hope he does. I’ll be gone soon, and it’ll be so much better if my best friend never knows I liked him.

Cade stops when we’re near the library—far away from where I saw Michael with Sienna, thank God.

At the thought, my heart clenches, making me press my palm to my chest.

“Where did you disappear to?” Cade tilts his head, forehead creased with concern.

“I went to the bathroom, and then…I texted my dad.” I lick my lips and force myself to hold his gaze. “I’m going home, Cade. He’s picking me up in a few minutes.”

“What? But we haven’t even been here an hour, and you’ve been gone for a good chunk of that time. What happened?”

“I’m tired, and all my yawning has made my eyes tear up, and I’ve ruined my makeup.” I snag his hand and give it a squeeze. “You’ve been such a good friend to me, but I think it was a bad idea for me to come here with you. You should be out there dancing with someone you like—”

He opens his mouth, ready to intervene, but I go on before he can.

“With someone who likes you back. And that’s not me.”

“Wow. I-I don’t know what to say.” He takes a step back, blinking rapidly. “And I don’t understand. We get along so well, and I really thought you liked me. Maybe not as much as you like Thompson—”

I bristle. “I don’t like Michael.”

“I don’t like it when you lie to me.” Cade frowns.

I rear back, frowning too. “I’m not lying.”

“I’ve had a crush on you for years. Do you really think I haven’t noticed how you and Thompson fell out after you asked me if I saw him and Sienna kiss?”

“It’s a coincidence.” The lie is hard to get out, but I stick with it. “I like you, Cade, but I don’t *like* like you.” Ducking, I pick an invisible piece of lint off my dress. “My life’s about to change soon,” I tell him, forcing myself to look at him. “And it’s for the best. You’ve been a really good friend to me. I cherish that a lot.”

“*Friend*,” he mutters, stuffing his hands into his pockets. “Definitely not the word I hoped you’d use to describe me tonight.”

“I’m sorry.” My phone buzzes in my hand, and when I see a text from my dad on the screen, I take a step closer to Cade. Standing on my tiptoes, I press my fingers to his cheek. “Thank you for tonight. You made my first-ever school dance unforgettable.”

He lets out a defeated sigh. “You’re very welcome, Isla.”

Before I overthink it, I kiss his cheek and step back. “Bye, Cade.”

“Bye.”

I hurry away from him, keeping my head low. Thankfully, I don’t run into Michael; in less than two minutes, I’m climbing into my dad’s SUV.

“How was the dance?” he asks, his expression etched with concern.

“It was good, but nothing really worth remembering,” I mutter. “Dad?”

“Yeah, honey?”

“Thank you for letting me go to Boston.” My voice sounds small, so I clear my throat and raise my head. “Do you really think Grandma and Grandpa are okay with me moving in with them?”

Dad nods. “Absolutely. Aunt Millie is ecstatic too. She can’t wait to have you so close by. Tom and Ben and Damon are over the moon. You’ll be surrounded by people who love you. If I didn’t think that was the case, I wouldn’t have agreed.”

A small smile pulls at my mouth. “You’re the best.”

He assesses me, his eyes softening. “I’m trying.” Then, he starts the engine and drives away.

I take a deep breath and let it out slowly as he pulls out of the parking lot. I can’t wait to be back in my room.

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

not true

MICHAEL

Sixteen years old

THE SOUND OF MY ALARM IS LIKE AN ICE PICK TO THE HEAD. THE PAIN ONLY flares when I shift to silence it. The vein in my temple pulsates so violently, it feels as if my whole head is ready to explode. I crack one eye open, and the light coming from my window brings with it another sharp stab of pain.

Why does my head hurt so much?

I bury my face in my pillow, blotting out the light, and try to go back to sleep. But a moment later, there's a rattling knock on my door, followed by Dad's too-loud voice.

"Wakey, wakey, Michael." He opens the door and storms inside. "The sun is up; you should be too."

"Dad," I groan, pulling my comforter up over my head.

A rush of cool air hits me as Dad tears the blanket off the bed and grasps my ankle.

"I said, get up." He tugs, dragging me toward the edge. I'm a big guy, but my dad is bigger, and he's still a hell of a lot stronger. "Now."

"My head hurts. A little more sleep will help." I crawl back up to my pillows.

I'm hit with a small pile of clothing.

"You have five minutes to get ready," Dad grits out. "We're going for a run."

I force my eyes open and turn, dislodging what I now realize is a pair of sweatpants and a hoodie. “For a run? Are you—”

He grabs my ankle again and lifts my leg. “If I were you, I’d think really hard about what I said next.”

“Fine. Fine,” I mutter, holding his gaze. I’ve never seen him this pissed. “I’ll be downstairs in five minutes.”

“I’m counting on it.” He drops my leg and walks out without closing the door.

Dammit. Today isn’t looking any better than yesterday.

DAD IS quiet as we run side by side, focused on the road ahead. It feels like he’s ignoring me. If so, it serves me right.

My headache has gotten better, but it’s still present. The morning air is cool enough to sting my lungs, but it’s what I needed to wake up. The sun’s peeking out over the horizon.

My breath fogs in front of me, my sneakers hitting the pavement as I search my memories, trying to figure out how I got home last night. Images and sounds blur into a mess I can’t untangle, though I remember my dad’s car, and I think I remember climbing into the back seat.

The higher we climb, the slower Dad runs. I match his pace, wishing I could blend into the background so he’d forget I’m here with him. At the top of the hill, he stops, hands on his knees. I stop too, breaths sawing in and out as my head pounds dully. This is torture.

“How do you feel?” Dad asks.

I slump to the ground, knees up, arms resting on them, and look up at him. “Like I was run over by a train.”

“Did you feel like that when you woke up, or only after the run?”

“After the run. But I felt like I was dying when I woke up. So this is an improvement.”

“Okay.” He squats and zeroes in on me, his expression tight. “What happened last night?”

Adrenaline shoots through me, my extremities tingling. “What do you mean?”

“Your girlfriend called me from your phone last night, and when I got there to pick you up, you were wasted.”

My stomach lurches. “My girlfriend?”

Dad snorts. “*That’s* the detail that caught your attention?”

“I just…” I trail off, taking in the scenery behind him. “Who are you talking about? What does she look like?”

“The blonde from your birthday party. Can’t remember her name.”

Involuntarily, I shudder. “She’s not my girlfriend.”

He gives me a deadpan look, brows raised. “I spent a good three minutes waiting for you two to stop sucking face before the girl helped you into the car.”

My face burns intensely, like my skin has been set on fire. I did *what*? In front of my dad?

“When you finally stopped, she grabbed your hand, dragged you to the passenger window, and introduced herself as your girlfriend.” He tilts his head. “Her high-pitched squeal after I said it was nice to meet her still rings in my ears.”

“I’m sorry.” I hang my head, eyes squeezed shut. “She’s not my girlfriend. I don’t know why she would say she is. Honestly, I don’t remember half of what happened.”

“Yeah, I gathered that.” He stands, looming over me. “I’m no saint, Michael. I remember being a teenager and making stupid choices. But this was a school event. Thank God none of the teachers noticed. If they had, you could’ve been suspended; you could’ve been benched. You realize that, right? And the scouts are coming soon. You know that. Why would you risk everything for something so stupid?” He studies me for a moment, his jaw tightening. “You’re sure no one kept handing you drinks? No one pushed you to have more than you planned?”

“I knew the punch was spiked,” I say quickly. “I figured I’d have a few sips and be fine. That was on me.”

He doesn’t look convinced, but he nods anyway.

I run my fingers through my hair. “But it wasn’t just spiked. It was mostly alcohol, and I didn’t realize how fast it would hit me. I only had one cup, and I think…I think I stayed with Sienna most of the night. That’s the last clear thing I remember.” I bite my bottom lip, racking my brain for details from last night. “I remember getting back on the dance floor, and it’s all kind of a blur after that.”

Dad narrows his eyes. “You said you stayed with Sienna.”

“Yeah, I think so.” I rub the back of my neck, squinting up at him. “Why?”

“Do we need to have a conversation about safe sex?”

I scramble to my feet, my cheeks burning. “Oh my God. Are you trying to make me die of embarrassment?”

“No. I’m asking questions.” He shrugs, unbothered. “Your mom was eighteen when she got pregnant with you.”

“I’m sixteen, and I haven’t had sex yet, if that’s what you wanted to know.”

“Okay. Just remember, if you want to talk about it, I’m here.”

I grunt, turning away. “Yeah, sure. As if you won’t make fun of me about it.”

“Aha, so you’ve been thinking about it.”

I haven’t just thought about it. I made a whole plan, one that started with kissing Isla. Then, I’d ask her to be my girlfriend, and eventually, we’d be each other’s firsts. But all of that went to shit because of that stupid dare. Because I let it happen instead of setting boundaries.

Shoulders slumping, I avoid the implication. “When I decide I want to do that, I’ll talk to you.” I look to my right, toward Isla’s house, even though I can’t see it from here. She said she’d talk to me today. Will she? I don’t remember seeing her when I got back to the gym with Sienna last night.

“Sounds good.” He comes closer and wraps his big arm around my shoulders. When he lets go, I focus on the Winnie-the-Pooh tattoo on his wrist. He’s proud of it. Even when the Thunders’ fans would make jokes about it, it never bothered him. Why can’t I be more like him? He would’ve never gotten into the situation I’m in currently.

I want to get tattoos when I’m older too. More like Uncle Xander’s, though. More abstract, no color.

“Xander called Bella last night when she and your mom were together. He was on his way to the school. Apparently, Isla hadn’t even been at the dance for a full hour.”

I stiffen, my heart sinking.

“I was hoping you’d know why she left so early.” Dad takes a step back. “It was her first dance. Xander and Bella were so excited when she said she

wanted to go, so when she left so early, it made us all worry that something happened."

"I don't know. I was with Sienna." My voice cracks, and I clear my throat. "Is Isla okay?"

"Yeah, your mom saw her when she got home. She's okay."

"Good."

Fragments of phrases flash through my mind, something about Isla and Turner…but the words don't make sense. I guess I heard something, but I don't know what exactly.

"Let's go home." Dad looks at his wrist, checking the time. "We've got just enough time to have breakfast before practice."

I groan. "Can I skip today? I feel awful."

"Lemme think about it." He purses his lips, eyeing me up and down. Then, he shakes his head. "No. You can't. And if I beat you back to the house, you'll be washing my car, and your mom's, for a whole month."

With that, he takes off.

Un-fucking-believable.

By the time I get to the rink, my headache is almost gone. Unfortunately, my mind is still foggy, so I have no clue how I'll survive three hours on the ice.

At least I'll see Ash and have the opportunity to ask him about the dance. If I'm really lucky, I'll catch Isla before she leaves so we can have the talk she promised.

In the locker room, Ash is sitting on the bench with Turner beside him, both half-dressed in their gear, talking.

"I feel bad for her, you know?" Ash says. "Moving across the country for better opportunities is fine, but not when you're only sixteen."

I set my bag on the bench beside him, and he jerks, his head whipping around, his eyes going wide.

"Who are you talking about?" I ask.

"Er…" he mutters, the sound dying off slowly.

"Isla. Who else?" Turner says.

"Dude!" Ash punches him in his shoulder. "Shut up."

“What?” Eyebrows pulled together, Turner scrutinizes him, then me. His jaw goes slack. “Wait, you didn’t know?”

My lungs constrict, making it hard to breathe. “Know what?”

Ash stands and looks me in the eye. “You heard Isla’s coach is moving to Boston, right?”

I nod, teeth clenched.

“Isla is going too. She said it’s—”

My stick hits the floor with a clatter, and I rush out of the locker room. My limbs tremble as I pace the hallway, my vision going spotty. A murderous energy swims beneath my skin. This is not fucking happening. No fucking way.

The sound of a slamming door halts me in my tracks. I snap my head toward it and lock eyes with Isla. She’s dressed in black leggings, a pink hoodie, and a black jacket. Her hair is still a bit wavy from last night, and it cascades around her shoulders.

“Hi,” she says quietly.

The single word is loud in the empty hall. It’s like a scream, sending goose bumps scattering all over my skin.

I stomp toward her, fury rolling through me. “Were you even going to tell me?”

She doesn’t step back when I get in her face. She frowns and grips the strap of her bag tighter.

“Were you?” I tower over her, my pulse hammering in my throat. “Didn’t you think I should know?”

“Wanna be more specific? If I know what you’re talking about, maybe I can answer your question.”

A short laugh escapes my lips. “Always so innocent.” I duck my head, glowering. “When were you going to tell me you’re moving to Boston? Once you were already there?”

Her mouth pops open, a soft huff leaving her. “What?”

“Are you going to deny it?” I clench my fists at my sides. “When I walked into the locker room, Ash and Turner were talking about you following your coach to Boston.”

“I’m not denying anything. I am moving to Boston. It’s what’s best for my career.” She skirts me and rushes to the door.

Fueled by anger, I dart after her and grab her elbow.

She yanks out of my grip and glares at me. “What do you want?”

“I am your best friend,” I bite out, “and you told me nothing.”

She lifts her chin. “Guess you know how I feel now, huh?”

My blood boils, but I press on. “Ash knew. Fucking Turner too, but not me.” Sienna’s words from last night flash in my head. “Are you and Turner together?”

She presses her hand to her forehead. “This is bullshit. Cade is just a friend.”

“Sienna said you two are dating. Considering he knew about your move and I didn’t, I’m starting to think she’s right.”

She purses her lips, her nostrils flaring. “Did she tell you that before or after your make-out session in the hallway?”

I rear back, breaking into a cold sweat, my body thrumming with an energy I’m not familiar with. “Were you spying on me?”

“No.” She throws her hands in the air. “I was worried about you. Wanted to make sure you were okay. I wouldn’t have bothered to check on you if I knew I’d stumble on you two kissing.”

Tears stream down her face in a way I haven’t seen since we were kids.

I take a step back, my heart lurching. “Isla…”

“Leave me alone.” Her voice rises an octave. “Never ever talk to me again. I hate you.”

She turns around and pulls the door open.

On instinct, I reach for her, catching nothing but air as she takes a step forward. Like she’s trying to put a wall between us, she tugs the door closed behind her in the hopes I won’t follow.

Except the heavy door slams on my hand before I can pull back.

The crack that follows sounds like a sound effect from a movie. It’s sharp and loud, and it echoes through the empty hallway. For a second, I don’t feel anything. Then, the pain hits, white-hot and pulsing, crawling up my arm like fire.

“Fuck.” I cradle my right hand with my left, clenching my jaw. “Fuck!”

She flies back through the door, eyes wide, mouth agape. “Oh my God! Michael…I didn’t see…”

“I know,” I grit through my teeth.

She was facing forward. She had no clue I was trying to stop her.

“Michael, I’m—”

“Just go,” I growl. “I’ll ice it. It’ll be fine.”

She clutches the strap of her bag, her knuckles going white. “But maybe you need—”

“I said go,” I snap. “Don’t bother pretending to care about me.”

Her eyes fill with tears. “I do care.”

“It doesn’t matter anymore. Leave.” I turn around and stomp back to the locker room, still cradling my hand. “I have practice in a few minutes.”

“I care about you. What you said isn’t true. Not true!” she cries, her voice shaky. “Not true!”

Without looking back, I step into the locker room.

Her words, *not true* in that heartbroken tone, play over and over in my mind.

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CHAPTER FIFTEEN

ice queen

MICHAEL

Sixteen years old

"DOES IT HURT?" SIENNA ASKS, TRAILING HER FINGERTIPS OVER MY CAST.

"It's tolerable," I grumble, pulling away.

After the whole ordeal with Isla, I put on my gear for practice but could barely hold my stick. Coach forced me to show him my hand and then called my dad. Dad was there twenty minutes later, and he took me to the hospital for X-rays. I fractured the fourth metacarpal. The doctor called it a clean break. That's a fucking joke. As if it being clean would hurt less.

"How long do you have to wear a cast?"

"Six weeks. It could be another four weeks after that before I'm cleared to play again." Six to ten weeks. No hockey. No practice. No scouts.

"Aww, I'm so sorry. I can't believe Isla smashed your hand in the door like that. I never would've thought she could be so vile."

I frown. "What are you talking about? She didn't do it on purpose. She didn't know what was happening. Didn't even know I was there."

A crease forms between Sienna's brows. "Really? Everyone's saying you two had an argument because of our kiss, and she did it to hurt you."

Damn. Rumors travel fast, and this one is a load of crap.

"Not that it's anyone's business, but it's not her fault," I grit. Face lifted, I scan the courtyard. Where the fuck is Ash? Lunch started ten minutes ago.

“Hey.” Turner appears, voice hoarse, a deep frown etched onto his face. “Can we talk?”

Sienna touches my arm again. “Do you want me to leave?”

I stare at her, stunned she even has to ask.

I missed school yesterday. Dad got me in with a sports medicine doctor quickly, hoping to get the fracture healed right away. Today, the second I showed up, I sought out Sienna and told her we aren’t dating. I said it clearly. Twice.

So why the hell is she still glued to my side? She’s acting like if she stays close enough for long enough, I’ll magically change my mind.

Fuck that.

I drag a hand through my hair, irritation pulsing under my skin. “I already told you, we’re not together.”

Her smile doesn’t even flicker. “That’s not what I asked.”

That’s exactly the problem. She keeps asking the wrong questions, hoping I’ll give her the answer she wants.

I eye Turner and then nod to her. “Yeah, I want you to leave.”

She pushes out her bottom lip in a ridiculous pout, but then she stands and walks away. “See you in class.”

Turner sits across from me. His posture is tense, one balled fist resting on the table.

“Are you gonna talk, or are we going to stare at each other?”

“I’m sorry about your hand.” He sighs. “Injuries suck, and without you, wins are gonna be a lot tougher.”

“Thanks.”

“I wanted to clear the air. We may not get along, but I don’t want animosity to grow between us and affect the team.” He shifts his weight, grimacing slightly. “I shouldn’t have told you about Isla’s move to Boston. It wasn’t my place; it wasn’t Ash’s either. She deserved to tell you herself.”

I grind my teeth, my jaw cracking. “She had plenty of chances. She didn’t care to tell me.”

“I don’t think that’s true,” he says quietly. “She’s your best friend.”

A sharp pain slices through my chest. “Was. She *was* my best friend.”

He frowns. “Have you even talked to her? She was beside herself with worry after what happened to your hand.”

“Why would I?” I deadpan. “She told me to never talk to her again, so I’m giving her exactly what she wants.”

He hesitates. “I really don’t think she meant—”

“I don’t care what she meant,” I growl. “Look, she made her choice. She chose her career. She’s moving to Boston. Good for her. She’s…she’s nothing to me now.”

The words hang between us, heavy and so untrue.

He studies me for a moment, and what I swear is pity flickers in his eyes. “Right,” he finally says, standing. “Anyway…thanks for hearing me out.”

When he’s gone, I sit for a few more moments, focusing on breathing evenly. Then, with a grumble, I throw my backpack over my shoulder and stand as well. This day can’t be over soon enough.

MOM PLOPS down beside me and stares at the side of my face.

Blowing out a breath, I pause the video I’m watching and turn to her.

“How’s your hand?” she asks.

Before I can answer, my sister comes into the room, her deep brown eyes narrowed on me, her lips pursed. “Can you please tell him not to be an ass to me?” She crosses her arms over her chest. “I’m tired of being snapped at for no reason. He acts like he’s dying when all he did was break his hand.”

The fucking audacity.

Mom looks from her to me, eyebrows arched, looking absolutely unimpressed. “Have anything to say to that?”

I lift my head to glare at my sister, only to find she’s gone.

“She’s been watching her stupid cartoons at a diabolical volume. I told her to turn it down. Twice.”

“You could’ve gone to your room.”

I grunt. “I want to stay here.”

With a sigh, she shifts so she’s facing me. “I understand your hand hurts. I understand your mood is shit, and you’re angry. I’m here for you. Your dad and Meg too. For anything you need except outbursts. It’s a mild injury. You’re lucky, really. You’ll recover completely and be playing again by February.”

“I’ll miss most of the season. And the scouts. My whole life has been put on pause because of this stupid fucking hand.” I toss my phone aside, gritting my teeth.

“Language, Michael.”

“Boo-hoo,” I retort. “He dared to use a curse word.”

Jaw clenched, Mom pulls her shoulders back. “Go to your room. Now.”

“Whatever.” I stand from the couch with a groan.

As I walk away, her phone rings, and Aunt Bella’s name appears on the screen. The accompanying picture is one of her and Isla.

My feet get heavy, my body weighed down. I didn’t see her at school today, and honestly, I prefer to keep it that way. The sooner she leaves, the better.

She’s no one. At least, that’s what I tell myself as I climb the stairs.

If only I could believe it.

December

I HAD to suffer through a week of school, a week of questions about my hand, a week of stupid comments from everyone before Thanksgiving break. Blessedly, my family dropped the subject, so no one forced me to talk about what happened. No one forced me to go anywhere I didn’t want to go.

But the break is over, and even though I don’t want to be here, I don’t have a choice.

As we walk down the hallway, Asher talks nonstop about last night’s practice that I spent sitting in the stands. As desperate as I am for him to shut up, I search the hall, looking for something else to focus on.

That something else ends up being Isla as she hurries past me. My gaze flies to her of its own accord, cataloging the white shirt and black skirt paired with polka-dot tights and her favorite Uggs.

I purse my lips, inwardly cursing myself for still looking for her, for still paying attention.

She is no one.

With a shake of my head, I focus on Asher again. Listening to him yammer on about practice has to be better than thinking about Isla.

At the end of History class, as we're packing up, my phone buzzes with a new message. So does everyone else's. All around me, classmates are unlocking their phones and checking their notifications.

I do the same, finding a new video in the school chat.

The scene on the screen pins me to the spot.

"Hey, Ice Queen." A football player blocks Isla's path. I don't remember the guy's name, but I do remember the clothes Isla is wearing in the video. The white shirt and black skirt. This was filmed today.

She pulls up short and cranes her neck. Her body is tense and so damn tiny compared to his.

"We didn't think it was right that you don't have your crown."

A group of kids bursts into laughter nearby. Some are even clapping.

The asshole pulls out a shitty-looking plastic tiara with paper plastered to the front. "Let me put it on your head."

He reaches for her, but she slaps his hand away.

"Don't you dare."

Her voice is loud and clear, even through the speaker of my phone. It sends a chill down my spine.

Another guy from the football team approaches her from behind, blocking the view of the camera and locking her between himself and his friend.

My muscles lock, and my body temperature ratchets up.

What the fuck?

"Dixon and Murphy are doing it for you," Sienna says, peering over my shoulder.

I whip around and find her smiling at me.

"The whole school is on your side. They're all upset about losing the team's best player for most of the season."

"I didn't ask for this," I mutter, my hands shaking. "I told you it was an accident."

Sienna shrugs. "I know that, but I guess not everyone believes it."

"Dude, what the hell?" Ash stands and stalks toward me; his voice sounds strained. His jaw tightens, like this hits close to home. He might be a jokester most of the time, but he fucking hates anyone who targets people

who can't fight back. "They're bullying her. What are we gonna do about it?"

I chew on my bottom lip, anger and frustration filling me to the brim. "Let's go. This needs to fucking stop."

WHEN I FIND Dixon and Murphy sitting on the bench in the locker room, laughing at their phones, something inside me snaps, and I barrel toward them.

Ash jogs ahead and throws an arm out, blocking me. "You shouldn't get into this with a cast—"

"I'm not fighting," I say, stepping around him.

Dixon looks up first, his grin melting away quickly. "Yo, Thompson. Rough week, huh?"

"Delete. The. Fucking. Video," I hiss.

Murphy snorts. "Relax, man. It's a joke."

"In what universe?" Ash snaps. "You guys are twice her size, and you were threatening her."

"Come on. It's not like she didn't deserve it," Dixon argues.

I step into his space, towering over him so he has to tilt his head back to hold my gaze.

"You come anywhere near her, post anything about her again—mention her name, talk to her, look in her direction, even fucking breathe in her vicinity—and I'll go to Coach Zabicki and then to the principal." I look from Dixon to Murphy. "I'll show them the video, including the part where you laugh while she's crying."

All the color drains from Murphy's face, and Dixon's mouth drops open.

"And I promise you," I add softly, "if you do more than walk by her in the hall or sit in the same class, I'll make sure you don't play football next season. At least, not at this school."

Murphy swallows. "You're bluffing."

"You wanna test that?" I snort. "My dad has a lot of connections, but Isla's dad could fucking destroy your NFL dreams with a snap of his fingers."

Murphy blinks rapidly while Dixon wipes his hands on his jeans. It's like the idiots forgot all about Xander Walker when they chose to mess with his kid.

"I-I wasn't the one who filmed it," Dixon mutters.

"But you posted it." Ash steps up beside me. "Sent it to the school chat for everyone to see."

"You know what?" I point at them in turn with my broken hand. "I'm gonna add a few more rules. You delete that video from your phone and from the chat. You find the person who recorded it and make sure they delete it. Then, you're gonna make sure no one fucking dares to mess with her again. Am I clear?"

Murphy rubs the back of his neck. "Uh, y-yeah. We'll do that."

"Yeah." Dixon pulls his phone out of his pocket, taps a few times, then shows it to me. "It's gone. I know who sent it to me, so I'll talk to him, make him delete it."

"Okay." I step back, giving them space. "Glad we understand each other."

"We better go," Murphy mutters, standing.

Dixon joins him, eyeing me, chewing on his cheek. "You're not gonna say anything to her dad, right?"

"Not if you do what I told you."

He nods, and then they're gone, rushing away.

After the door shuts behind them, I slump onto the bench and stare at the row of lockers ahead of me. I'm angry with Isla, and I'm nowhere near forgetting what happened, but that video fucking ruined me. She didn't deserve to be ridiculed like that.

"You gonna tell her you did this?" Ash drops beside me, elbows on his knees.

"No. We're done. Whatever we had is over."

He lets out a humorless laugh. "You say that like you're trying to convince yourself, not me."

"I'm not." I dig my fingers into the edge of my cast, roughly scratching at my skin. "I don't owe her anything."

"But you still care." He nudges my shoulder. "You wouldn't have snapped like that if you didn't."

My chest constricts, almost suffocating me. I stand abruptly. "I don't care about her. I just didn't want those idiots bullying her. No one deserves

that.”

He snorts, slapping his thighs. “You’re a terrible liar.”

“Fuck you,” I spit, storming out.

It’s been a long fucking day.

MY LAPTOP IS PERCHED on my bed, *Blue Lock* playing. Isla got me into anime a long time ago. I may have acted like I only watched it with her because I was a good friend, but, in reality, I like it too. This one is particularly good at distracting me from all the gloomy thoughts swirling inside my head.

Another practice spent sitting in the stands, and I’m still fuming over the stupid assholes at school and that video. Dammit.

When a knock sounds on my door, I hit pause. “Come in.”

The door creaks open, and Mom pokes her head in. “Hey.” She scans the room, homing in on me. “Can we talk for a moment?”

I shrug. “Sure.”

Quietly, she pads into the room and perches on the edge of the bed. “I know you still aren’t talking to Isla, but I thought you should know…”

My heart stutters. Know what? Shit. Are kids still fucking with her? Do I need to hunt down Murphy and Dixon?

I dig my fingernails into my palm as I ball my good hand into a fist.

“She fell during practice today. Took a hard hit. Bella said it’s a mild concussion, and she won’t be at school until after winter break.”

I slip my fingers into my hair and tug at the roots.

She darts a look at my hand and then looks back at me. “I thought… maybe you’d want to reach out. You two have been practically inseparable your whole lives. She might need—”

I cut her off. “She doesn’t need me.” My throat is closing, my voice rough. “She made that pretty clear.”

Mom’s expression turns heartbroken. “Is that really what you think?”

Yes. No. I don’t know.

Regardless, the way my stomach hardens every time I think about her is unbearable, so I shrug. “If she needs a best friend, she can get a new one. In Boston.” I flash Mom a fake-ass smile. “I’m good.”

Her eyes soften, and it’s another hit to the chest. “You’re hurting,” she says quietly. “And she’s hurting too.”

“I’m not hurting,” I snap. “I’m finally making the right call.”

For a long moment, she watches me, sadness radiating from her. Then, she stands. “Okay. If that’s what you believe.” She pauses at the door. “But you’re making a mistake, Michael.”

With that, she leaves, closing the door silently behind her.

I sit in the quiet for a moment, wishing I could turn off my brain. Then, I hit play on my laptop and turn up the volume to drown out the stupid ringing in my ears.

But it doesn’t work.

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CHAPTER SIXTEEN

no one deserves to be alone on their birthday

ISLA

Sixteen years old

My room is dark, but it's better this way. Bright lights still make my head throb. Lying on my back, I stare at the ceiling. I still can't wrap my head around how drastically my life has changed in the past few months.

I don't think I'll ever be the same. At least I'm headed to Boston; I can leave the old behind, walk away from the things that no longer serve me, forget about all my hurt and doubt.

Put Michael out of my mind.

Eyes closed, I turn onto my right side. The last three weeks have been hell. The way Michael snapped at me when he found out I'm leaving. His annoyance when I mentioned I saw him and Sienna kissing in the hall. Then, there's his broken hand.

I just wanted him to leave me alone, to stop hurting me with his cruel words… I yanked the door shut behind me to put some distance between us. I didn't see him reaching for me. He knows I didn't do it on purpose, but how could he think I don't care that he's hurting? How could he completely shut me out of his life?

It broke me.

I cried so hard that day. I've cried every day since. How could he really believe I don't care about him? And does he not want to be friends anymore simply because I'm leaving?

On top of all that, each whisper behind my back, each laugh and mockery to my face, is like a little cut, the pain of each one building on the last. And that stupid nickname? It never used to bother me. Now, it hits me in the solar plexus each time it's hurled. Then, there's the terrible tiara those two assholes put on my head and the video they posted to the school chat.

Queen of ice and fake tears. The life of a nepo baby has never been more horrible.

The insinuation I've only made it to where I am in my skating career because of who my dad is hurt me more than any of their other jabs.

They tried to strip me of all my achievements, of everything I've worked so hard for.

Is my dad a famous retired pro athlete? Yes, but his name holds no weight in the world of figure skating. His reputation is nothing when we're talking about international championships. He may be a big deal in the US, but most people around the world don't follow the NFL. I love my dad, and I'm immensely proud of his career and his legacy, but when I step onto the ice in pain, fighting dizziness and headaches, religiously sticking to a strict diet and barely socializing, it has nothing to do with him.

"*Must be nice to have everything handed to you on a silver plate*," a girl I've never spoken to before told me. Then, she proceeded to blame me for ruining the hockey team's season. Never mind that Michael's dad is also a famous athlete, one who played the same sport as his son. He's in the Hockey Hall of Fame, for fuck's sake, yet I'm the only one being called a nepo baby, the one being accused of using my dad's fame to my benefit.

Groaning, I sit up and eye my laptop. During Thanksgiving break, I started watching *Demon Slayer: Kimetsu no Yaiba*. I'm itching to dive back into the fictional world and lose myself in the story, but it's only been three days since I fell and ended up with a mild concussion. The doctor said no screen time, and my parents are strictly enforcing that rule.

No doomscrolling. No watching movies. No playing games. And no ice.

The last one makes my heart ache.

On the ice is the only place I can push thoughts of Michael away and feel like myself again. This bed-rotting is boring. It makes me want to scratch my eyes out.

Luckily, winter break starts soon, but even before that, I'm headed to Boston. I don't have to go back to that school again except to empty my locker. I'm saved from having to face any of those terrible people again.

“Isla?” My brother’s voice rips me out of my thoughts.

“Yeah.”

Ian opens the door and pauses at the threshold. “Can I turn on the light?”

“Sure.” I shield my eyes with my palm, knowing if I don’t, my head will start pounding again.

The room brightens, but he continues hovering in the doorway, shifting on his feet.

“What’s wrong?”

He glances to his right. “Meg’s here.”

My heart stumbles over itself. I love Meghan like a little sister, but she’s also a direct link to Michael, and any mention of him feels like a stab in my chest.

“We wanted to come and check on you.” He stuffs his hands into the pockets of his sweatpants. “No one deserves to be alone on their birthday.”

The urge to burst into tears again threatens. I had so many plans for my sixteenth birthday. But after Michael kissed Sienna, I couldn’t bring myself to follow through on any of them. Anytime Mom asked what I wanted to do to celebrate, I told her I need more time. Now, I’m thankful I didn’t plan anything, because even if I weren’t recovering from a concussion, no one would’ve come.

“Come on in,” I murmur quietly. “Meg, you too.”

Smiling, Ian grabs Meg’s hand and pulls her into the room. They stop in the middle of the space, like they’re not sure how close to get, but when I beckon them to join me on my bed, they bound over together. My brother sits to my left while Meg plops down in front of me.

“How do you feel?” She tilts her head, assessing me. Her deep brown eyes tear a hole in my chest. They look just like her brother’s, like the eyes of the person I once trusted more than anyone. That thought sends a shiver down my spine.

“I’m fine, at least as fine as I can be with a mild concussion.”

She pats my hand affectionately, her dark brown hair falling in her face. “First, Michael’s hand, now you. It’s like there’s a cloud of bad luck looming.”

“Uh-huh, but it’s not the end of the world,” I tell her, trying to remind myself it really isn’t, whether Michael and I are friends or not. “Even though it sort of feels like it.”

She throws her head back and laughs. “My big brother is definitely acting like it’s the end of the world.” Her smile fades a little, and she fiddles with the hem of her shirt. “Yesterday, he was working on a school project with Ash and some blonde from his class. I swear, it was the first time he wasn’t grumpy in weeks. He even joked. That girl, though…ugh.” Meg wrinkles her nose. “She smelled like caramel. Too much of it. Like she wanted everyone to notice.”

A wave of pain rolls through me, and it has nothing to do with my concussion. So Sienna is still around. I shouldn’t be surprised, but hearing it knocks the air out of me anyway. A slow stiffness spreads through my muscles. I rest my head against the headboard and breathe deeply, forcing my shoulders to loosen. It shouldn’t matter. What he does, who he spends time with—it’s none of my concern.

But the truth is, knowing she’s still in his life…stings.

“Your brother lives and breathes hockey, so it’s understandable that he’s upset.”

“I know, but he doesn’t need to be an ass to the people who love him.” Meg pouts.

“Sorry. Hope he cheers up soon.” I grasp Ian’s shoulder and pull him to my side. “Why are you so quiet? Are you hiding something from me?”

His eyes go wide, and he blurts, “Mom and Dad are preparing a little surprise for you.”

“Ian!” Meg yelps. “Aunt Bella told us not to say anything!”

I let out a laugh. “That’s why I love you.” I meet my brother’s gaze. While I look like our mom, he looks like a child version of our dad. “Your inability to keep a secret never ceases to amaze me.”

“I wanted to cheer you up.” He frowns. “I don’t like it when you’re upset or when you shut yourself up in your room like you have been.”

“Once I’m better, I’ll come out more. I promise.”

“Kids! Ian, Meg? Where are you?” Mom calls from downstairs.

“With Isla,” my brother yells.

“We’re waiting for you. Come downstairs,” Dad adds, sounding cheerful.

With a sigh, I climb off my bed. Ian and Meg stand and take my hands, leading me downstairs.

“Did Michael wish you a happy birthday?” Meg asks.

Disappointment and defeat hit me like punches. No. I hoped he would, but no.

But when I see the hope in her eyes, all I can do is nod.

“I’m glad. If not, I was gonna whoop his ass when I got home.”

I giggle. “I’d have paid a lot of money to see you do it.”

“Once you’re feeling better, you should come over. I’ll do it just for you.”

“Um, maybe after winter break.” I smile at her despite the pang in my chest. My move to Boston is coming up quickly, and with each passing day, my anxiety grows. So instead of explaining that’s not possible, I go with a little white lie.

“Deal.” She pulls on my hand. “Come on. You’re gonna love this.”

Shaking my head, I smile and follow her and Ian into the kitchen. With any luck, spending time with my family will help clear my head of the lingering thoughts in my mind.

“YOU’RE GONNA WAIT HERE, RIGHT?” I ask Mom as I push open the passenger door. “I won’t be long.”

“I’ll park and wait in the car. Don’t worry, take your time.”

Swallowing past the trepidation crawling up my throat, I close the car door and head toward the school building. Today is one of those California winter days that can’t decide what it wants to be. The sky is dotted with low gray clouds, yet here and there sunlight peeks through, warming the air. I left my jacket in the back seat and don’t regret it. Even in only my pink hoodie, I don’t feel cold.

In fact, I’m sweating a little, no doubt from nerves.

We leave for Boston tomorrow morning. Dad hired a moving company to deliver most of my things, so they’ll be waiting at my grandparents’ house when I get there. My suitcase and backpack are already packed.

On the surface, I’m ready to leave.

Deep down? I’m a mess. That’s why I’m here. I don’t want to leave without saying goodbye, at least not to the few people who were kind to me. Cade and Asher. And maybe, just maybe, if I see Michael, he will hear me out too.

I open the doors and step inside. Instantly, the whispering starts. Ignoring it, I hold my head high and stride toward the library, where Cade said he'd be. He apologized for telling Michael I was leaving, but honestly, he didn't need to. I distanced myself from my best friend, and that's what led to me hiding things from him.

Cade said he apologized to Michael too. Apparently, Michael told him he and I were no longer friends.

I push away the thought and the hurt that comes with it. With a deep breath, I lower myself onto the stool beside Cade. "Hey."

He turns to me, his lips stretching into a big smile. "Hi. Is this why you asked where I was?"

I nod. "How are you? Ready for winter break?"

"I'm good." He closes his textbook and shifts so he's facing me. "And I can't wait for winter break to start. I'm tired of this place and these people. Half of them suck, and the other half are just meh."

Despite myself, I laugh. "You have impossibly high standards."

"Maybe, but I blame you for that. You're a good friend…" He trails off, tapping his fingers on the table. "How are you?"

"I'm good." I take a deep breath. "I'm here to say thank you for being my friend. For standing up for me, for supporting me. It means way more than you realize."

He frowns, searching my face. "Are you here to say goodbye?"

"Yeah. My flight leaves tomorrow morning." I lean in and wrap my arm around his shoulders. "Thank you, Cade. Your friendship means the world to me." Before he can respond or hug me back, I pop up and back away. "Well, I gotta go. I have one more person to thank before I leave."

He jumps to his feet. "Isla, don't leave like that. Let's meet up after school. Please."

A lump rises in my throat, and I swallow thickly. "I can't. There's still so much to do." I suck in a breath, my chest caving in. "But we'll stay in touch."

"Promise?"

"Yeah." I take another step back and wave. "Bye, Cade."

I turn on my heel and head out of the library, digging my phone out of my pocket. According to Ash's text, he's waiting for me near our History class.

When I find him, he’s standing with his back pressed to the wall, his eyes glued to his phone. The small smile that lifts his lips warms my insides. He might be a jokester, a bit unserious when he needs to be, but he’s always been a great friend, no matter what.

“Hey, Ash.” I stop in front of him.

“Isla baby.” He pushes himself off the wall and hauls me in for a hug. “Glad you’re back. I missed you.”

“I missed you too,” I murmur, putting a little space between us. “How are you?”

“Good. Counting down the days to winter break. I need some time away from this place.”

I give him a small smile. “I get it.”

He ducks his head so we’re eye to eye. “How are you? How is your concussion?”

“Everything’s fine.” I lower my focus to my hands, a wave of anxiety washing over me, and pick at my nails. “I wanted to say thank you. Thank you for cheering me up, for sticking by me at the ball when I…” I trail off, the words too hard to get out. Tears prick at the backs of my eyes, but I blink them away. “Thank you for being my friend.”

He steps in close, his expression serious. “Why does it feel like you’re saying goodbye?”

My heart pounds against my sternum, my words a whisper. “Because I am.”

“You’re leaving for Boston? I thought you’d wait till the school year was over.”

“Yeah, we’re leaving tomorrow.” I look up, finding his green eyes locked on me.

“Does Michael know?”

“No.”

“But—”

I step forward and wrap my arms around his torso, cutting him off. “Thank you for everything. I’ll never forget you.”

He sighs, winding his hands around me and squeezing hard. “I’ll never forget you, sweet Isla.” He releases me. “Thank you for not leaving without saying goodbye.”

“I’d never do that to you.” I take a step back, slipping my hands into the pockets of my jeans. “Bye.”

Steps slow and measured, I head toward the exit. The whispers and giggles no longer bother me, like I've put a wall between myself and all these people, making it impossible for them to hurt me. A few more minutes, and I'll be out of this school for good.

"Wow. Didn't expect to see you here." Sienna steps into my path, chin lifted, eyes sharp.

Her smug smile grates on my nerves, just like her sugary sweet voice.

"What do you want?"

"Nothing. I want nothing from you," she quips.

She glances at the doors to the courtyard, and I follow her line of sight.

Outside, Michael sits at a table, a lazy grin on his lips. His hair is a mess, as always. He's surrounded by his usual crowd—the guys from the hockey team, a few cheerleaders. A pretty boy in his natural habitat.

"I'm surprised you recovered so quickly." Sienna tilts her head, giving me a fake smile.

"I'm fine."

I step to my left, but before I can pass her, she shifts with me, blocking the way again.

"That's good. You scared people, you know? One second, you're skating like you always do, and the next—*bam*." She grimaces. "Flat on the ice. Just hearing about it made my heart stop. I mean…" She lowers her voice, leaning in. "For someone aiming for the Olympics, that was a pretty clumsy fall, don't you think?"

A wave of nausea hits me. I press a hand to my stomach. "I slipped."

"Of course. It happens…to some people." She lifts a shoulder in a half shrug. "I thought you were steadier than that, especially with all the private training your dad pays for. But I guess stress can get to anyone."

Heat crawls up the back of my neck, hot energy swimming inside my veins. The dig at my dad pisses me off. "I'm doing my best. Falls happen."

"Of course." She pats my hand patronizingly. "Don't overthink it. I'm sure it's the pressure. The expectations. Not everyone handles that well. Sometimes, stress makes us lose focus. Or balance."

My heart thrashes inside my chest. Her words hit too close to home.

Rather than let her see how she's affecting me, I pull my shoulders back. "Was there something you wanted?"

"Oh. Not really." She taps her finger against her lip thoughtfully. "I wanted to check on you. I thought Michael would've at least asked if you

were okay. But I guess…” She trails off, leaning closer. “You two don’t talk anymore, huh?”

I clench my jaw. “He’s busy.”

“Yeah, sure.” She smiles again. “Busy with school. Busy with his friends. Busy not defending you when that video was circulating.” She clicks her tongue. “I thought he would’ve said something to those guys, but he didn’t. He didn’t even look upset when he saw it.”

Icy sweat trickles down my spine. I haven’t talked to him since before that day, but the video was sent to the whole school, so there’s zero chance he didn’t see it. I fell later that day and ended up with a concussion, so I haven’t been to school since, but what she’s saying can’t be true. Right? He would’ve said something, wouldn’t he?

“Anyway, I’m glad you’re okay. Just be careful when you’re on the ice. People can be vile when it comes to revenge. Next time, it could be much worse.”

Frowning, I study her face, trying to make sense of her words. What is she talking about? I was too deep in my head, too distracted that day. That’s why I fell. Elena saw it too.

Doubts creep into my head, my mouth going dry. No. She’s bluffing. No one would hurt me on purpose like that.

Right?

Or would they? Lately, I find myself surrounded by people talking shit about me. Then, there are the assholes who cornered me and put a tiara on my head. And Michael, who’s been ignoring me for weeks, as if I mean nothing to him.

I sneak a peek at him. He’s relaxed. Composed. Like he doesn’t have a care in the world. My heart cracks even more, pain shooting through me.

Blinking, I center myself. This place, these people, it’s all just noise. I’m leaving this city. I’m leaving all of them behind. There’s a new life waiting for me in Boston. I’ll be happy there.

“You know what, Sienna?” I square my shoulders and step into her. “I will be back on the ice in a few weeks, and I will continue striving, breaking records, and hitting my goals while you will always be mediocre. Good luck with never being the best, with always being talentless.”

I push past her, leaving her gawking at me. I won’t check on Michael again. It’s time to move on from our friendship the way he has.

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CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

she's gone

MICHAEL

Sixteen years old

"MICHAEL, HEY." SIENNA LEANS AGAINST THE LOCKER NEXT TO MINE. "How was Michigan?"

The caramel scent I finally started to get used to while we were working together on a project for English class hits me, and my stomach quivers. Looks like the time away wiped out my tolerance. It's too sweet, too heavy, and just too much.

Or is it only bothering me because I'm in a shitty mood? Because I'm letting my anger control me?

Sienna and I aren't dating. She knows it, but she is constantly glued to my side. Ash thinks I should take her out once, break things off after, and be done with it. But that feels wrong. Cheap.

I don't want to date a girl I feel nothing for.

I grew up surrounded by adults who actually love each other. Like, real love. My parents. Their friends. Everyone in that circle is still obsessed with their spouse, even after decades. Hugs, kisses, all that lovey-dovey stuff, annoying inside jokes—whatever.

Even though I'm not looking for that right now, I know one thing for sure: it can't be forced. One day, I want to find a girl who really gets me, a girl I can talk to for hours or say nothing to and still feel understood.

With Sienna? None of that exists. Nothing about us feels right.

I already wasted my first kiss on her. I'm not wasting my first relationship too.

"How was your trip? Did you stay with your mom's parents or with your dad's?"

I push all thoughts of relationships out of my mind and slam my locker shut. "Erm, the trip was good. We spent time with both sides of our family. We even went to the game, and now I have Ahonen's jersey, thanks to my dad."

"Must be nice to have a dad who can open any door like that." She pushes herself away from the locker. "Let's walk to class while you tell me more."

"Um, sure."

I drag my feet as we move down the hallway. After winter break, almost everyone is in a decent mood. Not that any of us really want to be at school, but it's nice to see friends, I guess. The energy is contagious, thrumming through my body in a steady rhythm. Within minutes, I'm walking taller, nodding as friends greet me, smiling at the girls who make flirty eyes at me.

But then, I see Turner.

When he closes his locker and notices me, the smile slips from my face.

Jaw clenched, he jerks his head, turns on his heel, and trudges away. Damn. What's gotten into him? I thought we'd moved past this shit.

That's another thing I'll need to think about before practice today. Rather than a cast, I've been wearing a black wrist brace. My hand still aches when I flex it, so my grip on the stick feels wrong, almost foreign. But I need to get back on the ice. Thank God the doctor gave me the green light to start skating and practicing light stickhandling.

By science class at the end of the day, I'm buzzing. I can't wait to leave this place and go home, then to the rink.

"Hey," I call out to Ash as he enters the classroom. "Do you need a ride home?"

Since my family was out of town, he and I have barely seen each other since before the holidays.

Smirking, he splays his hands across my desk and leans forward. “You really wanna give me a ride home?”

“Yeah, why not?” I shrug. “Figured we can catch up. We didn’t have a chance to talk today.”

“That’s because Sienna has glued herself to your side, and I’m not a fan of third-wheeling.” He glances around. “Where is she, by the way?”

Annoyance flares to life in my veins. “I’m not dating her, and you’re perfectly aware she isn’t in this class.”

The smile he gives me lacks any humor. “Really? It seems like you are. She’s always by your side. And for all I know, she adjusted her schedule so she could be here with you.”

I knock on the desk three times. “Don’t jinx it.”

“You’re weird.” He shakes his head and then slumps into the chair next to mine. “Tell her to get lost.”

“I did,” I groan. “She says she just wants to be friends.”

“You don’t need a friend like her.” He takes his textbook from his backpack and scans the room. “Kind of weird to be back.”

“Yeah. I thought so too.” I glance at my phone and then at my textbook. I’ve seen Turner four times today, but I haven’t seen Isla once. Maybe Ash has. “Have you seen Isla? I wanted to make sure no one’s messing with her, that Dixon and Murphy kept their word.”

“Um, n-no. I haven’t,” Ash mumbles, the tips of his ears reddening. “I don’t think she’s—”

“Hello, class.” Mr. Coleman steps into the classroom, closing the door behind him.

Ash leans over. “Mom is picking me up, by the way. But thanks for the offer.”

“Okay.” I nod and open my textbook.

I do my best to pay attention, but while Mr. Coleman lectures, one question keeps bugging me: where is Isla?

LAUGHTER ECHOES off the walls as I step into the house. I take off my shoes and head into the living room, where Meg sits on the couch, controller in

hand, eyes glued to the screen. I smile. She's completely focused on playing *Cuphead*, the tip of her tongue poking out of her mouth and everything.

"Are you going to help me or not?"

Confused about who she's talking to, I pad into the room. Only then do I notice Ian. He's on the floor, a throw pillow under his head, a second controller in his hands.

"I'm doing my best. Why are we even playing this game?"

Meg rolls her eyes. "Because it's been three months, and we're still stuck."

"That's because you two suck," I say.

Meg's controller goes flying, and she lets out a shriek.

I catch it and straighten my back, grinning. My reflexes are still good, and it's fucking fantastic.

My sister jumps off the couch and swivels, her chest rising and falling rapidly. "Michael!"

"Yeah, dude, not cool," Ian mutters.

Game Over flashes on the screen, and I wince.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to scare you." I hold out the controller.

Meg takes it; with her eyes still on me, she puts it down. Then, she turns to Ian. "Do you want something to drink?"

"Apple juice."

"Okay." She wanders into the kitchen, leaving Ian and me alone.

Now that it's just the two of us, I work up the nerve to ask him about Isla.

I clear my throat. "How was your winter break?"

"Awesome." He sits up and drops the controller to the rug. "We had a great time in Boston."

Yeah, I heard Mom telling Dad the Walker family was in Boston for break.

"Cool." I tip my head to my shoulder. "Do you know why your sister skipped school today?"

Ian frowns, his fuller bottom lip protruding. If he were bigger and had tattoos, he'd look exactly like his dad. "Um, she didn't."

I clutch the back of the couch and lean forward. "But I didn't see her at school."

He rubs the back of his neck. "No surprise there. She goes to school in Boston now."

My stomach plummets, a wide cavern opening inside me. I cuff my neck and rub at my throat. “What?”

“You’re her best friend. How did you not know she was moving to Boston? Do you not talk to Isla at all?”

“I knew that was the plan,” I rasp, my lungs burning. “I just didn’t think it would happen before the school year ended.”

“She’s mostly settled in and practicing twice a day. Where have you been?” Ian eyes me as if I have two heads. “I’ll go find Meg.”

He hops up and scurries out of the room while I stand rooted to the spot. A shudder runs through me, my body growing cold.

This is a joke, right?

But no, it’s the truth.

She’s gone, and she left without saying a single damn word to me.

My stomach twists hard enough that I almost double over, and the floor tilts beneath me.

In a trancelike state, I climb the stairs and shuffle to my room. I drop my backpack on the floor and plop down on my bed. Leaning to one side, I yank my phone out of my pocket. I find her contact, my finger hovering over the Phone icon. Instead, I quit the app, tap the Messenger icon, and our text thread opens.

The last message is from her, and it’s from several weeks ago. She apologized and begged me to talk to her after I broke my hand. To no one’s surprise, I ignored it. Before that are the texts I sent her after she called me out for not telling her about kissing Sienna. A little farther up is a message from her wishing me a happy birthday. As I take in the line of emojis she used, adrenaline rushes through my veins, spreading through my whole body.

Muscles quivering, I fall back on the bed. I forgot about her birthday. Her sixteenth birthday. I didn’t even send a stupid happy birthday gif.

I force myself to breathe, but every inhale burns.

Did she have a birthday dinner? Some kind of celebration? She’d been planning her sweet sixteen since we were eleven. She had lists, mood boards, color schemes. She talked about it nonstop every fall.

When we made that pact a couple of years ago, I planned to kiss her on her birthday for the first time. I thought about it for months and months. Yet, when the time came, I was angry and hurt and caught up in my own shit. I forgot all about her.

I snap up straight, and my fingers tremble as I type out a message.

ME:

Why didn't you

Delete.

ME:

When were you

Delete.

ME:

Did you

I stop typing and lock my phone. What am I even doing? This is fucking bullshit.

She left.

She left, and she didn't say goodbye.

She left, and she didn't tell me.

She could've easily sent me a text. I'm not the only one to blame here.

Ash knew. He had to. And he was going to tell me, but then Mr. Coleman walked into the classroom. It's why Ash had his mom pick him up. He didn't want to be the one to tell me.

And Turner? With the way he reacted today, he has to know too.

She said goodbye to both of them, but not me.

I grip my phone so hard, my knuckles turn white. A hot, ugly feeling claws up my throat—hurt, anger, embarrassment, all of it choking me.

"Stupid," I mutter, smacking my forehead with my palm. "I'm such a stupid fucking idiot."

Here I am, panicking because I forgot her birthday, while she didn't even bother to say goodbye to me.

That's enough evidence alone. She's done with me and our friendship. She was done long before I even realized something was wrong. It all started when I didn't tell her about that stupid dare, when she found out about it but decided not to come out and ask me.

My chest squeezes so tight, I swear, my ribs are cracking.

I stand abruptly and toss my phone onto the blankets.

"Whatever," I say, voice trembling. "If she didn't care enough to tell me she was leaving, then why the hell should I care that I missed her birthday?"

It sounds pathetic, even to me. But if I don’t hold on to this anger, I worry devastation will swallow me whole.

I pace around my room, feeling like a caged animal, desperate for anything that might make me stop caring.

My gaze lands on the table where the custom hockey tape she gave me for my birthday sits. Dark blue, covered in her handwriting—little messages like “you’re the best” and “go win.”

I snatch it up and head for the trash can. My hand hovers over it for a second. Then, I curse under my breath, turn around, and shove the tape into my drawer instead, pushing it all the way to the back before slamming it shut.

The moment I turn around, my focus is fixed on my phone. I grab it again. Her contact card stares back at me. Her beautiful blue eyes. The full lips I’ve dreamed of kissing one day. Our years of messages, stupid photos, videos, gifs, and memes.

My throat closes.

“Fine,” I whisper. “If she doesn’t want me in her life, then we’re done.”

I delete her profile picture, delete our chat history for both of us (thank God the messenger app allows it), and change her name in my contacts to “No One.”

It’s fucking childish. Petty.

But I refuse to consider that losing her feels like I’m losing part of myself.

I hit Block before I can think twice, just in case, so she can’t slip back into my life whenever she feels like it.

If she wanted me in her life, she wouldn’t have walked out of mine without a word.

Isla Walker is dead to me.

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CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

like we never existed

ISLA

Sixteen years old

"DAMMIT," I CURSE AS I SEARCH FOR MY PHONE. WHY DID I THROW IT inside?

"Gotcha!" I pull the ringing device from the bottom of the bag and swipe right to accept a FaceTime call from Mom. "Hey."

Eyebrow quirked, she takes in my disheveled state. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah." I lower myself to the floor and lean back against the bed. "I'm getting ready for practice, but I threw my phone into my duffel bag and couldn't find it."

My heart squeezes as I study her. Her hair is pulled into a messy bun, her blue eyes glimmering with happiness.

I've been in Boston for over a month, and so far, I like it here. Grandma Pauline and Grandpa Greg dote on me all the time. Nana Millie takes me for lunch every Saturday after practice, and I stay at her house overnight on Tuesdays. Uncle Ben reminds me constantly that I can count on him and his husband for anything, and Uncle Tom has become my biggest cheerleader, just like Mom predicted. He picks me up from practice most days, though he comes early and watches. Then, he takes me to their place for hot chocolate so I can hang out with my cousin Damon. He's always happy to see me.

I’m surrounded by love, but I still miss Mom and Dad like crazy. Ian too, and of course, Milo. Ugh.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I stop that train of thought. The last thing I need is another round of waterworks.

“How are you, honey?”

I shrug. “I’m good. Practice this morning went great. Elena was happy.” I lick my lips. “But I have my period. She’s great about limiting my ice time when I don’t feel well, but it’s still been meh.”

“Maybe you should skip practice?”

“No.” I shake my head. “It’s nothing I can’t handle.”

I came to Boston and went straight into competing at nationals. This season was rough. Juggling school and training is nothing new, but the fallout with Michael almost destroyed me. Yet, I still placed sixth. Sixth in the entire country. Elena says that at sixteen, it’s exactly where I’m supposed to be, that the real climb starts now.

So, I’m preparing for the Challenge Cup in the Netherlands in two weeks. It’ll be my first international competition. Just thinking about it makes my stomach tighten.

“Isla?”

Blinking, I refocus my attention on my phone screen.

“You’re spacing out.”

“Sorry. Anyway, I’ve been catching up on homework. I swear, I’ll be forever grateful to Ellie for giving me her notes. I would’ve failed the science test without them.”

Three weeks ago, when I started school in Boston, I made my very first friend. Her class schedule and mine are almost identical, and on top of that, she’s a professional athlete too. She’s a gymnast, and she is phenomenal. It’s been incredible having a friend who understands what my life is like while also not being my competition. So far, she’s been nothing but supportive and encouraging, and I’m trying to be the same for her.

“I’m so glad you two get along so well.” Mom tilts her head to the side. “Though the dark circles under your eyes tell me there’s more going on. Did you stay up late reading manga again?”

I cover my eyes, my shoulders shaking from silent laughter. “Guilty.”

“That’s what I thought.” She shakes her head, still smiling. “You know I love manga and anime as much as the next person, but you need sleep. With the amount of time you spend working out and on the ice, it’s essential.”

“I know. I’ll go to bed on time tonight. Don’t worry.”

“Easier said than done.” She leans closer to the screen. “I miss you so much, honey. We all do.”

“Miss you too.”

“I don’t know who misses you more—your dad or Milo. They’re both insufferable.”

Laughter spills out of my mouth.

“There’s the smile I love.” She presses her finger to the screen, as if tracing my face.

My eyes water, so I blink rapidly to hold back the tears.

“Take care of yourself,” she says. “Please.”

Chest tightening with affection and sorrow, I nod. “I will.”

“One more thing,” she adds, her face lighting up. “Your dad will be there next week so he can go to the Netherlands with you.”

“Mom, you guys didn’t have to do that.” Now there’s no stopping the tears.

“This championship is important. There’s no way none of us wouldn’t have joined you.”

“Thank you so much.” I wipe my damp cheeks. “I can’t wait to see Dad.”

“Trust me, he can’t wait either. Neither can I. The next trip is mine. That, or we’ll all come visit you.”

“That would be a dream.”

By the time we end the call, I’m running late, so I grab my duffel bag and rush out.

THE MUSIC CUTS OFF MID-SPIN. The silence in the rink is louder than the notes blasting from the speakers.

I come to a shaky stop, my legs burning, the cramps only getting stronger.

Elena claps, drawing my attention to her. “Enough for today.”

“I can do it again.” I straighten, getting back into position.

“No.” Her tone is firm, but the soft smile on her lips tells me she’s not upset with me. “You’re tired. In Russia, we say, *Sdelal delo—gulyayi smelo*.

This is your second practice of the day. You did well. Now, you clearly need some rest."

I skate to the boards and stop in front of her. "I'm fine."

"That's what you always say." She brushes a strand of hair off my cheek. "Your jumps were off tonight. Your timing too. Are you in pain?"

Sighing, I rub my hands together. "Just cramps."

"You've done more than enough. Go home and rest, *Solnyshko*. You need it."

I smile but don't say anything, afraid my voice would betray the emotions bubbling up inside me.

"Go change. Drink water. And rest. That's an order," she adds, winking at me. "Tomorrow will be better."

"Okay," I whisper.

My legs feel like lead as I drag myself to the locker room. The hallway smells like detergent and cold metal. Halfway down the hall, my vision blurs.

My breath catches. *Shit*. What's going on?

My heart rate picks up, and within seconds, it's hammering violently. I press one hand to my chest and another one to the wall, steadying myself.

Breathe. I just need to breathe…

I close my eyes and focus on that, but my chest aches and my throat tightens, making it almost impossible.

Pressing my back to the wall, I slump, letting it hold my weight. My ears ring as I force myself to inhale and count to three. Rather than loosen up, my throat continues to constrict. My hands are clammy, and my vision blurs at the edges.

I'm fine, I'm fine, I'm fine.

I squeeze my eyes shut, and images of my life in Santa Clara bombard me. My parents. My brother. Milo following me around the house. Michael. God, I miss them all so much…even Michael.

Why does it hurt so bad? It's never been like this.

I slide down the wall, pull my legs closer to my chest, and rest my forehead on my knees. *One, two, three. Three, two, one*, I think as I try to regulate my breathing.

"Isla?" The deep voice is gentle and full of concern.

With one more forced breath, I look up. Dean stands a few feet away, his skates slung over one shoulder, his gym bag over the other.

“Hey.” He sets his gear on the floor and kneels in front of me, his green eyes assessing me. “Are you okay?”

I open my mouth, but all I manage is a shaky exhale and a jerk of my head.

“Okay.” He shifts until he’s sitting beside me. “Can I touch you?”

I nod weakly.

He places his hand on my back and slowly runs it up and down. Then, in a low, calm tone, he says, “Breathe with me. Can you do that?”

My face is hot, my eyes full of tears, the pressure in my chest unbearable. “Ye-yeah.”

He inhales slowly, eyes on me, waiting for me to do the same.

I obey, mimicking him over and over.

My heartbeat starts to settle, though my legs still feel like jelly. “Sorry,” I whisper. “I don’t know what that was. I’ve never felt like that before.”

“It was a panic attack,” he says softly. “I get them sometimes too before big competitions.”

A panic attack. The thought weighs heavily on me.

For a moment, we don’t say anything. We just sit and breathe together. When my heart rate has returned to normal, I look at him properly. His dark brown hair is cut short, and so is his beard. His green eyes haven’t changed a bit, the dark lashes surrounding them still making them glimmer like gems.

“You don’t owe me an explanation,” he says, “but if you ever want to talk, I’m here. Moving across the country alone couldn’t have been easy.”

I blink fast, fending off more tears. “Yeah. It’s been hard.” I sniffle. “Do you live here now too? What about Cassie?”

“Yeah. Both of us.” He gives me a small smile, a little dimple popping in his cheek.

“That’s great.” I hiccup, my cheeks burning as he assesses me a little too closely. “Thank you so much for helping me.”

“No thank you necessary.” He tips his head. “What about your boyfriend? How is he handling your move?”

“M-my boyfriend?” I blink, taken aback.

“The hockey player. Michael, I think.”

My heart stutters, but I let out a weak laugh. “We weren’t dating. He was my best friend.”

A smile breaks over his lips, as if he likes my answer.

Warmth spreads over my skin, and I can’t help but smile too.

“Could we exchange numbers?” He playfully nudges me with his shoulder. “Maybe we can hang out. It would be nice to have someone to talk to outside the rink.”

He hands me his phone, and I type in my number. When he hits the Call button, I quickly silence my phone and save his number too. While the device is unlocked, I click on the Favorites tab, intending to call Uncle Tom to let him know I’m ready to leave.

Instead of tapping my uncle’s name, I hover over the first contact in the list.

Michael.

Before my brain can catch up with my fingers, I press the Call button.

Instantly, I want to click the red End button. Panic rises like a tidal wave inside me, only to vanish when, instead of ringing, the call fails. Frowning, I try his number again. The call fails again.

No ringing. Not even once.

Confused, I open our text thread in the messenger, and then my heart falls to the floor.

No, no, no. He wouldn’t do that.

Rather than a thread full of messages, voice memos, photos, and videos, I find nothing.

He erased it all. Those years of friendship saved in the chat were my lifeline. Now, there’s nothing. Like it never existed.

Like *we* never existed.

Hands shaking, I lock my phone and push it into my pocket.

“Everything okay?” Dean asks softly.

I shake my head, breath stuttering, worried I’ll slip right into another panic attack. “Everything’s fine,” I choke out. “I dialed the wrong person. Tried to, at least. The call failed…thankfully.”

Wrong person. That term could never describe Michael. He’s the *right* one. Always has been. But he’s the one person I shouldn’t be calling. And if the way he ignored my attempts to talk after he broke his hand wasn’t enough, now, he’s made it crystal clear he doesn’t want anything to do with me.

“If a call doesn’t go through like that,” Dean says, “it usually means either the person’s number has changed, or your contact is blocked.” He dips his head and grimaces. “He could’ve done it by accident. My granny

once blocked me by accident and then panicked because she couldn't reach me."

I smile, feigning indifference. "Yeah, that's probably it." Before I fall apart in front of Dean, I scrabble to my feet. "I should go. My uncle will be here soon, whether I call him or not."

"Okay." He stands and scoops up his gear. "It was nice to see you. Really."

"You too."

I walk away slowly at first, but when Dean disappears, I rush into the locker room and fall onto the bench. A strangled sound escapes my throat, but I quickly cover my mouth with my hand to silence my sobs.

Is Dean right? Is my number blocked? What other explanation is there?

Michael blocked me.

He erased our messages.

The pictures are still there. The videos too, saved to my phone. But our texts? Our voice memos? Gone.

He erased me.

I undress and drag myself into the shower, where I stand under the pouring water. I cry and cry until my lungs burn and I'm close to hyperventilating. Then, I quickly get dressed, dry my hair a little, and walk out to the parking lot.

When I climb into Uncle Tom's SUV, he turns to look at me, brows pulled low, and pats my knee. "Rough day, sweetie?"

I nod.

He smiles softly. "I have just the thing to cure it." He wiggles his brows. "Let's pick up the best hot chocolate in Boston."

Something inside me loosens, and I try to smile, finding I can, just a little. "I'd love to."

Even as acceptance settles in the pit of my stomach.

Michael and I are really through.

We're no one to each other.

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part three

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CHAPTER NINETEEN

but it can't be her...right?

MICHAEL

Nineteen years old

THE LATE AUGUST SUN PAINTS THE WORLD GOLD. THE ENGINE OF MY BLACK Audi Q8 rumbles as I exit the freeway, rapping my fingers over the steering wheel, restless.

The SUV is shiny and powerful, but I still prefer my Yamaha YZF-R6. On my bike, I can be anywhere I fucking want way faster, maneuvering between cars, opening the throttle when the road is straight and empty. The feeling of the wind rushing over me is overwhelming but freeing at the same time. It makes me feel alive, even on days when my mood is shit.

The only downside? It's impossible to get myself, my hockey bag, and my stick to practice on two wheels.

"Why are you so fidgety?" Ash asks from the passenger seat, sunglasses slipping down his nose.

"I don't know," I mutter. "Guess I'm just wired."

He snorts. "So nothing new. It's August, dude. School starts in a couple of days, and we haven't started two-a-days yet, even if you're already showing up at the rink on your own."

"It's my last year here. One more season. One more shot to take home the championship."

"You say that like you're sixty, not nineteen. And don't get me wrong, winning the Frozen Four would be great, but a year from now, we'll be

prepping for our first season in the NHL. We have plenty of time to prove ourselves after that."

While I've been drafted by the Phantoms, Ash has been drafted by the Vipers. It'll be the first time in our lives we're not playing together.

Rather than answering, I focus on the road ahead. On Golden Bay University. As we crest the hill, the brick buildings sprawling below come into view, bathed in sunlight and surrounded by green quads. I spent last year here, learning who the hell I am outside my last name, outside my reputation. The best part is, it's only an hour from Santa Clara. It's comforting to know I can go home anytime I want.

Dad wanted to rent an apartment for Ash and me, but I chose to live on campus. Our dorm is for athletes only. Ash and I share a suite with two bedrooms, a bathroom, a mini kitchen, and even a small living area. It's good for rest, but also for the parties we throw from time to time. I'm only here for two years, so I want to enjoy this time to the fullest.

Though it's hard to avoid conversations about my future.

It's well-known I've been drafted to the New York Phantoms, so people are always asking why I'm still here. My go-to answer is: why not?

The deal was simple. Two years at GBU before I go pro. Two years with the Golden Bay Hawks. The Phantoms' management wants me stronger and sharper, and the Hawks are making sure I'm exactly that. By the end of my sophomore year, I'll be ready to hit the ice in New York—but only as long as I'm putting my all into it.

Plus, I really want to win the college championship, just like my dad did when he was in school. The day Dad lifted that cup, Mom was already pregnant with me, and they were planning their life together in Santa Clara. I'm not usually sentimental, but that means something to me. And maybe I also want to prove I'm as good as my dad was.

Either way, my goal this year is to win, to finish the season, pass my classes, and move forward with my NHL career.

The Hawks use a rink about twenty minutes from campus. It's an old, spacious arena near the bay. The cold bites, and the boards creak each time we crash into them.

Most days, I'd rather be on the ice than anywhere else. Even parties. Even dates. Ash doesn't feel the same. He lives for partying and pussy. It's a miracle he agreed to come to the rink with me today. Or maybe it's

because the campus is still a ghost town, so the parties haven't started up yet.

"What do you want to work on? Shooting?" Ash's voice brings my attention back to him.

"Speed and some edge work." I lift a shoulder. "I get enough shooting and stickhandling during practice."

"And yet you're dragging my ass to the rink for the second time today."

"You really think the Vipers would be happy with an attitude like that?"

Lips twisted, he flips me off. "Fuck off, Thompson. Sue me for wanting to have fun while I still can. This is my last year here too."

"Sorry." I crook a smile, easing off the gas. "I'm grateful you're here. It's much more satisfying to beat you than it is to compete with myself."

"Keep dreaming." He laughs. His phone buzzes, and he pulls it out of his pocket. "How long do you plan to stay here?"

"Two hours. Why?"

"Amanda wants to hang out. She says Leah can come too."

"Who?" I ask as I pull into the lot.

He rolls his eyes. "Amanda is—"

"I know who Amanda is. A chick from your never-ending list of hookups."

"And probably my favorite one."

I shift into park and look at him. "Why don't you date her then?"

"Neither of us wants all that commitment. The sex is great, and we have fun. What more do I need?" He opens the car door. "I'm not opposed to being in a relationship, but not now."

"Okay." I haul myself out and then snag my duffel and stick from the cargo area. As I press the button to lower the hatch, Ash punches me in my shoulder.

"Hey! What's that for?"

"You and your questions about Amanda distracted me. Leah wants to come too. Can she?"

I look him up and down and then head toward the rink.

"Where are you going?" He jogs to catch up. "We're in the middle of a conversation."

"If she wants to come, she can come. I don't care what you do in your room."

He groans, his feet dragging on the asphalt. “She wants to come because she’s interested in you, Captain Obvious.”

“What’s her name again? Leah?” I rack my brain, trying to picture the girl’s face. “What does she look like?”

“Blonde. Tall.” He smirks. “Your *alleged* type.”

I frown. “Why alleged?”

“Because even though you swear that’s your type, the girls you actually pay attention to look nothing like that.”

Fucker. He’s got me there.

Yeah, most people think I’m into leggy blondes, but that couldn’t be farther from the truth. Not that I’m going to talk to him about it. Or anyone. I let them all believe the illusion—it keeps things simple.

“Okay.” I sigh, even though I’d rather spend the evening in my room alone. “She can come.”

Grinning, he snatches his phone out of his pocket. “Awesome.”

“But if I’m not vibing with her, I’m out; you can deal with them both.”

“What won’t I do for you and our friendship?” he teases.

As we step into the rink, I consider my retort, but before I can fire back, a sharp, cadenced sound snags my attention. It’s as familiar to me as my own face: a set of blades meeting ice in a rhythm all its own, creating a melody I’ve grown to love over the years.

Ash pulls up short. “Thought you booked this slot for us.”

“I did. I didn’t think anyone else would be here.” Bottom lip trapped between my teeth, I mess with my nose ring, a habit I barely notice anymore. I got it the summer before freshman year, and now, it’s part of me, like my tattoos. I have to take it out before every game, though. Annoying, but I’m used to it. “Maybe they’re just finishing up. Our slot starts in ten minutes. Guess we should check.”

“Just don’t be a jerk. If they booked the block before us, then their time isn’t up yet, and they have every right to be out there.”

I stride toward the rink, my neck stiff, irritation flaring bright inside my chest. Ash is right, but I’m on edge, like I am most days. I need to get out on the ice to work through it.

When the skater comes into view, my shoulders sag. A figure skater. I should’ve known.

Ash stops beside me, and as we watch the girl on the ice through the glass, a coldness that has nothing to do with the temperature in here seeps

into my bones. My chest tightens, and for a second, my brain blanks out.

Black leggings, pink leg warmers, a pink warm-up jacket, and white skates. She moves fast, the bright pink and black blurring. Every turn, every spin, every landing is clean, making her look like she's defying gravity.

She glides into a backward crossover and jumps up, her arms pressed to her chest. She does two and a half rotations in the air, and when she lands on the back outside edge of her skate, she doesn't even wobble.

Holy shit. A nearly perfect Double Axel with a clean landing.

My heart thumps so wildly, it's ready to jump out of my chest.

I know that landing. I've seen her do it a hundred times—in videos from every championship, every highlight reel, footage of the fucking Olympics last year.

But it can't be her.

Ash clears his throat. "Am I hallucinating? Is that—"

"Isla." Her name scrapes out of me roughly. I haven't said it aloud since she moved to Boston. I stuck with calling her a traitor instead. Despite the pain that came with speaking those two syllables now, her name doesn't feel foreign on my lips.

"Wow. I can't believe she's here."

Neither can I, but I can't find the words to tell him that. I'm too focused on the sound of her blades cutting across the ice and the ridiculously fast beat of my heart. It feels like it's syncing to the rhythm of her movements.

Her body is all lean muscle and refined lines. She's as petite as I remember, but she exudes more power than before. Warmth spreads through my body and settles in the pit of my stomach. She's not just skating. She's laying claim. Solidifying ownership.

She owns this fucking ice, and she's imposing her reign like a real-life Ice Queen.

She slows to a stop, and when the details of her face register, I suck in a breath. I haven't seen her in person for over three years. I haven't talked to her in even longer.

"Dammit. Why didn't she tell me?" Ash mutters.

His words hit me like a punch. What does that mean? Has he stayed in touch with her?

Eyebrows knitted together, I fix my focus on her. She glances at her watch, and as she turns to leave, her attention snags on me. When our eyes collide, my heart goes into overdrive.

Before I can rein myself in, she zeroes in on Ash. The way her lips curl into a smile sends a shiver down my spine. What the hell is going on?

Ash takes off, a shit-eating grin plastered to his face, and when she steps through the door, he loops his arms around her waist, lifts her, and whips around in a circle.

With a burst of laughter, she winds her hands around his shoulders.

My muscles go numb and my throat constricts. I can't move, can't speak. All I can do is watch them…and lose my fucking mind.

"What are you doing here?" He sets her on her feet but doesn't release her. I ball my fists, the sight of his hands on her waist sending my temperature skyrocketing.

She takes out her earbuds and closes her fist over them, her other hand pressed to his chest. "Practice. I wanted to try the ice."

"Isla," he groans. "I mean what are you doing *here*, in California?"

She giggles, the sound light and melodic and so damn familiar. "Am I not allowed to tease you a little bit?"

"You're allowed to tease me alright, but any more surprises like this, and I'm afraid we'd be talking at the hospital, since I'd probably have a heart attack."

"So dramatic." She shakes her head, the move causing a lock of hair to slip from her bun. Her hair is the same deep brown it's always been, but with pinkish highlights at the ends. "I'm here because it's my first year at GBU."

"You're joking…"

"Nope."

My heart twists in my chest, a mixture of trepidation and pain and maybe…hope?

"Oh my fucking God!" my best friend shouts, his voice echoing through the arena. "My sophomore year is gonna be a thousand times better than I thought." He pulls her to his chest and hugs her again.

Dark jealousy infiltrates my veins, fueling every cell in my body.

Why can't he keep his hands to himself?

"Hope you won't be disappointed."

"Never." He glances at me, and his eyebrows go up. After a heartbeat, he finally steps back from her, dropping his hands to his sides. "Um, we're here for practice…" He trails off.

"I better go anyway." She pats his chest. "See you around."

With that, she rounds him and heads toward the women's locker room. She doesn't look my way again, doesn't say hello or even acknowledge me. It's as if I don't exist.

"Uh, should we change?" Asher takes a tentative step closer, a deep frown etched onto his face.

Without a word, I turn on my heel and stalk toward the men's locker room. My heart pounds in rhythm with my steps as I throw open the door.

When Ash joins me, I ignore him, gritting my teeth hard enough to crack a molar. My duffel bag lands on the floor with a thud, my stick clattering beside it a second later. Heat ignites just under my skin and spreads through me, like I'm burning alive.

"I sent Amanda a text," he mutters. "I told her not to come." He strips out of his tee, giving me a wary look.

"Okay." I nod. "Less talking. We've only got the ice for two hours."

Lips pressed together, he dips his chin. "Sure."

I pull off my tee and yank the long-sleeved black dry-fit shirt out of my bag. Inside me, anger and frustration mix so tightly, I'm afraid they'll suffocate me. With a deep, cleansing breath, I lock all the thoughts and feelings into a small box and push it to the back of my mind. Right now, practice is the only thing I should be focusing on. Nothing else.

She doesn't matter.

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CHAPTER TWENTY

pretty boy

ISLA

Nineteen years old

IT'S BEEN SIX MONTHS SINCE THE OLYMPICS.

Six months since I stepped onto the ice with the weight of every fall, every bruise, every meltdown, every panic attack, every uncelebrated birthday, every *oh-my-God-I-can't-breathe* moment hanging over my head. I placed fifth.

No medal. No podium.

But for a nineteen-year-old, it wasn't a terrible way to end the games.

When we returned to the US, Elena and I sat down and discussed my next steps. There was no argument about whether I'd try again, on either of our parts. In four years, I want to win gold. I know I can do it. Elena believes in me too, and I won't quit until it's done.

My parents wanted me to find a little normalcy in life, to live like the rest of the world. After all, I've already missed out on so many things. My grandparents, my uncles, and my Nana Millie all backed them up. Even my traitor of a brother told me it's time to "be normal."

It was their suggestion I go to college. So, here I am in California, at Golden Bay University, an hour from home. I've always dreamed of studying at GBU, but while I focused on my skating career, I wasn't sure it would actually happen.

As much as I wanted to give that dream a try, at first, I said no to my parents. Repeatedly. Because Michael is here. I gave them every excuse I could come up with. When I ran out of excuses, Dad flew to Boston to convince me to go to GBU, reminding me it meant I'd be close to them.

I folded quickly after that.

Elena and I came up with a plan. She's still my coach. She creates a program and adjusts it based on how I perform. We have a video call every day, regardless of how I'm doing. She pushes me even harder than ever. According to her, if I want a second shot at the Olympics, I need to learn how to get out of my head, because that's often what's standing in the way of the results I want.

To no one's surprise, sports psychology is my major. As much as Elena wants it, I, too, want to learn to deal with pressure, with the constant battle for perfection, with learning how to detach my well-being and my self-worth from my results on the ice. And one day, I want to help others. I've been in the sports world long enough to know I'm not the only one who struggles like this.

My training plans come from Elena, the technique and the choreography, but Coach Gonzalez, GBU's figure skating coach, is here for the day-to-day stuff. We haven't done more than discuss the details so far, but he will watch my jumps, keep me on the ice, and make sure I don't break myself trying to meet my goals. He wasn't exactly thrilled with the idea of me being here alone today, but I needed this. I needed to feel the ice.

Though, if I'd thought there was any chance I'd see the one person I hoped to avoid, I might have rethought my decision.

"All I wanted was a week of peace. Time to adjust to my new reality." I tsk as I pull my BMW X3 into the dorm's parking lot. "And what did I get? One day. Ridiculous."

With my duffel bag in hand, I head inside. I tried to talk my parents into renting an apartment for me nearby, but they're adamant I need to be as involved in student life as possible. So, here I am, living in the dorms reserved for athletes. My suite is on the second floor, the corner room, and my roommate, Blake Scott, is amazing so far. She has blue hair, gray eyes, and a very sharp tongue. She's a basketball player, towering over me by nearly a foot.

Tonight, we have plans to meet her sister for dinner. I told her I didn't want to encroach on her family time, but she insisted.

Classes start in four days, and while my training never stops, I'll have to find the time this week to learn more about GBU, the people here, and the unspoken rules of college life. Basically, anything that will help me blend in.

Inside our suite, Blake is on the couch in our shared living room, watching *Jujutsu Kaisen*. Happiness bubbles up inside me. I suggested she watch it this morning, and she's already on it.

The sound of the door closing catches her attention, and she turns. "How did it go?" she asks, arching an eyebrow.

"The ride to the rink is short. That's a plus. The place is a bit old, but it's in good shape, and it's big. I think I'll be fine." I set my bag on the floor, kick off my sneakers, and pad to the couch. "What are you up to?"

"You were absolutely right about *Jujutsu Kaisen*." She grins. "It's a banger. I have no idea why I never watched it before."

"So many people don't realize how good anime is, but I love being the influencer."

"I take it I'm not the only person you've convinced to give it a go?"

"Of course not. My friend Ellie is obsessed with everything manga-related because of me. She's even gone to several conventions with me. But she's not the only one I've introduced it to."

She tilts her head, her blue hair falling in her face. "Someone from the Olympic team loves anime too?"

"Yes, but my lips are sealed." I wink at her and stand. "I'll go take a shower. What time are we meeting your sister?"

"Five."

"Then I'll be quick."

"Okay. I'll be here, falling in love with Nobara, hoping to meet a girl like her in real life."

"You have great taste," I throw over my shoulder as I head for my room.

"Who's your favorite?" she calls.

"Gojo," I say, closing the door. Sukuna too, but not many people would approve of that, so I keep it to myself.

My mom will be so proud when I tell her I've converted another person into an anime fan.

BLAKE AND HER SISTER, Kylie, sit across from me at the diner near campus while I scan the menu, already thinking about my early practice tomorrow. I settle on the grilled chicken salad, dressing on the side.

"Anything to drink?" our server—Nora, according to her name tag—asks.

"Water with lemon," I tell her, holding out the menu.

When she's gone, I lean back in the booth, studying the Scott sisters. Kylie and I are the same age while Blake is a year younger. They have the same gray eyes and puffy lips, but that's where the physical similarities end. Though if Blake's hair weren't blue, I imagine it would be a similar blond color. Blake is tall and lean, probably thanks to years of playing basketball. Kylie, on the other hand, is around my height and curvy. Both are beautiful in their own way.

"What do you think?" Kylie asks, her expression bright. "This is one of the most popular places on campus."

"Looks great." I shrug. "But I better try the food before I form an opinion."

"Understandable."

"If you'd started here straight out of high school, you two could've been roommates." Blake glances between Kylie and me.

Her sister laughs. "You're forgetting I'm not an athlete. No way would they have put me in your dorm. Though I wouldn't have minded if they did. The parties there are epic."

"Sounds awesome. We'll have to check out the next one." Blake grins at me.

"You don't even know we'll be invited."

Kylie shakes her head. "Everyone's invited. There are a lot of athletes there, mostly hockey players, but they don't care who you are. Ash is like that, the life of every party."

"Asher Vaughn?" I ask, anxiety building inside me.

Kylie nods.

"Do you know him?" Blake arches a brow.

"Yeah." I clear my throat. Why is the thought of my friend making me panic? I've spent the last three years texting with him regularly. "He's from Santa Clara too," I tell them. "We went to school together."

"Then you're definitely invited. The boy literally has zero boundaries, and everyone loves him." Kylie giggles. "His best friend is the total

opposite. Everybody likes him too, but he keeps people at arm's length."

Dread joins the party, mingling with my anxiety. *No, please*. I don't want to hear anything about my former best friend.

"They're the most popular guys on the hockey team. Hot, too, even in my opinion, and I'm not into boys," Blake comments.

"Yeah, they are." Kylie zeroes in on me, her expression calculating. "If you know Asher, does that mean you know Michael too? They grew up together, I think."

My stomach sinks. As much as I'd prefer to never hear about him again, I'd love it even more if I never had to talk about him.

"Uh-huh." I nod once. "But I don't know him like I know Ash. He and I have stayed in touch since I moved to Boston when I was sixteen."

"You mentioned your family lives in Santa Clara. Did they move back from Boston with you?" Blake asks.

"No. Actually, they stayed here when I moved. My parents are from Boston, and several relatives still live there, so when my coach moved, I followed her." I shrug. "I lived with my grandparents for two and a half years."

"Wow. Our mom was a wreck when each of us left for school, and we were eighteen. I can't imagine her letting us move away before that." Blake puts her head on her sister's shoulder, a slow smile breaking over her lips. "Though I guess it makes sense. Your dad is an NFL legend, after all. I can imagine he's pretty understanding about doing what you have to do to go pro."

If they only knew how many times Dad tried to convince me to change my mind, how often he suggested I skate at an amateur level, just for the pleasure of it. Not because he didn't believe in me, but because he missed me. He wanted to have his little girl at home.

"Yeah, he's very understanding." I shift, the vinyl seat squeaking beneath me. "What about your family? What do they do?"

Blake and Kylie are talking about their parents when the server delivers our food, and no one mentions Michael again.

Mentally, I congratulate myself for steering the girls toward safer topics. The last thing I want is to know more about *his* college life. I already know way too much, thanks to how close our families are.

Michael Thompson doesn't belong anywhere near me.

He especially doesn't belong in my thoughts.

He was evicted from my mind years ago, and he needs to stay that way.

BLAKE CHATTERS the whole way home, going on about anime, which she was apparently researching while I was at the rink.

As much as I usually love talking about it, I'm too tired to focus on what she's saying. It's already ten; I haven't been up this late in months.

My exhaustion must be the reason I didn't notice him right away. Or maybe it's because I didn't expect to see him again today.

But when I do, my body locks up. My muscles tighten, and my heart gallops in my chest.

With a helmet in hand, he stalks away from a black motorcycle parked a few spots away. I slow, hoping Blake will pause too. If not, he and I will end up approaching the doors at the same time.

I keep my eyes ahead of me, willing my breathing to remain steady. But he lifts his hand to rake his fingers through his hair, and memories I carefully buried over the years assault me. The movement is familiar, but the tattoos covering his arms and his neck aren't. The streetlights cast a dim glow over him, so I can't make out the details, but he definitely has full sleeves.

I was impressed with myself for ignoring him so completely at the rink. But now, I'm failing at a breakneck speed, all because he still hasn't noticed me.

Why didn't I consider the possibility we'd live in the same dorm? Shit. He's an athlete, just like me. It makes sense, but it's annoying.

And this means the chances of running into him have increased greatly.

Blake is still talking, but I don't register a single word. He looks the same, though he's taller and bigger, I guess. His black tee stretches over his broad shoulders like a second skin, while his dark blue jeans hug his long, muscular legs and perfectly toned ass.

My attraction to him after everything that happened is fucking concerning.

"Want to watch it together?" Blake touches my arm, startling me, and I yelp.

Michael has crossed the whole parking lot without noticing us, even with Blake's incessant chattering, but the instant I yelp, he whips around and homes in on us.

He looks me up and down, a sharpness flickering in his eyes. Then, walking backward, facing us, he lifts two fingers to his forehead in a lazy salute. "If I'd known the Ice Queen herself would grace us with her presence today, I would've brought gifts. Or at least bowed properly. My bad."

The mocking tone. The fake smile. The way his gaze lingers like he's daring me to react. It all hits harder than I want to admit. It's like he's punishing me for the mistakes I made years ago.

Heat crawls up my neck, but I force my shoulders loose, putting on a sweet smile like his words haven't sliced me open. "Relax," I murmur. "No gifts required. But I get why you're confused. My silence must've bruised your ego. Didn't realize you needed my attention so badly, Pretty Boy."

His steps falter, and I use the opportunity to pass him, dragging Blake into the building by her hand. To her credit, she keeps silent until we step into our suite.

But the second the lock clicks behind us, she slips off her shoes and says, "So you *do* know Michael."

Bottom lip trapped between my teeth, I contemplate how to respond. Then, I shake my head. "I *did* know him. Now? I'd prefer to never see him again."

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CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

i just want to watch

MICHAEL

Nineteen years old

"Is it just me, or was Coach way harder on us than usual?" Asher sits next to me in nothing but his briefs, his skin still damp because the damn guy can't dry off after a shower. With a towel thrown over his head, he leans back against his closed locker.

I pull on my jeans. "It's just you. Practice was—"

"I'm not asking you." He opens one eye and gives me a piercing look. "You are not human."

"You're ridiculous." I yank a tee from my duffel bag.

"Vaughn is right," Diego Flores, our goalie, says. "It *was* tough, and Coach *was* harder on us than usual."

"Just a bit," I argue, pulling my shirt over my head.

A collective groan rumbles through the room, and one of the guys yells out, telling me to shut up. Whatever. I'm not tired. Once I drop my things at the dorm, I plan to take my bike out. It's become my new norm over the last two weeks: me and the road every night for an hour or two. Between that and extra practice, I've been sleeping like a log. No dreams, no thoughts, and, most importantly, almost zero chance of bumping into Isla.

The Ice Queen is usually in bed by nine, so that's when I hop on my bike. I only know because I overheard her roommate talking to a blonde about Isla's routine. It's not because I'm keeping tabs on her or anything.

I thread my fingers through my hair and survey Ash, who's still leaned back against his locker, half-naked. To get his attention, I kick his calf. "Do you need a ride or not? I'm not going to wait forever."

He drags the towel off his head and peers up at me. "No. I have plans."

"Plans?"

"Yup."

I tilt my head. "And what are those?"

Avoiding eye contact, he says, "You're exceptionally nosy for someone who usually doesn't give a damn about what I do." He digs into his bag and retrieves his sweatpants. "I'm meeting someone for a drink."

My body locks up, and I glare at him.

Finally, like he can feel my scrutiny, he focuses on me, though his expression is easy. He's always been an over-sharer, so by being vague like this, I know exactly who he's meeting.

"Seriously? Guess you're not afraid she'll shut you out the moment you say or do something wrong."

He rolls his eyes. "Look, man, I get it. Things were bad. But she's not the enemy. Don't you think it's time to stop pretending you don't care?"

My chest tightens painfully. "I don't care."

"Very convincing."

Instead of replying, I zip up my duffel bag and hang it over my shoulder. "See you tomorrow."

"Planning another late-night ride?"

Nodding, I head out of the locker room. Near the door, I stop at the bulletin board to make sure our practice schedule hasn't changed. Our team meeting is also noted on the calendar, along with time for reviewing film. Her name is there, next to her practice hours.

Weekday mornings from six thirty to eight thirty, and from ten to twelve on Saturdays. She has a second time slot booked from 6 to 8 p.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays. It's not on this calendar, but I'm sure she has off-ice training as well after lunch most days. With the way her schedule looks, it's no wonder she goes to bed so early.

Not that I care.

With a shake of my head, I step out into the hallway and move toward the exit. I haven't seen her in two weeks, not since we bumped into each other in the parking lot of our dorm. The campus is big, and she's a year behind me, since she took a year off to train for the Olympics, so it's not

difficult to avoid her. And I absolutely need to avoid her, since I clearly can't control myself when she's around.

Calling her "Ice Queen" was stupid, but the words left my mouth before I had a chance to think. I just blurted them out—hoping for what, exactly? Probably to mock her, to knock her down a peg. But it didn't go the way I thought it would.

I'm still reeling from the "pretty boy" comment. I don't understand the reason behind it, and that pisses me off.

Dammit.

As I settle into the driver's seat and hit the ignition button, a black BMW X3 pulls into the parking lot. When it takes the spot in front of mine and the driver comes into view, my heartbeat speeds up. She hasn't noticed me yet, so I take the opportunity to study her. Her hair is in a high ponytail, leaving her face exposed. I can't make out her eye color from here, but I'd never forget her dark blue eyes or the way her long lashes framed them. Once upon a time, her light skin was perpetually sun-kissed. Is it still the same now? Her cheekbones have become more prominent, making her look even more like her mom.

Despite my better judgment, I zero in on her lips, and my breathing stills.

Who did she give her first kiss to? Does she have a boyfriend? Has someone else gotten to touch her, hold her, know her in ways I never have? If so, I already hate him.

I shouldn't care. I shouldn't want to know.

But I do. *God, I do*.

My thoughts jumble, piling on top of one another. I grip the steering wheel until my hands ache. The first time I peeked at her social media was probably six months or so after she moved to Boston. It was summer break, and I was sitting on the roof outside my bedroom window. Every sight, every sound, every smell reminded me of her, and I caved. I didn't unblock her, but since her Instagram profile was public, I checked her posts via web browser rather than the app.

I've done that more times than I'd like to admit. I've never commented, never interacted, but I've been watching her since. Her profile is usually the last thing I look at before I fall asleep.

But she almost never posts anything personal. It's always her skating and the traveling she does for competitions. The most personal information

I've found is through Ian's profile. When the Walker family visited her in Boston, he'd usually post a picture or two, but other than a glimpse of her, those images gave me nothing. I don't know anything about her life outside the rink.

She finally looks up, and when she finds me staring at her, her lips part, and she rears back in her seat like she's trying to disappear. It's like she can't stand the thought of me looking at her. Even as a hot wave of frustration and maybe a little mortification washes over me, I scoff, not breaking eye contact. There's no way I'm looking away first.

She twists her puffy lips, eyes narrowing.

"What are you going to do now, Ice Queen?" I murmur. If she could hear me, the words might sting her. Instead, the burn lands inside my own chest.

Truth is, I don't hate her. I never did. But I'm still messed up about her. Still at a loss over how quickly everything fell apart. How everyone knew she was moving but me. How she left without saying goodbye.

And now, she's here. Real, gorgeous, skating better than ever. Every part of me is reacting like I'm sixteen and losing her all over again.

I'm pissed.

I'm relieved.

I'm jealous out of my mind.

She's still the most beautiful girl I've ever seen, and that fact alone is like a punch to the gut.

No, I don't hate her, but I don't know how to be unaffected by her either.

And that scares the shit out of me.

A knock on my window makes me jump in my seat, and I whip my head to the side so fast, my neck pops.

Eyebrow arched, Asher stands beside my car with his duffel bag slung over his shoulder.

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With a grunt, I roll down my window. “What?”

“I thought you said you were going back to the dorms.”

I nod.

“And I also swear you told me you don’t care about Isla.”

I fidget in my seat—not because of his words, but because her name doesn’t belong in his mouth.

Chin lifted, I glare at him. “What’s your point?”

“Having a staring contest with the girl you say you don’t care about isn’t the flex you think it is.”

“Fuck off, Vaughn,” I snap, closing the window.

He smirks and waves, stepping away from my car.

Without a glance at her, I back out of my spot and drive away. I haven’t even made it out of the parking lot before my attention drifts to my side mirror, and I find Asher climbing into the passenger seat, giving her a quick side hug. It shouldn’t sting this much to see him touch her, but it does because that used to be me. Teeth gritted, I fix my focus on the road. It doesn’t matter. They are old friends catching up. Nothing more.

Have they seen each other since she moved away? I haven’t asked Asher, but it’s clear they stayed in touch. How close are they? How much does he know about her life? Each question is like another weight pushing me down. Ugh. It shouldn’t matter. His friendship with her is not my concern.

It is not my concern.

With a shake of my head, I breathe in and out, regulating my heartbeat. I banish all thoughts of her from my mind and focus on tomorrow’s practice instead. My slapshot has been a bit loose lately. I’ve got to fix it if I want to win the championship this season and especially if I want to show the Phantoms they made the right decision when they drafted me. I can’t afford to be distracted.

My phone buzzes as I park outside the dorms. I turn the engine off and then pull the device out of my pocket. When the screen lights up, I groan.

DNR:

Hi, handsome. It’s been a while. How are you?

I stare at the message, my jaw ticking. Sienna is relentless, I’ll give her that, but she’s also kind of pathetic. I never dated her, never even kissed her again after that night at the Harvest Ball. Eventually, she backed off.

Mostly. She stopped hovering around me every second, but she didn't disappear completely. Sometimes, I think she wants to make sure I don't forget she exists.

Which is unnecessary. I couldn't forget her even if I tried.

Not because she matters, but because when my life spun out of control, she was at the core of every issue. My own personal butterfly effect. If that stupid almost-kiss at Jones' birthday party hadn't happened—if I'd stopped it from happening—then maybe the rest wouldn't have fallen apart the way it did.

I don't blame Sienna, but I'll always blame myself for not saying no.

I should've never let her kiss me.

Slipping my phone back into my pocket, I exhale deeply. Then, I get out of my car and head to the dorms. I have a paper due on Wednesday, so I need to work on it before I go for a ride. Everything else can wait.

I WAKE up before my alarm. My phone shows it's 5:40. I fall onto my back and groan. I didn't go to bed until midnight, so why the fuck am I up so early?

I turn onto my stomach and bury my face in my pillow. My alarm isn't set to go off for another hour, so I shut my eyes and even out my breathing. I breathe in for one, two, three, four. Then, I hold it while counting to seven and let it out while counting to eight. It's a trick my mom taught me to do when my anxiety flares like this. Usually, it helps, but not today.

My brain wanders to last night. I stayed in the suite until just before ten, when Asher finally got home. He was in a good mood, as usual, a smile playing on his lips. Nothing about him was different, but dark thoughts crawled into my mind anyway. The possibility that something happened between him and Isla gnawed at me. What if they aren't just friends?

I snap my eyes open and turn onto my back. This is fucking ridiculous. I'm getting all worked up over nothing.

With a huff, I roll out of bed and stumble to my closet. I throw on a pair of black sweatpants and a black tee, creep into the bathroom to wash my face and brush my teeth. My hair sticks out in every direction, so I run my

fingers through it. It doesn't do a whole lot of good, but it isn't so obvious now that I spent the whole night tossing and turning.

Twenty minutes later, I'm behind the steering wheel, my backpack and duffel bag in the back seat. It's just past six, and practice doesn't start until seven thirty, but I was too restless to stay home.

I drive aimlessly, but within minutes, I find myself nearing the rink. It's ten minutes past six. Her practice starts in twenty minutes, and if I know one thing about her, it's that she's never late. I thrum my fingers over the steering wheel, chewing on my bottom lip. It wouldn't hurt to watch her for a few minutes. Just out of curiosity.

I ignore the fact that I've memorized her schedule. I'm here because I'm curious. She placed fifth in the Olympics last February, but now that she's going to school, can she stay on that level?

I park near the back of the lot and then walk to the entrance. Kellan, the older man who drives the Zamboni, approaches at about the same time.

"Michael? Do you have an early practice today?" he asks, his light blue eyes on me. He has a bushy mustache that twitches when he smiles.

"Uh, no. I woke up early and couldn't fall asleep, so I came here. Not totally sure why." I hide my hands in my pockets. "The ice usually calms me down. You think I could sneak in and sit in the stands for a little while?"

"Sure. You'll get quite a show. Isla Walker reserved the ice this morning. Not sure if you know who she is since she's new here, but she skated at the Olympics. And she's really good."

I flash him a smile. "Really? Then I better hurry. I don't want to miss out on the opportunity to watch someone at her level skate."

"You sure don't." He claps me on my shoulder as I pass him.

The silence inside the rink sends a zing of excitement through me. She isn't here yet, which means I can slip into the stands without being noticed.

I just want to watch.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

seven minutes

MICHAEL

Nineteen years old

MUSIC ECHOES OFF THE WALLS, THE OFF-CAMPUS HOUSE VIBRATING WITH the rhythm. The bass pulses through the floors and up the wall where I stand, people-watching. It's not the first party of the year, but it's the first one the guys on the team have made it to. After the way Coach nearly ran us into the ground this week, we need the break.

The place is packed, the drinks flowing. I usually have a good time at these things, but typically, Isla Walker isn't in attendance. Tonight, I'm not that lucky.

"You don't look like you're having fun," Asher says, shoving a plastic cup into my hand. "Maybe this will cheer you up."

I take the beer from him, still surveying the crowd of people. "I'm fine."

"*Clearly*." He moves to stand beside me. "Is it because Isla is gonna be here?"

"Asher," I warn him in a cutting tone.

"Fuck, why are you so difficult?" He groans, dragging a hand through his blond hair. "She's not out to get you. She's moved on. Why can't you?"

I bark a humorless laugh and take a slow sip of my drink, letting the burn settle in my chest.

"Moved on?" I ask. "You mean how she pretends I don't exist every time I see her?"

“She’s just being civil, man.”

“Yeah?” I clench my jaw so hard, it aches. “Doesn’t feel all that civil.” I told myself I wouldn’t talk about her, yet here I am, my thoughts consumed once again. “She doesn’t look at me, Ash. She looks *through* me. Like I’m fucking air. So don’t tell me she’s ‘moved on.’”

He studies me, head tilted, a depth of understanding in his eyes. He knows me too well. It makes it hard to hide my emotions from him—not that I really try.

“Maybe she’s trying to protect herself,” he finally says. “Maybe it’s not about you.”

I gulp down my drink and heave out a breath as the alcohol lights my insides on fire. “Why didn’t you tell me you two kept in touch?”

He holds my gaze, not an ounce of shame in his. “You haven’t mentioned her once since she moved to Boston. Not unless someone asked about her, and then you acted like she betrayed you. Why would I want to bring it up?” He shrugs. “Besides, ‘staying in touch’ is a bit of a stretch. We’d DM each other here and there, but sometimes, we’d go weeks between conversations. Most of our interactions were her posting and me reacting. Like the anime festival she went to when she was in Tokyo. That one was cool, so I DMed her about it.”

“Anime festival?” I never saw anything about that on her socials. “Didn’t think she posted personal stuff. Just photos from competitions and that kind of thing. Why didn’t I see it?”

His eyes sparkle, and a chill rushes up my spine. Fucking hell. I just admitted to stalking her socials.

“Why didn’t you see it, you wonder?” The smirk that rises onto his face makes me want to punch him.

“Shut it. Her profile has popped up on my feed a few times. That’s what I mean.”

“Of course. You’d never check her socials, right?”

I glare at him. “I don’t do that.”

“Sure,” he snorts, his head tipped back. “And I forgot to mention Jennifer Lawrence invited me to dinner, and I said yes.”

Irritation stirs to life inside me. “Fuck you.”

“Relax. You haven’t seen that stuff because she posts it to her finsta.”

My stomach flips. “She has a secret profile?”

He shrugs, still grinning. “Of course she does. Her professional profile is followed by more than a hundred thousand people. I wouldn’t post personal things there either.”

With a hum, I bring my cup to my lips. It makes sense. Regardless… “I don’t check her profile, but here and there, when one of her videos pops up, I take a peek.”

“And there’s nothing wrong with that. You two were inseparable for almost sixteen years. It’s hard to cut someone like that out of your life.”

I exhale slowly through my nose, gripping my cup so hard, the plastic dents. What Ash said is an understatement.

For seven months after she left, when anyone asked, I’d tell them she betrayed me. That she left without saying goodbye. That she didn’t care. I repeated it so many times, it became muscle memory. An automatic response. It was easier than admitting how deeply I was wounded. I deleted all our messages. I blocked her number, her socials, told myself I never wanted to hear her name again.

And for a while, I believed it.

But then, I was on the roof one night, the perfect kind of summer night she and I used to relish together. The temptation to check her profile was too strong to fight, and it forced the whole damn façade to crack. Now, I do it all the time.

Ash keeps talking, telling me to move on, but I ignore him, my mind drifting to this morning and every morning for the last couple of weeks. When I sat in the highest row of the stands, hood up, watching her skate like the ice belonged only to her. Like Boston never happened. Like she never ripped my chest open and left me to deal with the mess alone.

I tell myself I keep her blocked so she can’t reach me.

But maybe I’m really doing it to keep myself from reaching out to her?

I don’t want to know.

“Oh, she’s here.” Asher’s voice is loud and deep, ripping me out of my thoughts. “I’ll go say hi. It’s her first college party, after all. I want her to have fun.” He looks me over, eyebrows pulled together. “You’ll be okay?”

I roll my eyes and lift my cup in mock salute. “Of course. I’ll go find the guys.”

“Suit yourself.” He turns on his heel and makes his way through the crowd.

I linger behind, even though I know I should go find our teammates. But when have I ever done what's best for me? Probably never.

When Asher hugs her, my body temperature shoots up, and the desire to tell him to stop being so handsy with her is almost too strong to ignore. But he wouldn't listen anyway. If I thought he would, then maybe I'd say something.

He steps to the side, letting a couple pass him, and two girls come into view: the girl with blue hair who plays basketball and Isla.

Bright pink, long-sleeved crop top, ripped light blue jeans, and white sneakers. Her deep brown hair is down in soft, almost careless waves, cascading over her shoulders. The room is dim, and people pass by her every couple of seconds, making it hard to tell if she's wearing makeup. Though I can't miss one eye-catching detail—the bright red color on her lips. She smiles, easy and open, her hand resting on Asher's forearm.

The sight sends my emotions into turmoil. She used to smile at me like that, but now, I'm no one to her. Just another face on campus. A face she can't stand, no matter what Asher tells me.

And I hate it. While I could never hate her, I despise how I can't make myself look away. I've spent years telling myself she no longer matters. That what happened between us killed any affection I used to have. That she is no one. That I should feel nothing.

But as I stand here, watching her from across the room, the sensations overwhelm me.

It's the ache of missing something I told myself I didn't miss. It's the sting to my heart each time she looks right through me. It's the reminder she once knew me better than anyone yet now pretends I'm a stranger. It's the pain of missed opportunities.

Head thrown back, she laughs. When she straightens again and her eyes settle on me, her smile slips away. A pit opens in my stomach, the discomfort making me shift my weight from one leg to the other. She blinks, her expression going blank, and pins her attention on Asher.

With a deep breath, I force myself to look away from her and push off the wall. If she's going to act like I'm nothing, then I will too. It's time to find the guys and forget I even know her.

THE NIGHT BLURS, a cacophony of sounds, thumping music and loud voices. The drinks are flowing while students dance and talk and laugh. I don't know how long I've been here. I snagged a second beer from the kitchen not too long ago and have been sipping on it slowly. I don't want to get drunk. I don't want to show up to practice tomorrow morning with a raging headache.

Most of my teammates are doing the same. Several of us lounge on couches in the living room, talking and joking. Asher joined us not long after I found the guys. Amanda, his favorite hookup, apparently, is perched on his lap. She has brown hair and brown eyes, and a flirty smile lights up her features. Her friend Leah is to my left, her leg pressed against mine. She's pretty and nice from what I can tell, but the chances we'll be making out tonight are less than zero. I've never been good at wanting someone just because they want me. My body doesn't work that way. My head definitely doesn't.

A girl with red curls launches herself onto Diego's lap and immediately slides off. Thanks to his goalie reflexes, he catches her before she falls to the floor. Uncontrollable giggles rack her as he steadies her and shifts her to the couch beside him.

"Why such long faces?" she slurs, peering around at each of us. "Please tell me you didn't come to this party only to brood?"

"What are you talking about? We're having fun." Diego shrugs as he lifts his cup.

"No, you're not." She slaps his shoulder, making the poor guy choke on his drink. "But I know how to fix the problem."

Another girl appears and wraps her arms around the redhead's shoulders. "Alana, leave the guys alone."

"Why would I do that?" the redhead, Alana, says. "We're gonna play Seven Minutes in Heaven." She looks around, her eyes glistening, her pupils blown. "Anyone who opts out is a coward."

"We're not fourteen," I grumble.

Amanda ruffles my hair. "Stop being a spoilsport, Thompson. Do you know how many girls would love to play this game if they knew you were involved?" Her attention shifts to her friend on the other side of me. "Leah, you're playing, right?"

The living room is packed, people crowding around the couch—mostly girls, but some guys too.

Fuck this. I never agreed to play this stupid game. I'm pushing up from the couch, ready to get the hell out of here, when a flash of pink stops me. I whip my head up and find myself staring into a familiar set of blue eyes.

Isla.

I haven't seen her since Ash approached her when she walked in, and now, she's here, about to play? Yeah, there's no way I'm leaving now. Despite my best efforts, she makes me feel off-kilter. Better bet I want to do the same to her.

Alana goes first. Not only are several guys from my team here, but a few football and basketball players have joined us. One after another, people spin an empty bottle, and then they and their partner disappear into a nearby closet. Each time, they come out with swollen lips and wrecked hair and are met with giggles and applause.

While it's fun to watch, I have zero interest in participating. I've already declined spinning the bottle myself, and I said no twice when it landed on me. I don't react when Ash calls me a coward. He can say whatever he wants. I learned my lesson long ago, and I don't plan on kissing anyone I don't want to kiss.

As I pull out my phone and check the time, the blue-haired girl pushes the bottle into Isla's hand. "Your turn."

I swear, every eye in the room is on her. She's been a hot topic around campus lately. Everyone knows she's an Olympic figure skater, and more than a few people are curious about her.

She hesitates, her puffy lips twisting and a small wrinkle forming between her brows as she scrutinizes the bottle.

"Come on, Isla. It's just a silly game," Diego calls out to her.

She looks up at him, her expression unsure.

My heart pounds. Since fucking when is my teammate on a first-name basis with her?

"I'll buy you an iced latte if you do it." He grins at her.

She snorts, her cheeks going a little pink. "Nice try, bribing me with coffee."

"Right. As if you could survive a day without your favorite—"

"Flores, shut up," I bark.

Other than the music, which has been turned down, thank fuck, the room goes silent.

"Let her take her turn so we can move on to someone else."

She zeros in on me, her lips pressed in a flat line. She's pissed, but I don't care. Maybe I sound like an asshole, but I stopped him from flirting with her.

Delicately, she sets the bottle on the table and gives it a spin. One spin, another spin, and on its third rotation, it comes to a stop.

Pointing.

Right.

At.

Me.

A wave of heat rolls through my veins, setting my skin on fire. I swallow thickly, my throat dry.

Fuck. What are the chances?

The room erupts in a chorus of gasps, whistles, and laughter, the noise breaking through the mess of thoughts in my head.

"You jinxed it, Captain. Made it point right at you," Flores says, his tone biting.

I don't bother looking at him. I couldn't even if I wanted to. My focus is fixed on her. She stares back at me, her expression unreadable. Her roommate leans in and whispers in her ear, but she shakes her head.

Why the hell doesn't she look more out of sorts? While she seemed surprised when the bottle stopped on me, it clearly didn't rattle her the way it rattled me.

I'm having heart palpitations, dammit, and she remains stoic.

"Better spin again," Flores says. "Our captain here—"

Isla pushes herself up, and he snaps his mouth shut.

I stand too. "Let's get it over with."

My words hang in the air, probably because I refused to play before.

Asher grabs my forearm, but I shoot him a glare, and he lets go, holding both hands up in surrender.

Isla whips around and stomps toward the closet.

I follow her and open the door. "Ladies first."

Without replying, she enters the space, her head held high. The door clicks shut behind us, and then it's locked from the outside.

Welcome to hell, Michael.

The closet is small and dark, and it smells like cleaning supplies and dust. I rub the bridge of my nose to stop myself from sneezing.

She keeps her distance, her back pressed to the wall and her arms wrapped around herself, like she'd rather be anywhere but here. She doesn't even look at me, her gaze diverted to the floor.

I lean back against the door so we're face-to-face and cross one ankle over the other. The silence enshrouding us is heavy. It nearly makes my chest cave in. My heart beats faster with every second that ticks by. How the hell does she look so calm when there's a war raging inside me? How the hell is it so easy for her to avoid looking at me when she's like a beacon, calling me to her whenever she's nearby?

"Could've spun again," I say, my voice rougher than I intend. "Didn't have to be stuck here with me."

A humorless laugh springs out of her mouth. "I wasn't going to chicken out. The last thing I want is for people to ask questions."

"Wow. Impressive you can even tolerate being in a room with me. Figured you hated me too much."

Her eyes snap to mine. "I don't hate you," she says quietly. "But you made it pretty clear there's absolutely no friendship left between us."

My stomach twists. "How did *I* make that clear?"

"I'd say blocking a person is a pretty effective way to get that message across."

My stomach drops. How does she know that? Has she tried reaching out? The pain in my gut is like the jab of a knife.

"What?"

She shrugs as if she couldn't care less, but, based on the way her lips flatten, it's a pretense. Even after all this time, I recognize that look.

"I found out when I…when I called you by accident," she rushes out. "A couple of months after I moved to Boston. The call didn't go through, so I figured I'd send you a quick message. But I couldn't."

Sweat breaks out on the back of my neck, and I fight a wince. "I didn't… I just…"

"You did. And you deleted everything," she adds. "Years of messages. Every stupid meme and gif. Every late-night rant, our voice memos. All of it was gone." Her voice wavers, just barely. "You don't erase memories like that unless you want to erase the person they're attached to."

My throat burns, but I swallow back the bile climbing up my esophagus. "I don't owe you an explanation."

"That's convenient." She nods. "Running away is always easier."

“Oh,” I snort, “that’s rich coming from you.”

She bristles, her shoulders tensing. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“*You* ran away.” My voice cracks despite my efforts to hold it together. “You left without saying anything. You didn’t even—” I stop myself, jaw flexing. On an exhale, I say, “Whatever. It doesn’t matter.”

“It mattered enough for you to delete me.”

Silence stretches between us, weighing me down once again. I feel like my feet have sunk into the floor. The party is still raging on the other side of the door, but the sounds are muffled, a million miles away.

“I was angry, okay?” I force out. “You moved to Boston without saying goodbye. What was I supposed to think?”

“As if leaving home was so easy for me.”

“It was easy enough to say goodbye to Ash and Turner, but not to me.”

Her eyes get glassy, but she just straightens her spine. “That’s not fair.”

“Fair?” I step closer—close enough to hear her suck in a breath. “You think any of this was fair to me? To know my best friend had moved all the way across the country without saying a damn word?”

“What best friend?” The words are sharp, like pinpricks. “You stopped talking to me after the Harvest Ball.” She pokes me in the chest with her index finger. “*You* erased *me* from your life, Michael, long before I left.”

Rather than a pinprick, that accusation is like a dagger to the heart. I take a step closer, and she doesn’t move.

“Believe it or not,” I say softly, “deleting those messages didn’t make me forget a single thing.”

Her pupils dilate and her lips part. My focus falls to her mouth and gets stuck there. The air between us becomes thicker, the whole atmosphere charged.

“I thought we were almost becoming m—” She cuts herself off, shaking her head.

The words “almost becoming” lodge in my chest and refuse to leave. I inhale, her peach and vanilla scent sweet and familiar and heartbreaking. We’re so close, I can feel the heat radiating off her body. It’s hot enough to set me on fire.

Seven minutes is all I have with the only girl who’s ever made me feel anything real.

She swallows, the delicate column of her throat twitching. “Don’t look at me like that.”

“Like what?” I ask hoarsely, my attention darting between her eyes and her lips.

“Like you still care,” she whispers.

“But I do,” I say before I can stop myself. I duck my head so she’s forced to look at me. “What about you? You still care. True or not true?”

That question, one we’ve been asking each other our whole lives. Sometimes, it was fun. Teasing. Sometimes frustrating. It sounds like a plea now.

She worries her bottom lip, inspecting the closet, hesitating. *One, two, three, four*…

The door swings open, and light floods in, making me squint. My heart leaps into my throat, beating violently, making my head spin.

Isla storms past me and out the door. People whoop and applaud, but the noise stops short as she rushes out of the room. As I step out, her roommate is clambering up and running after her. I stand still, my muscles aching. Every pair of eyes is on me, full of curiosity and scrutiny. They’re all probably wondering what the hell happened between us in that enclosed space.

The truth is? I don’t know.

Without a word, I storm toward the door. I need to think.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

what kind of reputation?

ISLA

Nineteen years old

My mug of coffee warms my hands as I stare at the wall of the kitchenette. I've been back from practice for about an hour. All morning, my mood has been all over the place.

Seven minutes in heaven. What a joke. More like seven minutes of being forced to remember everything I've spent years trying to forget.

Being stuck in that tiny closet with him didn't feel like torture because I hate him. It felt like torture because I don't. Because even after the hurt, the silence between us, even after I left and he blocked me, even after the heartbreak, my heart and the butterflies in my stomach still instantly react to him, long before my brain has a chance to scream *Don't.*

I thought I'd prepared myself for this. For seeing him. For acting like we're strangers. For pretending I don't care. But the truth is…I never stopped caring.

That's why I hesitated to answer when he asked me if I still care. I'm not sure it's safe for me to tell him the truth.

Because the way he looked at me in that closet? Angry and confused but still somehow mine? It made a mess of my brain. My heart was pounding so hard when we were standing toe-to-toe, it felt like it would hammer a hole in my chest.

There’s so much unsaid between us, so much to unpack. Maybe that’s why I feel like a ticking time bomb every time I see him.

But I’m not sixteen anymore. I won’t crumble because of him. I won’t fall silent. These days, I understand it’s important to talk about the things that worry me, no matter the consequences. I won’t let him or anyone else dictate the narrative for me.

My years on the competitive circuit have taught me how to handle pressure, critics, failure, and bruised pride. If I hadn’t mastered that skill set, I would’ve been eaten by vultures by now.

No one is going to cater to my feelings. No one is going to be understanding or gentle with me if I’m not meeting the goals I set for myself. No one is going to pat my back and say, “You’ve got this, just try one more time” after I fail time and time again.

I learned it all the hard way. Learned it at the cost of my tears. By suffering through sleepless nights, sprains, and bruises. I can handle anything.

At least, that’s what I’ve believed, though I realize now that none of the work I did taught me how to handle *him*.

No skin is thick enough to block out the criticism and anger of the one person who once knew every part of me.

So those seven minutes were hell for me, especially when he admitted he still cares. In that moment, the boy I once knew was standing inches away from me. My first love. The boy who broke my heart without even giving me my first kiss.

It’s a miracle I didn’t end up having a not-so-rare panic attack after I rushed out. The intensity of the effect he has on me is terrifying.

Dean witnessed my first panic attack, and he helped me breathe through it. He and Uncle Tom are the only people who know I have them, and Uncle Tom only discovered it when he found me in the middle of a full-blown one when I was seventeen.

He came to practices and competitions as often as he could, and I’ll be forever grateful to him for being at the rink that day.

I had been working on my Double Axel for several weeks, preparing for the championship in Germany, but my performance was inconsistent. My blades hit the ice at the wrong time, or maybe I was under-rotating. I was frustrated with myself, drained and defeated, feeling like a failure. Elena was understanding, but she ended practice early when she felt I’d scolded

myself too much, telling me to come back when I learned how to regulate my emotions.

You're in your head. You don't listen to me. You don't listen to your body. You're a slave to your own doubts. Let go. Don't come back until your own mind isn't in the way.

Her words pounded in my head as I rushed off the ice. All I wanted was to be away from the rink, but the second I stepped into the empty hallway, all the air left my lungs. I couldn't breathe. My chest ached, and it felt like my jacket was strangling me. I tore off the fabric and threw it on the concrete floor.

The panic was so much worse than the time Dean found me. Forehead covered in sweat, I slid down the wall under the staircase and cried. When my uncle found me, he sat down and held me until I stopped crying and shaking. He reminded me to breathe deeply while reassuring me I was safe and that he was there for me.

It took a lot of work on my side to convince him not to tell Uncle Ben. The next time it happened, I was alone, but the breathing technique Uncle Tom had shown me helped me get through it. After that, Dean was usually with me when the panic took over.

Now, even after all that, the Double Axel is one of my favorite elements, and I nailed it during my program at the Olympics. I always insist that Elena include it in my programs, especially the one I'm learning now. She sent the finalized layout a week ago—the new choreography and jump passes she created go with "Ma Meilleure Ennemie," the song I chose.

Coach Gonzalez praised me like a proud father after today's practice. Elena was more restrained, probably because she could tell I was in my head. After all these years, she knows me as well as my parents do.

I've got to get thoughts of last night out of my mind so I can focus on my studies and on perfecting my skating program. Memories of Michael should stay in that closet. He is a distraction.

The door of our suite opens, and Blake steps inside. Smiling, she drops her duffel bag on the floor and pads across the room. She looks good in anything, even her black shorts and loose white tee.

"I thought you'd go back to bed after practice." She slumps into the chair across from me. "Did you get enough sleep?"

I lift my mug. "I made coffee. Figured I'd stay up so I can be in bed by nine tonight." I take a sip and shudder. It's bitter and has already gone cold.

“Never mind. I’ll need to get myself another cup if I want to make it through the day.”

She laughs. “You should come out with Kylie and me. She wants to go shopping and begged me to join her, and…I’m not the biggest fan of the mall, more so when she’s on a mission to spend money. She always fucks with my head, and by the end of the day, I’m buried alive in clothes I don’t even need.”

“So…you want me to go with you so she’ll fuck with my head too?” I try to suppress a smile and fail.

Ducking, she rubs the back of her neck. “I promise, it’s a good distraction. We can shop, talk shit about boys, and ignore anything that has to do with school or practice.”

I assess her in silence. Isn’t this what Mom and Dad want for me? To make friends, have fun? Since I moved to Boston, Ellie is the only friend I’ve made, really. And she’s going to college in Boston. Maybe Blake could be a friend too.

I stand and grab my mug from the table. “I’m in.”

“Yay!”

“When are we leaving?”

She picks up her phone and checks the time. “Around lunchtime? I need a shower first.”

“Okay.” I wash my mug and set it on the counter. “That gives me two hours to relax. Better put on something that’ll keep me from falling asleep. Looks like it’s time for a *Death Note* rewatch.”

“Another anime?”

I nod.

“That’s not fair.” She sticks out her bottom lip. “I want to watch it with you.”

Shaking my head, I shuffle toward my bedroom. “You have to finish every season of *Jujutsu Kaisen* first. After that, I’ll introduce you to the masterpiece that is *Demon Slayer*.”

“Isla,” Blake groans.

“See you in two hours,” I throw over my shoulder, closing the door to my room.

AT EIGHT, the Scott sisters eat while I sip on my water with lemon. We spent almost four hours at the mall, and Blake was right. I don't know how, but Kylie can convince anyone to buy anything, I swear.

I survey the four shopping bags beside me in the booth. Jeans, hoodies, T-shirts, two dresses, and three skirts. What was I thinking? I don't know. But at least my parents will be thrilled I'm going out more.

"You aren't hungry?" Kylie asks me, leaning back.

"I'm full."

"You feeling okay?"

I nod, frowning a little. Why wouldn't I be?

"Good. Then how about you tell me what happened last night at the party? I heard you and Michael Thompson ended up in the closet together, and that you both left the party early. And separately."

Blake points her fork at me. "I said nothing to her, I swear. Rumors travel fast around here."

I shrug, playing it off. "We went in, did nothing, and then I left." I didn't realize he did too.

"The two of you didn't talk?" Kylie cocks an eyebrow.

"We…kind of did, but I wouldn't say we had a full conversation." I worry my bottom lip, zeroing in on my drink. I don't want to get into all the details of my very complicated relationship with Michael. "I haven't seen or spoken to him in a few years."

"The tension between you two was through the roof," Blake comments before shoveling food into her mouth. "Especially after he shut down the flirting between you and Diego."

My spine snaps straighter, my hackles rising. "I wasn't flirting."

Blake pinches the bridge of her nose. "Diego clearly was, and Michael stopped it."

Warmth creeps up the back of my neck, my skin tingling. I'd forgotten all about what Diego said last night.

"If you and Thompson don't get along, then why did you go with him into that closet? You could've spun the bottle again." Blake asked me this same question on the way home last night, and I told her I wasn't in the mood to talk about it.

"It was a challenge, and I'm not one to back down, even if things get nasty or complicated." I shrug, twirling the straw inside my glass. "I didn't

want to make things weird, and I didn't want to give people something to talk about."

Except that's exactly what I did.

"I hate that the game ruined your night, but it's a good thing nothing happened between you two." Kylie pushes her empty plate away from her. "He doesn't exactly sleep around," she says, "but he has a reputation."

I arch a brow. "What kind of reputation?"

"You know." She waves a hand. "He likes to make out with girls, mess around a little, but never actually date them. And everyone here knows the kind of girl who *isn't* his type."

"Usually, people talk about what the type *is*, not what it's not," Blake says, picking up her drink.

Kylie snorts. "Usually, yeah. But not with Thompson. His rules are practically campus lore: no brunettes, and she has to be at least five four."

My stomach roils. So, basically, he avoids anyone who looks like me?

A sharp pang shoots through my chest, but I breathe through it and force myself to smile like that information didn't just flay me open. "Makes sense. His first…crush back in high school was blonde."

I'm not even sure he and Sienna dated, but they kissed more than once, so it's easy to assume he at least liked her.

"See?" Kylie sits up straighter, triumphant. "It all checks out. That's probably why everyone's still buzzing about him going into that closet with you. No offense, but you're literally the opposite of his type."

"They'd be scandalized to know how boring those seven minutes were." I stir my drink, my knee bouncing under the table. "Honestly, I'd rather not talk about him anymore."

Kylie winces. "Sorry. I didn't mean to poke a sore spot. No more Thompson talk, promise. Aside from that game, did you have fun at the party?"

Blake answers first, and while she talks, I tune out, staring absently at my water. I hate how much I care, and even more, I hate that I can't even fall asleep lately without thinking about him.

Stupid, stupid Isla.

Tonight, it's finally become clear that the issue wasn't Sienna. It wasn't that he broke our pact or didn't tell me the truth. The problem is that my feelings for him were one-sided. And I don't ever want to feel that way again.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

this is my ex-best friend

ISLA

Nineteen years old

WITH ONE EARBUD IN, I TAKE A DEEP BREATH AND CLOSE MY EYES, preparing myself to go through my layback spin and triple toe loop one more time before practice ends. Breathing out, I snap my eyes open and straighten my back. I start with external rotation in my hip joint, preparing myself for a dip. Then, with both arms out in front of me, I push forward. I lift my left leg and spin on my right, my back arched as deeply as I can get it. By the way the move feels and the sound of my skate on the ice, I don't need to look down to know my blade is carving a perfect circle. A smile forms on my lips. This is everything. One more rotation, and I'll slow. Then, I'll—

"Michael, hey. I didn't expect to see you here."

At the sounds of Coach Gonzalez's voice, my heart trips over itself, and my balance is ripped away from me.

I come to an abrupt stop and instantly regret it. The ice spins, and black dots appear in my vision. My toe pick scrapes the ice roughly, making it nearly impossible to keep myself upright.

Breathing heavily, I bend forward and put my palms on my knees. I close my eyes, willing the dizziness to abate.

When I finally open my eyes, Coach is alone on the players' bench. It's as if the words he uttered were a figment of my imagination. He quirks a

brow, beckoning me to come closer.

Biting my lip, I skate over to him, my heart a violent drum inside my chest.

“Are you okay? Looked like you lost your balance for a moment.”

I brush away a few pieces of hair that escaped my ponytail during my layback spin. “Yeah, I’m sorry. I…I stopped too suddenly, and my head spun a little.” I flash him a smile. “It’s a reminder of why I prefer to skate with both earbuds in. I lose myself in the music instead of getting distracted by the sounds of the rink.”

He studies me, his dark brown eyes attentive. I’d bet a hundred bucks Elena will know about this before the day is over. Sure, Coach Gonzalez loves to praise me, but when he notices issues or thinks I need to work on a skill more, he never hesitates to contact her. Being scolded twice about the same thing is a joy I’d rather not experience often.

“Be careful next time,” he finally says. “You could’ve fallen and hit your head.”

“I will. Thank you, Coach.” I glance at my watch. “It’s a little early, but I think I’ll call it a day.”

“Sure. I was about to suggest that myself.” He reaches over the boards and pats my shoulder. “You did great today. You should be proud of yourself.”

“Thank you. Bye.” I skate away from him, internally scolding myself for getting distracted. If I start to hallucinate Michael’s presence everywhere I go, it will be my downfall.

“LEAVING ALREADY?” Kellan asks, his light blue eyes emitting warmth as he studies me.

“Yeah, I want to catch up on a few hours of sleep before I start my homework.” I tilt my head to the side and hike the strap of my duffel bag higher on my shoulder. “How have you been? How is your wife?” The last time we talked, he mentioned she was unwell.

The corners of his eyes soften. “I’m okay. Hockey season starts soon, and I’m so excited to root for the Hawks. Watching these boys train, give it their all, and win is one of the highlights of my life. It feels good to think I

play a small part in every game they win on home ice.” He smiles gently. “And Lily is good. I’m surprised you remembered. She had the flu last week, but she’s feeling much better now. Thank you for asking, Isla. It means a lot to me.”

“I’m happy to hear that.” I nod, peering down the empty hall outside the locker room. “And you absolutely deserve credit for the team’s wins. The quality of the ice is superb. Take it from someone who’s skated on a lot of shitty ice over the years.”

“You’re too kind.” The way his cheeks redden is adorable. This old man is one of the nicest people I know. He knows everyone by name, and he’s always happy to chat with anyone who’s willing to stop and say hi.

As I’m getting ready to walk away, it dawns on me. I could ask him about Michael. Surely, he sees everything that goes on here.

“Kellan, um, have you seen Michael Thompson today? We…have a project together, but I wasn’t sure if he was…”

I trail off, my skin burning. I hate lying. It makes me uncomfortable.

“Michael was here, yeah.” Kellan nods, breaking into a huge smile. “He’s quite a fan of yours. He’s here every morning to watch you skate before the hockey team meets for conditioning.”

He’s what? My heart takes off at a sprint, and adrenaline shoots through my system, creating a familiar burn in my extremities. Fight-or-flight mode isn’t new to me, but a few simple words have never triggered me like this.

“I don’t usually see him on weekends, but he stopped in today. Maybe because of the project you mentioned.”

“Y-yeah, thank you so much.” I swallow past the lump clogging my throat. “See you.”

“See you.”

My knees wobble as I walk out of the building. I lift my right hand, and when it trembles, I grit my teeth. Dammit. I can’t leave like this. So, rather than climbing into the driver’s seat of my car, I crawl into the back seat and lie down. Eyes closed, I breathe in and out. My heart continues to gallop, its thrum echoing in my ears. *Everything’s fine*. I’m safe. So why does it feel like the rug has been pulled out from under me?

Gah, I shouldn’t care. I don’t want to care.

But when Kellan mentioned Michael has been watching me skate every morning, my stomach twisted into a knot.

Why would he do that? He chose to believe the worst about me. Ignored me. Blocked me. Erased years of communication. And now, he's showing up at my practices? To do what?

I cover my eyes with my hand and breathe deeply again.

I'm not scared of him. He'd never hurt me. But the way he makes me feel, the way he shakes my world just by looking at me, terrifies me.

"What does he want?" I whisper into the quiet of my car.

One moment, he's mocking me, calling me Ice Queen, then he's in that closet with me—after he refused to go in with other girls—and telling me he cares? I don't understand.

Is this a mind game? A way for him to pass the time? Is he hoping to catch me messing up so he can use it as ammunition against me?

The burning sensation in my eyes intensifies, fueling my irritation. I sit up abruptly and suck in a harsh breath.

"Enough. I'm not doing this again."

I won't allow him to mess with my head. If he wants something from me, he can damn well ask for it. I won't let him hover around the fringes of my life, interfering with practice and my career. He has no right to play these games with me. I'm not a toy he can mess with. My emotions are not for his entertainment.

And I plan to tell him that. Today.

I pull my phone out of my pocket and tap out a text to Asher.

ME:

I'm cashing in on your offer to hang out. You free if I stop by tonight?

ASHER:

Absolutely! Does 7 sound okay?

ME:

Yes! 👍

ASHER:

Fair warning: my roommate will probably be home 👀 If you don't want to see him, maybe stop by closer to 8?

ME:

I'll be there 🥰

I don’t like misleading him, but I need to nip this situation in the bud. It needs to happen tonight, and if I tell Ash why I’m really coming over, he’ll ask questions I don’t want to answer. We’ve always kind of skated around anything related to Michael, and it’s suited me well. If only we could continue that way.

But once I have a talk with the guy who was designed to torture me, Ash and I can hang out.

I FOCUS on the sign that reads 312 as I work to keep my breathing even. I’m here to spend time with my friend and also *potentially* to tell his roommate off.

Asher opens the door, smiling like a Cheshire cat. He’s in a white tee and gray sweatpants, his blond hair damp. His eyes glisten with mischief as he props his shoulder against the doorframe. “Wow, you actually came. I was sure you’d bail last minute.”

“I said I would. I’m not one to back down.”

“True.” He steps back. “Though I’m surprised to see you before eight.” He lowers his voice as I step into the suite. “Michael is in his room.”

“That’s okay.” I shrug, scanning the room. “Your place is nice.”

It’s laid out like mine, but it’s clear two guys live here. There’s a huge black couch in the living area, along with a small coffee table and a big TV on the wall. A controller has been thrown haphazardly onto a cushion, and there’s a roll of stick tape on the coffee table beside a stack of textbooks. It’s chaotic, yet somehow cozy. And it smells like laundry detergent and pizza.

As I take another step in and spot the two pizza boxes on the kitchen counter, the scent makes more sense.

“Thanks. We’re trying to keep it clean. We do okay most of the time.” He shoves his hands into his pockets and tilts his chin toward an open door. “Let’s hang out in my room.”

I lock my hands in front of me. “Do you mind if I talk to Michael first?”

He grimaces, but he catches himself quickly. “Erm, yeah, but are you sure?”

“Positive.” I nod. “I’ll be quick. Just need to settle something.”

“Okay.” He jabs his thumb toward his room. “I’ll be here. That,” he points to a closed door, “is his room.”

I shuffle down the hall and take a deep breath. Then, I open the door without knocking. It’s rude, and it’s not how I usually operate, but I don’t have time for pleasantries, and I want to make a point.

Michael stands with his back to me, drying his hair with a towel. He’s wearing a black tee and dark blue jeans. Quickly, he turns on his heel and homes in on me.

“Are you lost?” he asks, voice husky, as he lowers his towel. “Asher’s room is the next one.”

I pull my shoulders back. “I’m here for you.”

He arches his brow. “Oh? Finally ready to answer my question from the other night?”

“I need you to stop coming to my practices.” I curl my hands into fists. “Stop showing up. Stop standing in the dark like a…a stalker.”

A snort escapes him, his shoulders rising and falling. “A stalker? That’s new. Where are these fantasies coming from?”

“Kellan told me,” I spit out. “He said you’re at the arena every morning. What the hell are you doing, Michael? Why are you watching me skate?”

Surprise flashes in his eyes, though it’s quickly replaced by something darker, more intense.

“So let me get this straight.” He steps toward me. Dammit, he’s taller than I remember. He’s got to be six foot three. At five two, the top of my head barely reaches his collarbone. “You show up here, in my room, because you can’t stand the idea I might be *looking* at you?”

My heart lurches. “That’s not—”

“It is.” His voice drops, and he bows his head, the move casting shadows over his face. “You say you don’t want me near you, but you came here. For me.”

Heat prickles at the back of my neck. “I came here to tell you to stop. Whatever game you’re playing, stop. And if you have something to say to me, then say it. To my face.”

Eyes widening, he fidgets with his nose ring.

A nose ring? That’s new—

Isla, stop this! Now is not the fucking time!

I blink, forcing myself to focus on the topic at hand.

“And what exactly do you want me to tell you, Ice Queen?”

The nickname hits me like a punch in the chest, reopening an old wound. But no matter how much it hurts, I hold my head high. “The truth.”

“The truth? I’m not sure you can handle it.” He zeroes in on my lips and then drags his gaze down my throat. Time slows, the air between us almost crackling with electricity. “What if I told you I’m there every morning because I like watching you?”

I school my expression despite how hot my skin is, despite the growing warmth in my lower abdomen. “Honestly? I wouldn’t believe you. It’d be far more likely that you’re there in hopes of watching me fall and break something. Or because you’re bored and you like playing games with my mind. Either way, I want you to stay away from me.”

He rests a hand on top of his head, putting his full sleeve of tattoos on display. I force myself to stare at a spot near the collar of his shirt, ignoring the tattoos he has on his neck. All that to stay focused. I’ve trained myself not to look at him, to not notice him on campus. I need to continue doing just that, even when we’re this close.

“Why would I be rooting for you to hurt yourself when all I’ve ever wanted was to see you thrive?” His voice cracks, and something cracks inside me too, a warm liquid leaking out, heating me up while also making it hard to breathe. “Do you really think I’d get off on your pain? That I’m hateful enough to mess with your head when we both know how traumatic a fall on the ice can be? I used to leave my own practices early just to check on you,” he says, the words coming faster now. “I got benched more times than I can count because I couldn’t stop myself from making sure you were okay after a fall.” He shakes his head. “You have no idea what I’d do to protect you now.”

My heart stumbles, and my hands become clammy. I shake my head and step back even though every cell in my body begs me to stay, begs me to move in closer. “It doesn’t matter. If you keep coming to my practices, I’ll tell the athletic department you’re making me uncomfortable.”

“I make you uncomfortable?” He frowns, fury flashing in his eyes. “Is that what you tell yourself so you don’t have to admit you still care?”

My breath gets stuck in my throat. I jerk my head, lifting my chin. “I didn’t come here to talk about feelings.”

“No,” he says firmly. “You came here because you can’t ignore me any more than I can ignore you. Because, despite it all, our years of

friendship…you feel it too. There's something between us, always has been…"

His words stop registering. My mind is too chaotic, and my heart is thrashing so loudly, it drowns out what he's saying.

All I want is for him to stop talking. I want him to let me think.

Before I can stop myself, I stand on my tiptoes, cuff his neck, pull his face down, and kiss him.

Just to shut him up.

The move isn't soft or gentle. It's full of anger and frustration. I mold my mouth to his, desperate almost, and he goes completely still.

Alarm bells go off in my head. *What am I doing?*

I press my hands to his chest, ready to push away, but he circles his arms around my waist and tugs me closer. I suck in a breath, my lips parting, and he takes advantage of the opening, kissing me back. Hot and hard, his lips move against mine.

Everything about this kiss is wrong.

How good it feels is wrong.

The way he smells—just like he always did, of mint and citrus and another, more masculine scent—is wrong.

But the biggest issue here is that I want more.

I sink my teeth into his bottom lip, and he groans, low and broken. The sound travels from my lips to my toes, and then up into my brain.

It's like a kill switch. Suddenly, I'm aware of everything. Of what I'm doing. Of who I'm doing it with.

This is my ex-best friend.

The boy who didn't choose me.

The boy I told myself I was over.

The boy I swore I didn't care about anymore.

And yet…my chest constricts, and my pulse beats wildly, making my skin hum. A feeling I buried long ago is stirring inside me, and I'm not ready for it.

As my breaths saw in and out of my lungs, I pull away. His chest rises and falls quickly, his own breaths shallow. My lips feel swollen, and the buzzing under my skin grows uncomfortable.

"What the hell was that?" he asks on an exhale. He studies me like he's trying to read my thoughts, like he's dangerously close to discovering all the emotions I'm desperately trying to bury.

“I just wanted you to shut up,” I snap, fighting back tears. I’m furious—at him, but mostly at myself.

I need to leave.

“Isla…” His voice softens.

The way my name leaves his lips knocks the air out of my lungs, twisting my heart into a knot.

I clench my jaw. “Don’t say my name like that. I’d prefer you stick with Ice Queen.”

He takes a step forward, but I lift a hand, stopping him.

“I didn’t come here for this,” I whisper, my lips tingling. That kiss never should’ve happened. “I didn’t come here to…” A wave of exhaustion rolls over me. “Forget it. It doesn’t matter.”

He swallows hard, his throat twitching. “Then why did you come? To accuse me of stalking you? Or to show me how *much* you don’t care?”

Flinching, I take a step back. “I can’t do this with you.” I shake my head. “Not when everything between us is still…broken. Not when we can’t even talk without hurting each other.”

“Stay. Please,” he whispers. “Let’s work through it now.”

The desperation in his voice sends fissures through the armor I’ve surrounded myself with. I can almost feel it on my skin. Almost.

But our past still burns bright between us. We have too many unresolved issues, and I’m feeling too vulnerable to be anywhere near him. I need space before I do something even dumber than kissing him.

“No. I can’t.” I push the words out, dropping my attention to my hands. “Just stop coming to my practice. That’s all I want. Please.”

“Okay, but for the record—that wasn’t our first kiss.”

My jaw unhinges. I feel lost and confused, so before he can say anything else, I dart for the exit. I’ll text Asher when I’m safely behind my own locked door.

Michael belongs to my past, and he needs to stay there.

Because simply being near him hurts.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

i want to kiss her again

MICHAEL

Nineteen years old

HEAD IN MY HANDS, I SIT ON THE EDGE OF MY BED AND REPLAY MY interaction with Isla from start to finish.

Her demand that I stop showing up at her practices.

Her belief that I could ever want her to fall and hurt herself.

The pain that shot through my heart when she said that nearly made me stumble backward. How could she believe that? How can she not understand I still care?

I was stunned. But then she kissed me, and the whole world stopped.

Isla caught me in her orbit, became my sun, my sole reason to fucking breathe.

Soft and warm, her lips fit mine in the most perfect way. Her familiar scent enveloped me, the peach and vanilla aroma like a welcoming embrace. And damn, she felt good in my arms. I've never experienced a kiss like that before, one that felt *right* in every way.

But then, she pulled back.

Maybe it's all my imagination, but when I said her name, I swear, she felt physical pain. Her eyebrows pulled together, and her eyes glistened with unshed tears, like she regretted the kiss. Regretted me.

But I could never regret her. I don't know how I've lived this long without knowing what it's like to kiss her.

What it’s like to kiss the girl I’ve been in love with since I was a kid.

The knock on my door breaks through my thoughts, and I straighten. “Yeah?”

Asher steps into the room, hands in his pockets, and drops into my desk chair. Elbows on his knees and green eyes narrowed, he leans forward. “What happened?”

Head hanging, I shake it. “I don’t know.”

“You don’t know?” He snorts, the sound derisive. “Isla came over to hang out with me, then said she needed to talk to you. I didn’t interfere when you two were arguing. I figured you were both mature enough to handle yourselves. But then she left, and all I got was an apology text. So I’m asking again: what happened?”

I rough a hand down my face, the light stubble on my cheeks rasping. “She found out that I’ve been watching her practice and came here to tell me to fuck off.” I focus on the wall behind him, not at all interested in seeing the condemnation on his face. “Said that I’m…messing with her.”

“Messing with her how?”

“I don’t know!” I snarl. “She thinks I’m playing mind games. That I’m showing up to throw her off. She accused me of hoping she’d fall. As if I’d ever…”

He grimaces. “Ouch. Yeah, that one probably hurt.”

“I told her I’d never want that. Never.” I dig my fingers into my hair and tug at the roots. “I said it’s because I can’t ignore her. And I don’t think she can ignore me either. Then, she kissed me. To shut me up, apparently, and then she left.”

With a palm pressed to his forehead, Asher lets out a loud exhale. “Damn, I have so many questions.” He shakes his head. “I shouldn’t be surprised about the kiss part. It was a long time coming, considering how you two spent years pining for each other.”

“Pining for—”

“Shut up.” A lazy grin splits his face. “Sorry, I’m not gonna quiet you with a kiss. I find words way more effective.”

Standing, I flip him off. Restless energy pulses inside my body, the urge to go for a ride almost unbearable. But I made a promise to my parents when I got my bike that I’d never ride it when I felt like I might lose control. And right now, I’m hanging on by a thread.

“So when you leave an hour and a half before conditioning starts, you go to the rink to watch her skate?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

I pace the room, clenching and unclenching my fists. “I don’t know. The first time, I couldn’t sleep and just ended up there. I was curious. She’s skating at a pro level, and I wanted to see. But since then, I’ve been waking up before my alarm, and all I want to do is see her on the ice again. It sets my mood for the whole day. She’s kind of inspiring to watch.” *She always has been*.

He chuckles. “Okay, you little stalker.”

“If you’re going to mock me, you better leave me alone.”

“Sorry, sorry. I’ll keep my comments to myself.” He grins and holds up his hands. “So she kissed you, and I assume you kissed her back?”

“Yeah.” I drag a hand over my mouth. “And now, I have no fucking idea what to think. She found out I’ve been watching her, and she’s pissed about that. She doesn’t trust me. She thinks I’m playing mind games or some shit. Then she just,”—I throw my arms out, gesturing helplessly around the room —“kisses me and storms out.”

He frowns thoughtfully. “So what do you want?”

“I want…” I trail off, too overcome by the thoughts appearing in my mind at breakneck speed. Thoughts that, if I’m honest, have been there since the moment we started falling apart in high school.

But I don’t dare say them aloud.

I want Isla to trust me again.

I want her to talk to me.

I want to go back in time and pinpoint the moment that ruined everything so I can undo every shitty thing that happened between us.

Also, I want to kiss her again.

Instead of confessing it all, I shrug. “I want her to stop assuming the worst of me.”

“Well,” Ash says carefully, “you two clearly need to talk.”

“Thanks, genius. She doesn’t want to talk to me.” I drop back onto my bed. “She doesn’t believe a word I say and refuses to answer my questions. I asked her to stay so we could talk, but she ran off.”

“She probably wasn’t planning on kissing you when she came over, so I get why she freaked out.” His lips tip up in a small smile. “Give her some

time to cool off.”

Time? We’ve had years. The thought of waiting longer makes my chest ache. “I just…I don’t even know who she is anymore. I don’t know anything about her life. Not what she likes, not who she hangs out with.” I inhale deeply, considering whether or not I should say this next part aloud. In the end, I go for it. “I don’t even know if she has a boyfriend.”

His brows jump to his hairline. “Boyfriend, huh?”

“Don’t make it weird, please.” I groan, closing my eyes. “All I’m saying is, I know nothing about her.”

Asher tilts his head and assesses me, lips pressed together. Then, he pulls his phone out of his pocket, taps a few times on the screen, and hands it to me. “Here.”

I frown. “What is this?”

“Remember her finsta? The one I told you about. I didn’t show you before because I didn’t want to betray her trust or anything, but with recent developments…it kinda feels right.” His voice quiets. “You say you know nothing about her life, so look.”

Heart in my throat, I take the phone and stare at the list of people he follows. Is this a joke? I glance up and find him watching me with an amused smile.

“I don’t follow a lot of people,” he says. “Can you find her profile? I’m curious.”

Gah, I shouldn’t be surprised. I flip him off and then scroll through his following list until one profile catches my eye. A smile spreads across my lips before I can stop it. If I’m wrong, I’ll be very surprised.

I tap on the username *heartisaheavyburden_always* and instantly know I was right. A quote from *Howl’s Moving Castle*, her and her mom’s favorite anime. The profile picture is a mirror selfie, but only her phone case with Tengen Uzui on it is visible, along with black-and-pink polished nails. It’s so her. She has five hundred followers here and over three hundred posts. Damn, she posts a hell of a lot more here than on her official profile.

A weird twinge in my extremities makes me fidget. I really am a bit stalkerish, aren’t I? I know how frequently she posts. I know her schedule. Hell, I wake up every morning to watch her on the ice. After the way we left things three years ago, I shouldn’t be surprised she isn’t thrilled with the idea of being anywhere near me, but I want to change that. I need to know if she still cares.

With a deep breath, I focus on the images on screen. Her smile, so beautiful and open, lights up her face and turns every picture into a fucking masterpiece. I can't take my eyes off her.

In one recent picture, she's holding a bouquet of peonies to her chest, eyes closed, her plump lips stretched into a big smile. The caption says, "When your dad knows how to cheer you up." Below it, there's a comment from Uncle Xander that says, "Anything for my baby girl." She's always loved peonies because they're her mom's favorite, but she likes irises more, the ones that are more violet than blue.

Her feed is filled with posts and reels from the rink in Boston, according to the captions. Several feature her beside people I don't know.

Elena is in a lot of the pictures, reminding me of the conversation I overheard between Mom and Aunt Bella a while ago. Aunt Bella was scolding herself for not being there for Isla, saying Elena is more of a mom to her and that it hurts to see her daughter so little. I was still deep in my feelings, pretending I hated her then, but the sadness in her tone was impossible to forget.

Images of the books and manga she's read. Pictures of her laptop screen with movies and TV shows playing. Her trips all over the world. Dozens of competitions and the Olympics. The anime convention Ash mentioned, where she's dressed as Mitsuri Kanroji from *Demon Slayer*. It's a carousel post, full of shots of her in front of several booths. There's a girl with her dressed as Frieren from *Frieren: Beyond Journey's End*. The lanyard around her neck says *Ellie*.

Is she a friend from Boston? It hurts more than I realized it would to know she has friends I've never heard about.

When a bouquet of violet irises appears, I pause. Not because of the flowers, but because the person holding this bouquet and grinning is familiar. That guy Isla skated with a couple of times when we were fourteen—Dean Williams. The picture makes my hackles rise, but the caption takes it one step further, making my stomach roil.

Thank you for the flowers, bb ❤️ Happy anniversary to you too

As I reread the caption, a dark, ugly cloud forms in my mind, poisoning my thoughts. She posted the picture in January, a month before the Olympics. Was he her boyfriend? Is he *still* her boyfriend?

“You okay?” Asher’s voice rips me out of my downward spiral. Damn, I forgot he was here. “You look like you swallowed a whole damn lemon.”

No.

Not even close.

I’m fucking spinning out.

Rather than admit it, I force out a “Yeah” and hold out his phone. “Thanks.”

He studies me silently for several seconds before he takes his phone and stands. “Talk to her, man. I think you really need it.”

“Uh-huh.”

“And the stalking needs to stop. At least for now.”

Groaning, I fall onto my back. “I’m not stalking her.”

“Sure. Keep telling yourself that,” he mocks, turning on his heel.

After the door shuts behind him, I continue lying on my back for several minutes, staring at the ceiling. Maybe it was a bad idea to look at her private profile. Sure, it gave me glimpses into her life, but that singular image was enough to make my blood boil, and now, questions ricochet in my head. The two of us aren’t on speaking terms, so I can’t ask a single one.

I dig my own phone out of my pocket and navigate to her public profile. It’s still blocked, just like it has been for three years. I flex my jaw, one finger hovering over the Unblock button. I could undo it so easily, but what’s the point? There’s no way I’m gonna send a follow request to her finsta. She’d never accept it. Not after I acted like an idiot and deleted years of messages on a whim, thinking it would also delete the way I feel.

It didn’t. Neither did deleting the hundreds of pictures saved to my camera roll. I regretted it a week later, because while I deleted every single memory of her, of us, the pain and anger didn’t go away. If anything, it only made me miss her more.

“Hell would freeze over before she’d let me follow her,” I mutter as I exit her profile.

I type “Dean Williams” into the search bar before I can stop myself. A list of people with that name appears, but I quickly find the profile pic of a guy standing on a podium and navigate to it.

He has over a hundred thousand followers and just over one thousand posts. He looks exactly like I remember him—dark brown hair, tall, and

lean, though instead of stubble, he has a neat beard. He's stupidly photogenic. I swear, there isn't a single picture of him from a bad angle.

In several of the pictures, he's with his skating partner, Cassie Keller. Some look like they were taken at practice, others from competitions, and even from the Olympics, where they won silver.

I scroll slowly, taking in every photo, every reel. Before long, I find what I'm looking for—Isla. She's in the background of one picture, wearing a red dress and talking to Elena. In another, she's sitting beside Cassie on a bench, lacing up her skates.

The next image of her sends my thoughts scattering chaotically. My heart cracks as I look through the pictures in the carousel. Isla and Dean stand on the ice, looking past the photographer, her back pressed to his chest, his hands on her hips. There's another of the two of them laughing, her face turned toward him in a way that makes me wince. There's even a video of them skating together. He does a twist lift, effortlessly tossing her into the air. She spins twice before he catches her and sets her back on the ice, and they laugh together afterward, breathless and close.

My lungs constrict, my breaths coming fast and painful.

How have I not considered the possibility that she'd be with him? He's about two years older than us, if I remember correctly, and it makes sense that he and his partner followed Elena to Boston too.

Isla has lived a whole new life without me. And if these pictures and videos are any indication, Dean took the place I'd always imagined myself in.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

of course i care

MICHAEL

Nineteen years old

THE TURBULENT THOUGHTS SWARMING IN MY HEAD MAKE ME DIZZY. WAS this guy her first kiss? Her first boyfriend? Is he the one who—

My phone buzzes in my hand, halting my thoughts. A new notification appears, then another, then a dozen more in rapid succession.

What the fuck?

Blinking, I tap the first one. It's a comment left under a picture I was tagged in, an image of me sending the puck into our opponent's net. It was taken two days ago, during our first preseason game. We beat the Bears, and apparently, our social media manager, Kandi, is posting shots today. Based on the tags, many other people are posting our pictures too.

The moment I read the comment, I regret even opening the app. My mood was all over the place, but now, it's ruined. I don't check handles, only comments.

looks like Thompson's wrist still isn't 100%. hope he's worth the draft pick

bro better show something this season or he's done

I said it once and I'll say it again: Thompson is not NHL material. He's not like his dad at all

overrated #IMHO

dude peaked in high school, be ready to witness his downfall

A cold dread settles in my gut, and my skin itches as I scroll faster. Every new comment slices deeper.

this guy better prove himself quick. Otherwise, the Phantoms are gonna regret drafting him

another pretty boy with wasted potential

nepo baby

argh, dude is talented but so inconsistent 😡

doubt he has what it takes mentally. such a pity, because his dad was the goat

The comparisons to my dad hit the hardest. All my life, I've worked to avoid it, but the fans just can't leave it alone. My vision blurs for a second, but I blink rapidly, clearing it. There are good comments too, way more than bad ones. Several people are even defending me, but it doesn't matter. My brain has already chosen to latch on to the negativity. The room feels too small, too hot.

I tighten my grip on the phone until my knuckles ache. "Fuck," I hiss, locking the screen. I toss the thing aside and flip over, burying my face in my pillow. My head buzzes, and nausea washes over me so powerfully, I worry I'll throw up all over the bed.

After everything that's happened tonight, after Isla showed up, after our argument and the kiss, after she ran away and I discovered all the pictures of her life—a life I know nothing about—after seeing her with this Dean guy, and then these comments…it feels like I can't catch a fucking break.

A slow, pounding thought rises through the fog in my mind—I want to go home, just for a day. I need a little break. Clarity. Reassurance from my

dad, who always knows what to say to support me. Even though he doesn't know how much I struggle with the constant comparisons. With the pressure to prove I'm more than my last name. I just…I don't want to make him feel like I'm not proud of him while he's always been my role model.

Yeah, that's what I'll do. Tomorrow. I'll go to class, go to practice, and then head home for one night.

Tonight, I want a night of dreamless sleep.

FROM THE MOMENT I wake up, I feel off, like I'm moving through the day underwater. Classes and conversations. Even at practice, I feel disconnected, the world muted. My mind keeps looping back no matter how hard I try to shove the thoughts away.

The image of Isla in my room. The sensation of her mouth on mine. Her private profile. Dean's profile. The pictures of them together. And then the comments.

The fucking comments.

I've dealt with this my whole life. With condescending remarks about my abilities. With constant comparisons to Dad. For as long as I can remember, I've been called my dad's shadow. I've had to carry the weight of my last name, constantly aware it's more important than what I can do on the ice. This noise is not new to me, but it feels different today.

And I'm struggling to get out of my own head.

That's why I need to go home. Because for once, I don't trust myself to shake it off alone.

COACH DOESN'T LOOK up from his tablet when I knock on the office door after practice. "Yeah?"

"I won't be here for morning conditioning tomorrow," I say. "I need to go home for a day, but I'll be back before my first class."

He snaps his head up, his eyes narrowing. "Everything okay?"

I nod. "Yeah." It's not a complete lie, even if it's not the truth either.

He studies me for a second longer, suspicion in his expression. “Don’t make a habit out of this, Thompson.”

“I won’t.” With a dip of my chin, I step back into the hallway. Then, focusing on only the floor in front of me, I head out of the building. Ash is standing beside my car, the trunk open. I toss my hockey bag into the trunk, slam it shut, and pat the roof once out of habit.

“I’ll be back tomorrow before class.” I open the door and drag my motorcycle helmet out of the back seat.

“Okay.” He nods, studying me with a look of concern on his face. “Thanks for lending me your car.”

“Of course.”

“Say hi to your folks.”

“Will do.” I stride toward my bike. “See you tomorrow.”

I mount the bike and then pull out my phone to check the time. It’s seven, and I still need to drop by the dorm to grab my laptop. So, at best, I’ll be home by nine. I called Mom before practice so she knows I’m coming.

My phone buzzes in my hand, and, despite my better judgment, I tap on the notification that appears. It redirects me to the tagged picture, where even more comments have appeared. They’re new ones. Kandi already took care of the worst ones earlier today.

With a lump forming in my throat, I clench my jaw. *This is fucking bullshit.*

Home. I need to go home.

So, I stuff my phone into my pocket, pull on my helmet, and drive.

Four minutes in, I know I shouldn’t be riding. Not like this. Not when my heart is thrashing against my ribs and a voice in my head is reciting every shitty comment under that post.

The evening air is cool for September, the chill slipping beneath my hoodie as I speed down empty streets.

I promised Asher I wouldn’t go to Isla’s practice, so I haven’t seen her today, but that doesn’t mean I haven’t been preoccupied with thoughts of her. With questions. Did what happened between us rattle her the way it did me? Or is she completely unaffected? What if she couldn’t care less about the kiss?

I twist the throttle harder. The wind slams into me, sending shivers down my spine. It’s more than just the weather. It’s the storm brewing in

my chest. The ache builds as I get to the dorms. Streetlights blur into yellow streaks.

The dorms appear in the distance, glowing warm behind the trees. Windows lit, movement in some of the rooms. Isla lives on the second floor. Which window is hers? Is she home? Or at her off-ice training? I'm so focused on the building, I don't notice the car pulling out from the side street until it's too late.

Headlights come at me quickly, and with a loud curse, I jerk the handlebars left. Tires screech on damp asphalt, and my bike fishtails. Then, I'm airborne. Tucking myself into a ball, I pray I don't break any bones. My shoulder slams into the pavement first, then my helmet. It cracks loudly, and I squeeze my eyes shut. The sound that rattles through my skull is like a huge bell hovering over me. My chest hits the road next, and all the air is ripped from my lungs.

White spots flash in front of my eyes as I struggle to inhale. On my back now, I groan. It's better if I don't move, so I lie sprawled out. White changes to black, my vision going dark.

"Fuck!" a deep voice shouts, though the sound is muffled. "I didn't have time to stop."

A door slams, and then a female voice screams my name. The sound brings me back to my senses.

Still here. I'm still on the road.

My ears ring, and my mouth tastes like blood. My chest constricts when I try to take a breath. My skin is on fire, and my muscles ache. Fuck, did I break a bone? My world is spinning, and I can't do anything to stop it.

Footsteps grow closer. Then, a voice I swear sounds like Isla's yells, "Somebody call nine-one-one! Please!"

The visor of my helmet flips up, cold air hitting my skin, and there she is. Isla, hovering over me, eyes tearful, lips trembling.

"Michael, can you hear me?" Her voice breaks, and her face crumples. "Look at me. Stay with me, please."

I want to say her name, but I can't move my lips.

She doesn't try to take the helmet off. She knows better. She sits on the hard asphalt beside me and holds my hand, talking to me. "Stay with me. Michael, please look at me. Don't look away…" She sniffles. "Don't close your eyes."

The world fades around the edges. Lights blur. Sirens sound in the distance. I force my eyes to stay open; I want to continue admiring her. Her face always brings me joy and happiness.

She's right here, still holding my hand, clutching it to her chest, never leaving me. "Don't close your eyes," she sobs. "Please, stay with me. Please, Michael."

I want to tell her I'll be okay, but my throat is too tight.

"Stay with me," she whispers.

The cold from the asphalt seeps into my jacket, the sirens get louder, and then more voices echo through the air.

She squeezes my hand. I try to squeeze back, but I'm too weak, and the darkness is taking over. I'm studying her face, memorizing every detail, when the blackness swallows everything.

A BEEPING SOUND COMES FIRST. Slow. Steady. And annoying, because it interferes with my sleep. My eyelids are heavy—not that I want to open my eyes anyway. I inhale, and my chest burns. Dammit, it hurts so fucking bad.

Reluctantly, I open my eyes and blink at the bright light above. Dread washes over me. Where am I? It takes a moment to find the strength to turn my head. I can't move it much, but it doesn't take long to register I'm at the hospital. The beeping sound is coming from the machine attached to my body, my nostrils assaulted by the faint smell of antiseptic and plastic.

To my left, Mom is sitting in a chair next to the bed. Her brown hair is messy, her eyes swollen, like she's been crying. When she notices I'm awake, she gasps and jumps to her feet.

"Hey, sweetheart…" Voice trembling, she reaches for my hand. "You're okay. You're safe."

I frown, confused. Before I can find the words to ask what's going on, the memories come rushing back. Me on the bike, heading to the dorms, my chaotic thoughts distracting me. Then, a crash.

"I'm so sorry," I rasp out. "I promised you and—"

"No." She shakes her head. "No one's angry. Everything's okay. We're happy you're here with us. Just…don't scare us like that again. It's past midnight already. We've been waiting for you to wake up for a few hours."

The door opens, and Dad steps in. His jaw is clenched tight as he stalks closer, his dark brown eyes on me. Meg peeks around him, her arms wrapped around her torso, her eyes red from crying.

Dad puts his hand on my shoulder and smiles. “You’re gonna be alright. Cracked rib, concussion, some bruising. Could’ve been worse.” He swallows, his Adam’s apple moving up and down.

I use the pause to ask, “What about hockey?”

“You’ll miss the rest of preseason, but you should be back on the ice in November.”

Meg stops beside Mom and surveys me. “You look awful, but I’m glad you’re not dead.”

A dry laugh scrapes out of me. Everything fucking hurts.

Worrying her bottom lip, Mom looks at Dad. He gives her an encouraging nod.

“Isla’s here,” she says softly.

Those two simple words make my chest feel too small for everything I’m feeling, the heart rate monitor speeding up with it.

“She saw the accident and followed the ambulance in her car. She’s been here the whole time…holding your hand, talking to you. I made her take a coffee break an hour ago.”

A rush of dizziness slams into me. Not from the concussion, but because of my mom’s admission. I don’t know what I expected, but it wasn’t that.

“Can I—” My voice breaks. “Can I see her?”

Mom squeezes my hand. “Yeah, honey. We’ll give you two a moment.”

The three of them say goodbye and my mom kisses my forehead; once the door clicks softly shut behind them and I’m alone, anticipation courses through me, making my pulse pound and the air electrify.

A moment later, Isla steps inside. Her hair is in a messy braid, her skin pale, her eyes rimmed red. She’s wearing an oversized pink hoodie and black leggings with white sneakers.

The look is so familiar, even after all this time.

My Isla. Even though I have no right to call her that.

She comes closer, leaving a couple of inches between her body and the bed. “You scared the hell out of me,” she whispers, not looking at my face.

“I’m sorry,” I murmur. My voice is rough, my head still buzzing. “Didn’t mean to.”

Her lips press into a thin line. “That’s kind of your thing.”

I huff out a sound that might be a laugh, though the pain that comes with it makes me wince.

“How bad is it?” she asks, noticing my expression. “I didn’t want to bother your parents with questions, so I don’t know much.”

“Cracked rib. Concussion. Nothing too serious.” I lick my dry lips. “I’ll live.”

“Good.” She finally looks at me then, eyes glossy but steady. “I couldn’t handle it if you weren’t okay. Seeing you airborne and then on the road was more than enough.”

The words hang between us, neither of us knowing what to say. Not after everything.

I take another painful breath. “You stayed.”

“Yeah. I couldn’t leave until I was sure you were okay.”

“You didn’t have to.”

“I know.” She nods, clasping her hands in front of her. “But I wanted to.”

Heart in my throat, I fist the sheet. “I thought you wanted me to leave you alone.”

Her shoulders sag a little. “I wanted you to keep your distance, but I’d never want you to hurt yourself. Definitely not like this.” She gestures between us, then to the hospital room.

It might be terrible timing for what I’m about to do, but there’s a chance it’s actually the best. I know she won’t lie to me now.

“You still care,” I whisper. “True or not true?”

She sighs, eyes softening. “True. Of course I still care, Michael. I don’t know how not to, even though I convinced myself otherwise for a while.”

It was the same for me.

The crack in my heart, the one I’ve suffered through for three long years, stitches itself together just a little.

Silence stretches between us, but it’s not uncomfortable. It’s heavy and loaded with emotions and unspoken words, but it’s nothing bad.

“I should go,” she finally says, taking a step back. “You need rest.”

“Will you…” I stop myself before I can finish the sentence and swallow back the words. I don’t want her to think I’m pushy.

She hesitates at the door, eyes searching mine. “We’ll talk. Just…not tonight.”

“Okay.”

“Get better.” She gives me a small smile, and then she’s gone.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

we can't get out

MICHAEL

Nineteen years old

DAD STANDS NEAR THE WINDOW, ARMS CROSSED OVER HIS CHEST. HIS expression is unreadable as Pablo goes on.

"Let's be clear," my agent says through the speaker, "the Phantoms are *not* happy."

Dad exhales slowly. The sound is loaded with tension, making my body go rigid.

"It's not about the injury alone. I need you to understand that," Pablo continues. "It's about judgment. Risk. You're an investment, not just a kid with potential."

I clench my jaw, my neck and face heating. "I wasn't racing. I wasn't drunk. It was an accident."

"Accidents don't look good on reports either," he cuts in. "Especially this early."

Silence stretches. I look at Dad, at a loss.

"Also, after an accident like this, teams usually add a clause to the contract. No activities that pose an undue risk—motorcycles included," Pablo says.

Dad nods. "Yeah, I've seen it happen before."

"Michael cannot continue riding a bike," Pablo continues. "Absolutely not. I've been told they're going to add this clause into your ELC."

My gut sinks. Riding a bike has been the only stress relief I've found in years. It's helped me clear my head like nothing else ever has, and it's the most effective way to get rid of my anxiety. No way can I give it up.

"That's extreme," I tell them.

"No," Pablo drawls, "that's professional sports."

My dad doesn't join in, but the serious look he gives me tells me he agrees.

"They're watching you. *Everything* you do. Everything you *don't* do. If you want to move forward, you need to prove you're worth the risk."

My chest tightens, and it has nothing to do with my cracked rib.

"Focus on recovery," he finishes. "Stay safe. Stay smart. Don't give them any reason to doubt you. And when you're back on the ice, prove to them they didn't make a mistake by signing you. There's more attention on you than you realize."

Without a goodbye, he disconnects the call.

Brow furrowed, Dad examines me. Then, he eases himself onto the edge of my hospital bed. "I love you, Michael, and I always have your best interests at heart. I hope you know that."

I nod, swallowing thickly.

"I know you love your bike. I know you've always dreamed of having one, but this is the part where talent isn't enough. You really are an investment to them, and, unfortunately, they have every right to be cautious. And they have the authority to dictate what you can and cannot do."

I nod. I get it. This isn't just about hockey. It's about who I choose to be when everything is on the line.

Because being a pro athlete sometimes means giving up great things for even greater ones.

I didn't get it three years ago, but it hits me full force now. Isla faced the same situation when she decided to follow Elena to Boston.

Two weeks later

"WHAT IS SO important that you couldn't wait till tomorrow to look for it?" I ask Asher as we walk across the mostly empty parking lot. "I'm tired as

fuck, and I want to lie down."

The team won their first game of the season yesterday. I sat on the bench watching them play, my heart in my throat the whole time. The Hawks won, but it wasn't an easy win.

It came as no surprise that Coach called a team meeting instead of giving us the day off. He focused on positioning, the primary mistakes we made yesterday, and video review. He mentioned more than once how unhappy he was that I'm out till November. That definitely didn't improve my mood. Now that I'm back on campus, he's been harping on that point any chance he gets. I recovered at home with my family for a week and a half, cut off from everything hockey-related, but now that I'm back, I'm diving back in, even if I can't play.

I haven't been cleared to drive since my concussion, so Asher has been chauffeuring me around campus in my car. If he hadn't been the one behind the wheel, I wouldn't have bothered stopping here with him.

"You're on edge." He looks me up and down. "More than usual."

"I'm fine," I mutter, shaking off my irritation.

He snorts. "No, you're not. You're not riding. You're not playing. Coach is breathing down your neck like you personally offended him by getting hurt. And you're stuck watching instead of being on the ice with us." He bumps my elbow with his. "Anyone would be pissed."

I don't answer. It's pointless to argue. He's right.

I've spent the last two weeks healing, replaying the accident, and, most importantly, reliving the moment Isla admitted she still cares about me.

I haven't seen her since I returned to campus, though not because she's avoiding me, thankfully. According to Ash, she flew to Boston a week ago for a training camp. He wasn't sure when she'd be back.

"I know this is about more than hockey," Ash adds carefully. "I get how much riding your bike helps with your mindset, and you've never been great at sitting with your thoughts."

I huff out a dry laugh. "I lost my stress outlet. I lost my season momentum, and everyone on the internet is talking about how I don't deserve a spot with the Phantoms. How I'll never be like my dad, that I'm mediocre. That the only reason I have a career is because of my last name. And then, there's Coach. He's pissed, and he's not afraid to remind me of that every damn day. I'm ready to fucking climb a wall."

“Coach will lighten up. Give him time.” He claps me on my back. “And don’t listen to the haters. They have no idea what being a hockey player means.”

“Easier said than done.” I shake my head. “So what’s our plan?”

“How about I look in the locker room, and you check under the bench?” Asher opens the door and steps into the building.

I harrumph. “I still don’t know what the hell I’m looking for.”

“Oh? Really?” he asks, his brows jumping up to his hairline. “My… erm…hockey tape.”

I pull up short and gape. This is ridiculous, even for him.

“Stop looking at me like I’m an idiot.” He pushes me toward the doors of the rink. “If it’s not here, then I can check again tomorrow.”

Shaking my head, I walk away. I quickly check the team’s box, coming up empty. “Should’ve expected that.”

For a moment, I take in the details of the arena, allowing the familiar cold to seep its way into my skin. I’ve spent all my life watching hockey or playing it, so the sensation is a comforting one.

When a door bangs shut, I turn on my heel and head toward the exit. Did Ash seriously walk out without me after forcing me to come in and help him? I slip my phone from my pocket and check the time. It’s almost six, meaning the arena is about to close for the night. I better hurry up.

As I approach the door to the women’s locker room, it swings open, and Isla steps out. Her duffel bag hangs over her shoulder, and her hair is in a high ponytail. She’s wearing a beige sweater, a black miniskirt, and black ankle boots.

Damn, she looks good.

I push away the thought and inhale, ready to call out to her. But before I can, I realize she’s wearing earbuds and probably can’t hear me.

So, I follow her, keeping my distance. Why I don’t make myself known is beyond me.

She pushes on the door to the parking lot, but it doesn’t budge. I pause several feet away, frowning. *What the hell?*

She tries again, harder this time, but to no avail.

“What’s going on?” she mutters, taking out her earbud.

“It shouldn’t be locked yet. It’s not quite six,” I say quietly.

Screeching, she turns on her heel, hand pressed to her chest, eyes wide and blazing. The moment she realizes it’s me, she pulls her hand back and

smacks me.

“You scared me!”

I’ve never noticed before, but she’s kind of adorable when she’s furious. Her plump lips are pursed in a pout, her perfectly plucked eyebrows knitted together. She glares at me, and the look sends warmth through my body… because she’s *looking at me*.

I chuckle. “Sorry. You had your earbuds in, and I didn’t want to grab you.”

“Yeah, it’s much better to scare me half to death by talking when I think I’m here alone.” She crosses her arms over her chest. “Can you please try to open the door? Maybe it’s jammed and I didn’t push hard enough.”

“Sure.”

I lean into the bar, but it doesn’t budge. Dammit.

It’s only been a couple of minutes since I heard this door close. Asher is probably waiting by my car. Or maybe Kellan is still here.

“Ash should be in the parking lot. He’s here with me,” I explain, pulling my phone out of my pocket.

I dial his number, and when he answers, his voice is strangely cheerful. “What’s up?”

“The door is locked.” I glance at Isla, who’s standing close, like she’s listening to the conversation. “Isla’s here too. We can’t get out.”

“I know.”

It takes a second for his words to register, but then my insides freeze. “What?”

“It took me a week to convince Kellan to help me. He’s harder to crack than I thought, but he finally gave in. He locked the arena for the night, but he left me the key.” His tone is full of mischief. “All the other exits are locked too. There’s no way out. But I’ll unlock the door once you and Isla talk. For real. Hash it out. Yell at each other. Get everything out in the open. I don’t care. Just talk.”

My ears ring, and my head spins. Is he out of his mind?

Isla lifts her hand, opening and closing her fingers in that unmistakable “give it” gesture. Despite the situation we’re in, laughter nearly escapes me. I push my phone into her hand.

She takes it and puts Asher on speaker. “When you open this door, Ash, I’m going to kill you.”

“Don’t threaten me with a good time, sweet Isla,” he taunts. “I’ll check on you in forty-five minutes. Wish I’d thought it through and brought something to keep me occupied… Oh well. Guess I’ll sit in Michael’s car and wait. What I wouldn’t do for my friends.”

With that, he hangs up.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

then stop kissing me back

MICHAEL

Nineteen years old

LIPS PURSED, ISLA STANDS WITH MY PHONE IN HER HAND. THE WAY HER chest rises and falls rapidly is a dead giveaway she's nervous. Or maybe angry. Either way, she clearly doesn't appreciate Asher's meddling.

Me? I'm damn grateful. This has given me the opening I've been searching for. A chance to finally clear the air.

Though I can't say I'm not a little worried it'll backfire on me.

"Was this your idea?" she asks, meeting my gaze.

I snort. "Does it look like it was? I had no clue he planned to lock us in here together. I didn't even know you'd be here tonight, as unbelievable as that may sound." I look away. "I've only been back for two days. Ash told me you were in Boston and that he didn't know when you were coming home."

"Cheeky asshole." She holds out my phone.

I take it, using the moment to brush my fingers over her open palm, desperate to touch her.

"He knew I'd be back today because he texted me on Friday, asking when I was coming home. And I never miss my ice time, so of course I'm here."

"Does that mean you sometimes skip your off-ice training? Is choreography not that important to you?" I tease her, trying to lighten the

mood. “You never loved it as much as you love being on the ice.”

She glowers, looking cuter than she does threatening. “I’m a professional. It doesn’t matter what I like more. I never miss anything related to my routine.”

Pretending to be chastised, I nod once. “Got it.”

With a huff, she drops her duffel bag and then slides down the wall and settles on the floor.

For a moment, I loom above her, torn. I want to sit beside her, but it would be safer, I think, to sit across from her. And if I want her to talk to me, I better not try my luck.

So, I take a big step forward, then turn and drop to the floor as well.

“How are you?” I ask, taking her in.

She shrugs. “Fine.”

“How was Boston?”

“Also fine.” She sighs, her shoulders drooping. “I flew back yesterday but went home for the night. Wanted to see my family.”

“How are your parents? How’s Ian doing?”

“They’re all doing great.” The corners of her mouth tremble, but she fights the smile. “Meg was at our house when I got there. She and Ian are doing a project for English class. She looks so much like your mom.”

“Yeah, she does, while I look like my dad.” I chuckle. “And I could say the same about you and Ian.”

“True.”

Finally, the smile gets away from her, and her lips tip up. This smile of hers rewires my brain. It highlights every facet of her beauty, making her look happier and more relaxed.

My breaths come easier now that she doesn’t look so tense.

“How do you feel?” she asks. “How long do you have to stay off the ice?”

“I’m okay. Being home helped a lot. My parents made sure I stayed off my phone and policed the TV because of my concussion, and everybody fussed over me.” I fix my nose ring, a nervous habit. “And I’ll be back on the ice in November.”

“Sorry.” Her face falls. “I remember how much you hated getting sick and not being allowed to skate.”

I snort. “Look who’s talking. Do I need to remind you about when we were eleven and you begged me to put the thermometer in my mouth

because you knew you had a fever but wanted to go to practice?" Leaning forward, I splay my hands on the floor on either side of me. "And how, when you got off the ice, you lost consciousness because your temperature was a hundred and three?"

Huffing, she folds her arms over her chest, trapping her bottom lip between her teeth. She eyes me in silence for several seconds. Then, she lowers her hands to her lap. "Why were you here watching me skate? Honestly."

"I already told you. You just didn't believe me." I thread my fingers through my hair. "I wanted to watch you skate because you move so effortlessly. So fast. You've always been fast. Remember the time you beat Turner when he challenged you all those years ago?" I swallow thickly, my mouth going dry. "You rule the ice when you're on it, like a real queen. It's so beautiful and powerful. I've always loved watching you skate, but for the past three years, I've only been able to do it online."

A pinkish hue creeps over her cheeks, her lips parting. "Online? But you blocked me. I figured you'd…" Sighing, she slumps.

"I would what? Move on with my life?" I snort, shaking my head, a bitter taste in my mouth. "For a few months after you left, I was dead set on forgetting you. But then, one summer night, I was sitting on the roof outside my room, overwhelmed by all the good memories I shared with you. I was too much of an idiot to unblock you, but I googled your Instagram profile and have been following your career ever since."

"I…I had no idea," she says quietly, focus downcast. "Ian told me you called me a traitor and told everyone I betrayed you."

"Not my finest moment." I lower my attention to my hands, my skin itching and my chest caving in. I want to reach out and touch her. I want to feel her in my arms again, her hot breath fanning over my face, her lips on mine.

But I've got a lot to make up for first. We need to talk about so many more things.

"What happened to us?" I lean forward. "I really want to understand. I always thought we could withstand anything as long as we were together, yet we fell apart like a house of cards."

She's quiet for a long moment, avoiding my gaze.

I wait, my heart beating loud and fast in my chest.

“I had a lot of time to think, and I’ve been seeing a therapist too. She’s helped a lot with the pressure that comes with going pro, so I have her to thank for some of my conclusions.” Fingers locked in her lap, she wrings them. “If something bothers me or hurts my feelings, I need to be open about it…with the person who’s causing the emotion. But I didn’t understand that then.” She swallows, her throat twitching. “I made a mistake when I pushed you away rather than talking to you when I was hurt.”

“But why were you hurt? What did I do?” I ask, my voice breaking despite my effort to keep it steady.

Her eyes flare, and she purses her lips—a sure sign her anger is rising, so I hurry to continue before she shuts me down.

“I mean, I know I hurt you when I didn’t tell you about what happened at that party. Yeah, I should have, but I was stupid, and it really was nothing. Just a dare. That’s all.” I swallow, a lump clogging my throat. “I didn’t mention it because I was angry with myself. Ashamed I let it happen.”

She blinks, her brows knitting together. “I understand a one-time mistake, sure, but I find it hard to believe it meant nothing, since you did it again.”

My stomach clenches, and that old sense of shame washes over me. “You mean at the Harvest Ball? I was so wasted, Dad worried my drink was spiked with more than just alcohol. I barely remember that night.”

She scrambles to her feet, hissing. “This mind game you’re playing with me actually fucking hurts.”

I get to my feet too, my heart pounding against my ribs. “I’m not playing games. I really have no idea what you’re talking about. What second time?”

Her chest rises and falls, her pulse fluttering in her throat as she steps closer. She cranes her neck, her eyes blazing. “At Jones’ party, Asher dared Sienna to kiss the guy she had a crush on. True or not true?”

I nod once. “True.”

Her jaw pulses. “She kissed you. True or not true?”

“True.”

Mouth turned down, she asks another question, her voice quieter. “It was just a peck, true or not true?”

“Yes.” I nod again. “It’s true. I turned my head away at the last second, and she kissed the corner of my mouth. I didn’t want to kiss her. I was just too stupid to say no.”

Isla chews on her bottom lip, holding my gaze. Then, she takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. “After the game, you and Sienna snuck outside to talk, and you kissed her again. True or not true?”

My jaw unhinges, and my head spins so violently, I’m genuinely concerned it’s a long-term effect of my concussion. “What?”

“True or not true?” she grits out. “It’s a simple question.”

The pounding in my ears is so loud, it drowns out the sound of my ragged breaths, and pain surges through my muscles, making my body tense. “Of course it’s not true. Why would I do that? Why would I do that if I wanted my first kiss to be with you?”

The words are out before I have time to think about the consequences, before I have time to consider where to go from here. All I want is for her to believe me.

“No…that part isn’t true.” She takes a step back, eyes wide, pupils blown.

“It is. I didn’t want you to know about that dare because I was scared, afraid you’d say our pact was over. And I didn’t want it to be.” I duck my head so our eyes are level. “It was always you, Isla. I wanted to kiss you.”

Her bottom lip trembles as she presses her hand to her chest. “But Sienna told me you kissed her a second time.”

“I didn’t.” I shake my head. “The only other time anything happened with her was at the Harvest Ball, and only because I was drunk out of my mind—not that it’s an excuse. But I didn’t choose it. And I never liked her.”

“Did you…” She sucks in a breath, her voice wavering. “Did you… invite her to the Harvest Ball?”

Settle in with a love story.

Head to Lokepub for more romance novels.

I rear back, blinking, trying to make sense of the question. This conversation is getting more bizarre with each fucking second. “No. She asked me. I said no.” I clear my throat, my pulse beating wildly. “I wanted to go with you, but since you agreed to go with Turner—I went alone.”

“This is insane. I just…I don’t understand.” She takes a step back, then another one. “None of it makes sense.”

“Because she lied,” I say, quietly but firmly. “And because you and I stopped talking, she got away with it.”

“No.” Her whole body shakes, tears building in her eyes. “That’s not… that’s not possible…”

She turns, reaching for the door, probably forgetting we’re still trapped here.

“Isla, wait—”

“No.” Her voice cracks. “I can’t…”

Desperate to keep her here, I act on instinct. In a heartbeat, I’ve spun her around, and she’s pressed up against my chest.

A gasp escapes her lips, and I take the opportunity to dive in, crashing my mouth to hers. I kiss her hard and fast, holding her tightly.

Her lips move in sync with mine. Something warm and aching settles under my skin. I trail my tongue over her bottom lip, urging her to let me in. Instead, she breaks away suddenly, palms pressing to my chest, as if she needs the space to breathe.

“You can’t just—” Her voice falters. “You can’t kiss me like that.”

I stumble back, and when I’ve righted myself, I snort, breath uneven. “Then stop kissing me back.”

The quiet that follows my words sends a pang to my heart. I want this. I want her. I want us. But I can’t force her. And if she doesn’t want it, I’ll respect that. On an inhale, I step back, putting distance between us.

“Don’t,” she rasps.

The single syllable is barely audible over the pounding of my heart. “What?”

She steps into me, grabs my hoodie, and pulls me down. Instinctively, I wrap my arms around her, eyes searching hers.

“It was the same for me too. I wanted my first kiss to be with you,” she whispers. “You said that the kiss…in your room wasn’t our first. What did you mean?”

The corner of my mouth tips up. “You kissed me to shut me up. That’s not how the first kiss works. And for the record, the kiss a moment ago wasn’t our first either. We both need to want it for it to be considered.”

“Okay then.” She stands on her tiptoes, our lips a hairbreadth away from each other. “Just don’t let me go…please,” she begs and then presses her lips to mine.

The kiss is wild and hungry, the kind that makes a person unsteady. I stumble back a step, pulling her with me. When my back hits the wall, the impact barely registers. All I feel is her. Her mouth, her heat, the way she fits against me like this is where she’s always belonged.

I’ve kissed girls before.

But *this* is different. This is too much. Too real.

I never want it to end.

Her tongue brushes my bottom lip, and I let her in. The intensity of the moment only grows stronger as we take the kiss deeper. She slips her hand under my hoodie, her fingers tracing my abs. Then, she drags her fingers over the waistband of my jeans, scraping my skin with her nails, mapping territory. Her touch alone sends my brain into overdrive.

A needy sound tears out of my chest before I can stop it.

Fuck.

Nothing I’ve done before could’ve prepared me for this. Not even close.

I slide my hands down her hips, gripping like I’m afraid she’ll disappear if I don’t hold on tight. I don’t just want her. I don’t know how to stop wanting her.

It’s official. I’m a goner.

Honestly, I’ve been gone, fucking obsessed with her for years.

We kiss and kiss, our hands caressing and exploring—until the sound of a door unlocking shatters the moment.

I rear back, frozen for a moment. Her pupils are blown, panic flashing across her face. She takes a huge step back, putting distance between us.

“Time’s up. Hope you two figured your shit out.” The door opens, and Asher’s voice reaches us first before he steps inside. When he clocks us, he halts in his tracks.

I bet we’re quite a sight—hair disheveled, lips swollen, even though we’re not standing close.

“If you need more time, I can go back and wait in the car.” He grins with that smug look that says, *Fucking finally*.

I can’t help but smile in return.

“If I’d known all you needed was closed doors and forced proximity, I would’ve locked you two up a long time ago,” he comments, glancing between us.

It registers then that Isla hasn’t said a word.

I fix my focus on her, and my heart sinks. Cheeks flushed, she grips the hem of her skirt like she’s searching for something to ground her and keeps her attention on the floor.

“Isla.” I reach over, drawn to her.

She jerks back, sidestepping me. “I have to go.” With that, she’s gone, making a beeline for the door.

I grab her duffel bag from the floor and rush after her. Asher follows me out of the building.

“Isla, wait.”

She unlocks her car and pulls the door open, but I catch up with her before she has time to slip inside.

“Please, wait,” I say hoarsely. “Don’t go.”

“This… It’s a mistake.” Her voice trembles, though it seems like hesitation more than fear or anger.

“No, it isn’t.” I step closer, her duffel bag hanging from my fingertips.

She sucks in a harsh breath, her hands trembling as she clasps them in front of her.

“Hey,” I say softly. “You’re shaking. You shouldn’t drive like this. Let us take you home.”

“That’s okay. I’m fine.”

Dammit, why is she pushing me away?

“I should go,” she whispers. “I-I need to think. Tonight was…a lot.”

“Your bag.” I open the back door and set it on the seat. “We’ll follow you. Just to make sure you get to the dorms safely.”

She lets out a breath. “Okay.” Without looking at me, she slips into the driver’s seat.

Only once I close both doors and step back does she peer up, her eyes locking with mine through the window. Her expression is loaded, full of unspoken questions and thoughts and emotions still buried deep. But her admitting she wanted her first kiss to be with me, how she begged me not to let her go, and the way she hesitates before starting the engine…it all gives me hope. Just enough to tell me this isn’t over.

She needs space, and I'll gladly give her that. For now. But I won't give up on her, on the possibility of us.

Not anymore.

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CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

were you on a date?

ISLA

Nineteen years old

"Earth to Isla."

Heart jumping, I blink, the world coming back into focus.

Blake stands with her hip propped against the kitchen counter, dressed in light blue jeans and a white shirt, her hair in a messy bun.

"Sorry, I didn't hear you come in." I tap on my laptop to stop the film from my last practice.

"I noticed." She chuckles, coming closer. "When I got home last night, you were already asleep. How was your training camp? How is your family?"

"Training went really well. My short program is almost ready." I smile, a warmth growing in my chest. "As for my family, Mom was happy to see me. Dad was ecstatic. My little brother couldn't care less. Pretty sure his best friend was more excited about my presence than he was. Meg spent almost two hours with me, talking my ear off about boys from school." I shake my head. "I love how unbothered Ian and Meg are. They are real kids, easy and funny."

"Ian's best friend is a girl?" She lowers herself into the chair across from me.

"Yeah." My smile slips away. "She's Michael's sister."

Blake’s jaw drops, her eyes nearly bulging out of her head as she leans forward, setting her elbows on the table. “You’re telling me you and Thompson grew up together and were best friends, and now your brother and his sister are following in your footsteps?”

“Um, I hope not. I’d hate for them to fall apart the way we did.”

My heart constricts painfully, shame sitting heavy in my chest. I’m still trying to process all the truths I discovered last night.

I let the lies of a girl I knew I shouldn’t trust shape my choices. I let her tear apart everything Michael and I had built over years and years. The knowledge is like a lead weight in my stomach. How did I let myself believe her? And not just that—how could I have let her words matter more than years of history?

Tears prick at the backs of my eyes, like they have every thirty minutes or so since I left the arena last night.

The sadness is joined by a sharp, ugly anger toward her each time it wells. An anger directed at me too. She knew exactly what she was doing, and I’m the idiot who fell for it.

“I’m not sure if you know this, but Michael is back on campus,” she says carefully. “Do you still think the kiss meant nothing?”

I swallow.

“No,” I admit quietly. “I lied to myself. It meant everything.”

Both kisses did. The kiss in his room and the one at the rink. They were the farthest thing from meaningless. They were overwhelming. All-consuming.

I run my fingers through my hair, exhaling shakily. “But that’s the problem.”

Three years ago, I was lied to. I trusted the wrong person. Michael wasn’t playing games with me the way I convinced myself he was. I know that now. But knowing the truth doesn’t magically erase the past.

It doesn’t erase how deeply I was hurt. It doesn’t erase how easily I shut down, how I chose not to talk to him. And it only amplifies how terrifying it feels to want him this much now.

I didn’t run because the kisses meant nothing.

I ran because they meant too much.

“Have you seen him?”

I nod.

Blake tilts her head, her expression laced with worry. “Did something else happen?”

With a sigh, I shrug half-heartedly. “Kinda, but I need to figure out what it all means before I’ll be ready to talk about it. I’m sorry I’m struggling to be open.”

She reaches across the table and covers my hand with hers. “I understand. When you’re ready to talk, I’m here. But if you decide you can’t, I’m still here. I’m so lucky I ended up with you as my roommate. It’s made my college experience so much better already.”

I give her a small smile. “Mine too.”

My phone beeps on the counter, and I swipe across the screen, silencing the alarm.

“You have choreo, right?”

“Yup, and I better get going. Training camp went well, but last night’s practice, not so much. I sent the video of my free skate to Elena, and she’s not happy. I have a lot of improvements to make.” I close my laptop and stand. “There’s no way I’m placing anywhere near the top with how sloppy I was yesterday.”

Blake frowns, rapping her fingers against the table. “Are those your words, or your coach’s?”

Sighing, I hang my head. “Both. She’s been my coach since I was five. She knows me better than anyone, and she knows I can do better. I know it too.”

“Okay.” She stands too, pushing in her chair. “If you’re leaving, I have no excuse to hang out here. I’ll go for a run. Coach is happy with the team’s performance, but sometimes, I feel like she’s holding us back, giving us more rest than we need, and that’s not how I operate.”

Chuckling, I round the table. “Spoken like a person who’s obsessively committed to their sport.”

“Someone like you.” She bumps her hip into mine.

A smile breaks across my face. “I’m not agreeing or denying anything.”

“You’re the worst.” Her laughter follows her into her room as I open the door to mine.

Indeed, my friendship with Blake is one of the best parts of my college experience so far. As well as Asher. And Michael, if I’m being honest with myself. But I don’t want to go there. Not now. I need my head clear for off-ice training.

MUSCLES ACHING, I stand at the counter, waiting for my drink. Even now, there's a pleasant vibration spreading through my body. The two hours I spent at the dance studio were exactly what I needed. Despite how tired I am physically, I'm still buzzing with energy. After tonight, I have hope my time on the ice tomorrow will be amazing. And that means Elena will be happy. Good. I don't want to upset her again after yesterday's fiasco. The "Ma Meilleure Ennemie" choreography is coming along beautifully. I'm beyond glad we got permission to use the song. Nothing could be more perfect for the Grand Prix in France in December.

My phone buzzes with a new text, and when I take it out of my pocket and see my mom's photo on the screen, I smile.

MOM:

How was your day? Everyone here misses you. Especially your dad

ME:

It was good, and I miss y'all too

MOM:

You do know your dad will be upset you didn't say you miss him more than the rest of us, right? 😁

I snort. Dad is…Dad. He loves all of us in a way that sometimes blows my mind. I don't think I've ever seen a more family-dedicated man than him, and I've seen plenty of really great family dynamics.

ME:

Tell him I miss him more than anyone in the world

MOM:

That made him happy, and now he wants to know when he can come hang out with you

A groan slips past my lips. I should've known that question was coming. I don't mind it, but I wish he'd asked me himself when I was home over the weekend.

ME:

Whenever he wants. Just tell him to check my schedule so he doesn't show up when I'm at practice

MOM:

Got it ☺️ He will call you himself

MOM:

Ava just dropped Meg off. Asked me to say hi to you

The barista sets my hot chocolate on the counter, and I step in to pick it up. Before I can make contact, a large hand darts in front of me and snatches it. Eyebrows knitted together, I turn around, ready to call the person out, and find myself face-to-face with Diego, the Hawks' goalie.

"Hi, Isla." He smiles, his deep brown eyes glimmering. "I saw you through the window and thought I would come in and say hi."

"Hi." I hold out my hand. "Give me my drink, please."

"Are you heading back to the dorms?" he asks, tilting his head to the side, his dark hair falling into his eyes.

"Yeah. Why?"

"Can I keep you company? Or maybe convince you to stay here and have a coffee with me?"

Uncertainty rises inside me. My natural reaction is to wonder what his motive is. "Why?"

"So we can get to know each other." He pushes my drink into my hand. "I've been curious about you. I'd love to know more." A red hue creeps over his cheeks; in response, mine heat too. "No pressure, obviously. Just a friendly chat."

He's tall and broad-shouldered, his hair dark and curly, his skin a warm brown. Objectively, he's handsome, but all I can think about is how different he is from the boy who lives in my dreams and consumes my every waking thought. Is hanging out with Diego really a good idea? I don't want to lead him on or give him false hope. Uncertainty tightens in my chest. This feels…wrong.

He gently pokes me in my forehead, an open smile playing on his lips. I flinch before I can stop myself. He notices and immediately takes a step back, giving me more space.

"It's just a drink, I promise."

The barista clears his throat, and I turn to look at him. “Sorry, does this guy make you uncomfortable?”

I blink, my cheeks burning. And now, I’m making a scene. Exactly what I don’t need.

Diego shifts awkwardly, the tips of his ears redden. “No, no, we’re just talking.” He ducks his head. “Or *do I* make you uncomfortable?”

I know this is stupid, but I feel bad for putting him in this position. This isn’t the first time we’ve talked, and while he’s flirty, he never pushes it. He kind of leaves the ball in my court, letting me decide how I want to engage with him.

“Okay.” I check the time on my watch. “But I only have thirty minutes before I need to head home and get to bed.”

“You and your routine.” He shakes his head and then gestures at a table in front of the window. “Why don’t you sit? I’ll order coffee and be right there.”

While he strides to the counter, I sit at the table and unlock my phone, rereading Mom’s last text.

Michael’s parents have always been amazing to me. Their house felt like home, almost as comforting as my own. For years, I went there for movie nights, lunches that turned into dinners, and sleepovers no one ever questioned. I was never just his friend there. I was family. Until our friendship imploded, and I left for Boston.

Uncle Colton was surprised when he showed up at the hospital with Meg and found me sitting by Michael’s bed. I could see it in his eyes. But he said nothing other than “thank you.” And when Aunt Ava arrived, she didn’t ask why I was there either. She hugged me extra tight and thanked me for being with her son.

They let me stay. They let me talk to him after he woke up.

I wasn’t sure I should, but when I saw him hit like that, laying on the ground afterward, something inside me shattered. Every reason I’d come up with to stay away seemed insignificant. The idea of never seeing him again was worse than any anger I’d been holding on to.

In that cleaning closet, he asked me if I still cared. He asked me again in his room. But I didn’t know how to answer. After the crash, admitting out loud that I still care came more easily than I expected.

My feelings for him never disappeared. They just…went quiet. Like they’d fallen into some kind of hibernation. And now, they’re back, louder

than ever, stirred awake by stolen kisses and the surfacing of old truths.

I like him. Too much, I think.

But liking him has never been simple. I don't know if it's wise to revisit our past. Even with some cards on the table after our talk at the rink, there are a lot of other things we have yet to discuss. And maybe that's the part that scares me most.

"So." Diego puts a stop to my thoughts as he plops down in the chair across from me. "I haven't seen you in a while. How are you? Were you at the game on Saturday?"

"I'm fine. Busy, but that's nothing new." I lift a shoulder. "And no, I wasn't at the game. I was in Boston last week, and then I went home to spend some time with my folks." I tip my head. "But I heard the Hawks won, so congratulations."

"Thank you." His lips kick up on one side. "I've always been a huge fan of your dad, actually. He's a very impressive dude. He built a legacy with the Mustangs."

Lips pressed together, I dip my chin. Then, I break into a speech I memorized years ago. "Dad is a very dedicated athlete. He doesn't half-ass anything. He gives it his all, sometimes at the expense of his health, but never at the expense of his family." I sigh, and before I realize I've said it, I confide in him a little more than I probably should. "I need to be more like him. Right now, I feel like I have tunnel vision, and the only thing I'm focused on is my career."

"And what an impressive career it is," he praises, leaning forward a little. "You fascinate me. Really. Watching you on the ice? It's just…wow."

An older couple exits the café. Just outside the open door, a car door slams shut. The sound is so loud and sharp, it startles me and sends a shiver down my spine.

"Thanks. Um…" I clear my throat and shift in my seat, focusing on Diego again. "What about you? What are you planning to do after graduation?"

"I've been drafted, thankfully, so I'll head to Seattle to play pro."

"Congratulations." Smiling brightly, I pat his hand on the table.

The door chimes, and I unwittingly glance at the entrance. When my attention is snagged by a pair of eyes I know even better than my own, my body locks up. He zeroes in on the table, on my hand, his brows pinched and his face dark. Clearly, he's not here for coffee. Fantastic. I wasn't sure it

was a good idea to accept Diego's offer to sit and have coffee together, and now, I know I was right.

Dressed in a black hoodie and black sweatpants, Michael strides across the café. An easy smile breaks over his lips, but by the storm raging in his eyes, he's anything but happy.

"Flores, my man." He snatches a chair from a nearby table and drags it over to ours before dropping into it. "And Isla. What a pleasant surprise."

Diego's mouth turns down in a puzzled frown. "Hey. What are you doing here?"

"I was heading back to the dorms and saw you two." He studies Diego, then me, keeping his tone and expression light. "Decided to come and say hi."

"Well, hi," Diego replies, his tone a little sharp. "Now you can go. Isla and I don't need your company."

The fake smile Michael has been wearing slips, and he leans forward, lips flattened. "Who are you to tell me what to do?" He surveys me, his expression softening a fraction, though it hardens again quickly. "And what gives you the right to speak on Isla's behalf? If she wants me gone, she can tell me so herself. She and I go a long way back. Since we were little. I don't need you stepping in for her."

Diego scowls. "What's your problem? I'm trying to make sure she's comfortable."

"Lemme think about it." Michael sits back in his chair and crosses his arms, his chin lifted. "I'm afraid at the moment, my problem is you."

"Michael, stop," I say.

He doesn't bother looking my way this time. He's too busy glaring at Diego.

"Right now, this isn't two teammates talking." Diego lowers his voice. "This is me talking to a rich, entitled asshole. You walk around campus as if you're fucking royalty. As if you're so much better than the rest of us," he spits out. "Drafted, heading to New York at twenty. I get it—you grew up immersed in the NHL. Your dad, his friends, his teammates, agents. You're on a first-name basis with half the league, and you think that makes you untouchable." Licking his lips, he angles in, his face darkening. "In reality? You're nothing but Colton Thompson's son. Guys like me have to bend over backward to be noticed. We work relentlessly while you get special treatment because of the last name on your jersey." His eyes are cold and

glued to Michael. “And the most fucked-up thing is, you’re not even close to your dad’s level. You—”

“That’s enough!” I snap.

Anger bubbles up inside me, my skin burning, my cheeks on fire. I get that Diego is frustrated and angry, but his comment is untrue. Michael has worked as hard as any hockey player I’ve ever known. Maybe harder, because he wants to step out from his dad’s shadow. He’s been under public scrutiny his whole life, and he’s busted his ass to prove he’s not just his dad’s last name.

I meet Diego’s eyes. “I said yes to coffee, but not to this bullshit. And I definitely didn’t ask you to speak to Michael like that. You have no idea how wrong you are. I’ve seen how hard he works and what it costs him.”

“If I were you, I’d get up and walk out now. I’m saying this as your teammate,” Michael growls. “If I were the rich, entitled asshole you say I am, I wouldn’t hesitate to tell you to fuck off and then punch you in your smug face.”

“Whatever.” Jaw clenched, Diego turns to me. “See you around, Isla.”

“I don’t think so.” I clear my throat and straighten in my chair. “What you said about Michael crossed the line for me.”

Without another word, he’s gone. Michael sits still, shoulders tense, hands balled into fists.

“What he said was bullshit,” I tell him. “You’re an amazing player, and you deserve—”

“What were you even doing here with him?” he snaps, face red with fury. “Were you on a date?”

My heart lurches. “What? No. I came here for a hot chocolate, and he was here too.”

Michael grunts. “That doesn’t explain why you were so lovey-dovey with him. Smiling, touching his hand.”

Heat spreads over my skin, my anger drifting toward him. Lips pursed, I hold my head high. “I can’t do this right now. Not like this.” I stand and head toward the door.

To no one’s surprise, he follows me. Once outside, I discover Asher leaning against Michael’s SUV.

He grins. “Hey, sweet Isla. Fancy seeing you here.”

“Hi.” I turn away, heading toward campus.

Michael grasps my hand, halting me. “Where’s your car?” he asks.

“At the dorms.” I pull my hand out of his.

“Let me give you a ride.” He nods toward his car.

Stepping back, I shake my head once. “I’ll walk. Thanks.”

“Okay, I’ll walk with you then.” He stuffs his hands into his pockets and rocks back on his heels.

I groan, rubbing my forehead. “Michael, please. I’m not pushing you away. I just…” I exhale sharply. “I need space. Not because I don’t care, but because I’m being bombarded by so much right now.”

“You didn’t mind Flores in your space.”

Heart sinking, I meet his gaze. “Talking to someone for a few minutes in a café is nothing like dealing with…this.” I gesture between us. “With you.”

Lips pursed, he steps closer. “So, what? I’m supposed to leave?”

“For now? Yes. Because if we keep pushing like this, we’re going to hurt each other again.” I let out a deep breath, willing my body to relax. “You can’t give me a ride, and you can’t walk with me,” I add quietly. “Not today.”

If I stay with him right now, I’ll either say something I regret or let him push past my boundaries again.

“Call an Uber,” he says, jaw tight. “Otherwise, we’re back to you accepting either the ride or my company on the walk.”

Annoyed yet slightly impressed by his concern for my well-being, I nod. “Fine.”

I pull out my phone and order a ride. My point here isn’t to prove anything to Michael. Honestly, it’s the only way I know how to keep this from blowing up.

“Happy?” I ask quietly, not looking at him. “Please…just give me time to think.”

He skirts me, and for a moment, I think he’s actually going to listen and get out of here. Instead, he joins Asher, leaning against his SUV and crossing his legs at the ankles. “I’ll wait.”

And he does.

The next four minutes are the longest in history. Michael and Asher stand like statues in all their imposing glory. Asher’s shit-eating grin plays on my nerves. And Michael’s attention? It’s like a physical weight. A caress.

So, I unlock my phone and doomscroll, trying and failing to ignore his scrutiny. When my car arrives, I climb in without looking at them, press my

back into the leather seat and close my eyes.

As the car pulls away from the curb, I open my eyes and get situated. I buckle my seat belt, when movement out of the rear window catches my eye, and I crane my neck to look.

Micheal's SUV is also pulling away from the curb. Dammit. They aren't going to follow me…are they?

It only takes a few more seconds to be sure that's exactly what they're doing.

Just like the other night, Asher is behind the steering wheel, following the Uber, while Michael is in the passenger seat—close enough to see, far enough behind to give me space. Always there. Always watching.

Warmth settles low in my stomach, and a smile I definitely didn't plan for tugs at my lips. Michael's jealousy will need to be addressed sooner rather than later.

But this?

This is care.

Not control. Not possession. He's making sure I get home safe, not taking over or making choices for me.

Ten out of fucking ten.

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CHAPTER THIRTY

you've always belonged in my circle

ISLA

Nineteen years old

THE DINING HALL IS FULL OF PEOPLE, OF SOUNDS AND SMELLS, BUT I DON'T really pay attention to anything. Even my lunchbox with the grilled chicken, rice, and veggies I cooked yesterday is no more than just a decoration. My gaze is glued to the only guy I've always liked watching from afar.

Michael sits with his teammates, chatting and laughing, as if nothing can perturb him. Like the whole place belongs to him. And I think it does. He has an ability to command a room, to attract attention without even trying. All he needs to do is to just be himself, and everyone will be happy to orbit around him. Including me.

The way his presence sets my skin aflame is something out of this world. All I want is to be closer, even if it means I'll burn. He makes me feel like I'm losing control, and this is exactly what makes me avoid him, what makes me take a step back, even though all my heart wants is to take a step forward and be open with him.

But it's hard to break a circle, hard to change the habits I use to protect myself.

My therapist once told me all my rules, routines, and discipline are just ways of keeping my anxiety quiet. I'm also having trouble with being vulnerable, because relying on myself feels safer than giving someone the power to hurt me.

Most people don’t know about any of it, and I’m not looking to change it.

Michael lifts his hand and subtly fixes his nose ring. Probably a habit, because I’ve seen him do it a few times since I noticed him here. He’s in a white T-shirt and light blue jeans. His tattoos on his arms and neck add even more allure, drawing me in like a moth to a flame—which is precisely the problem. I should be focusing on literally anything else, yet here I am, wondering if he has more tattoos hidden beneath his clothes. I want to know everything about the ink he has running over his skin, about his reasons to get so many. I remember him being fascinated by my dad’s tatts, but I never thought he’d actually go for it.

The buzzing of my phone snags my attention, and when I see the caller ID, a small smile pulls at my lips. Speak of the devil.

“Hey, Dad.” I press my phone to my ear, angling my body slightly so I’m no longer staring at Michael.

“Hey. I hope I’m not distracting you. I checked the time, and it seems like you should’ve a break.”

“You’re fine. I’m at the dining hall. How are you?” I take a fork and shove some food into my mouth.

“I’m good. We all are, actually.” He chuckles. “Except for the fact that I miss my baby girl.”

“Dad.” I feign being annoyed while my chest expands so full, my heart feels tight.

“What? It was one thing when you were in Boston, but it’s completely different when you’re just an hour away from us. Tell me you’re going to visit soon.”

“I am. Maybe next week.” I take a sip of my water. “But it works both ways, Dad. You’re welcome to come visit me whenever you want.”

“Really?” His tone of voice turns lighter. “If I come, will you introduce me to your friends?”

“Absolutely.”

“And I’ll get to meet your roommate?”

“One hundred percent. Blake will be ecstatic to meet you. She’s a fan.”

“I’m ecstatic to meet her too,” he says cheerfully. “What about Michael?”

Suddenly, a mouthful of food I just swallowed feels like it’s ready to come back. I grab my water bottle and take a big sip. “What…” I clear my

throat. “What do you mean?”

“Well, I didn’t really want to intrude, and your mom said we should give you time to tell us everything on your own, but it doesn’t seem to work,” Dad explains. “You and Michael were inseparable before you moved to Boston, and now, you’re in the same college, you live in the same dorm. You saw him crash his bike and were at the hospital with him. It’s clear he’s back in your life. So…will I see him if I come visit you?”

My gaze drifts back to his table on autopilot.

There are more people now, not just his teammates. Two cheerleaders have joined them. One of them, a blonde with a high ponytail, is saying something to him, leaning in closer than necessary. He laughs at whatever she says.

Something twists in my chest. My jaw ticks. I force myself to look away and focus on my lunchbox instead. It’s stupid. He can talk to whoever he wants.

“It’s…complicated,” I mutter.

“Complicated how?” Dad asks softly.

“Every time he gets close, I find a reason to pull back.”

Because getting close to him feels like standing at center ice in front of the judges before a program, knowing there’s no way to control what happens once the music starts.

“Why?”

I think about the café. About the way he looked at me when he saw me with Diego. About how angry he was. About how hurt he was.

The truth is, I never wanted to hurt him. I just didn’t want to be rude, didn’t want to make things awkward, didn’t want to disappoint anyone.

And still, I ended up disappointing the one person who always mattered the most.

“I don’t know,” I say on an exhale.

Dad stays quiet, giving me time to voice what’s on my mind. I sneak a glance at Michael again, the pit in my stomach only growing. He’s talking to his teammate now, but a cheerleader with blonde hair is still beside him, still too close to him.

“We started talking recently, and things started getting better between us. But I did something stupid a few days ago.”

“Like what?”

I sigh. “Like trying not to upset everyone else.” I tighten my grip around my phone. “I keep telling myself I’m just being nice. Or avoiding drama. Or giving myself time to figure things out.” I swallow, remembering the look on his face when he asked if I was on a date with Diego. “But somehow, he’s always the one getting hurt. Because I don’t know how to set boundaries with people I don’t even care about.”

“You know,” Dad says slowly, “that’s almost exactly what I did.”

“What do you mean?”

“When I was in college, someone got hurt because of me. Or more like because they were too close to me. It broke me, messed me up pretty badly. I carried a lot of guilt, feeling like I ruined this person’s life.” He takes a deep breath. “Years later, when your mom and I were already dating, I got a chance to make things right for this person. I thought I was helping. I thought I was being a good person. I thought I could keep everyone happy. The guilt wasn’t as raw anymore.” His voice gets quieter, and I press my phone to my ear harder, afraid to miss what he has to say. “Turns out, while I was trying to keep everyone happy, while I was trying to be nice, not setting any boundaries…I was hurting your mom instead.”

I lick my parched lips. “Did you…make it right?”

“Uh-huh, but not before I lost her.”

My heart skips a bit at his admission.

“Losing your mom was an eye-opening experience. It also hurt like hell, and the year I spent without her was the worst in my life.” He clears his throat. “If making everyone happy and being nice and not setting boundaries hurts people who matter to you, I don’t think it’s right. It will only lead to you having regrets.”

I peer at Michael. “I think I already have them.”

“Then don’t make the same mistakes I did,” he murmurs.

By the time I finish my conversation, Michael and his teammates are gone.

As I head to my car, I’m lost in my thoughts, considering whether I have time to stop by the rink to visit Coach Gonzalez before I go to the dance

studio. I'm a few steps from my driver's side door when a large frame blocks my path.

Coming to an abrupt stop, I look up.

"Hi." Diego gives me a sheepish smile, shoving his hands into his jean pockets.

"What are you doing here?" I ask, clasping the strap of my backpack.

"Can we, um, talk for a second?"

I raise an eyebrow and then nod. I might as well get this over with.

He rubs the back of his neck. "I wanted to apologize."

"To me?"

He lets out a short laugh, shaking his head. "I owe Thompson an apology. What I said wasn't fair."

Confusion settles inside me. "Then why are you talking to me?"

"Because I said some dumb shit." He shrugs. "And because I don't want you thinking I'm *that* guy. I feel awful about this whole thing."

"Okay."

Silence settles between us, but I don't hurry to fill it.

His lips turn down. "That's all what you have to say?"

"What else is there?"

He chuckles, his eyes darting away and his cheeks turning pink. "I don't know. Most people usually have a response."

"I'm not most people." I lift my chin. "I appreciate that you want to apologize to Michael, but I'm not interested."

He studies me for a second, then nods. "Okay. I guess…that's it." He steps out of my way. "For what it's worth, Thompson is a lucky guy." He takes another step back. "See you."

Only when he's halfway across the lot do I unlock my car and slide inside. As I settle into my seat, realization sets in, and a smile blooms on my face. While I was polite, I wasn't exactly nice. I set boundaries, and the world didn't stop rotating.

It feels good.

AFTER I LEAVE Coach Gonzalez's office, I stop in the middle of the hall, frowning. I should be on my way to the dance studio, but the sounds of the

blades scraping the ice, the pucks hitting the boards, and whistles make me pause.

It's been so long since I saw Michael on the ice, and my curiosity keeps growing. I can stay a bit longer and still make it to dance on time.

So, I head to the glass. Instantly, my attention is drawn to Michael. Just the sight of him in his jersey with number 17 on his back makes my heart flutter the way it always used to.

He veers to the side, passing the first defenseman. He doesn't rush it, doesn't force anything. Then, as he cuts toward the net, he shifts his weight, and, with a lift of his stick, he releases the puck. It flies into the top corner, whizzing right past Diego's head.

"Yes," I whisper, throwing a fist in the air.

As Coach blows a whistle and the team resets, Diego adjusts his mask, shaking his head like he's frustrated by how easily Michael got the biscuit past him. He better get used to it. Michael is just that good.

He wins another face off and rushes toward the net, Asher by his side. The defenseman picks up his pace, trying to close the gap, but Michael slows a little, faking him out, making him second guess himself. I smile, warmth rekindling in my abdomen. He's always been really good at getting into his opponents' heads.

Diego is locked on Michael, determined to stop any shot he makes.

I bite my bottom lip and hold my breath, watching Michael's every move. He angles in, stickhandling, then slows again, dragging the moment out, messing with Diego on purpose. He wants him to make a mistake.

And, oh boy, he does.

Diego drops. It's too early—even *I* know that. Michael easily sends the puck into the net again. The sound rings out across the rink, followed by a slew of curses from Diego as he slaps his stick against the post.

For years, people have compared Michael to Uncle Colton, equating him to his dad's shadow. That's never been the case for me. He's incredible in his own way. Watching him now, I'm even more certain he has a great future ahead of him. One day, his name will be in the Hall of Fame alongside his dad's.

Like he can sense me, he looks my way, his eyes meeting mine across the rink. He pushes his helmet up, as if he isn't sure it's really me. I wave at him, the back of my neck heating. I expect a wave in return, maybe a quick

nod. Instead, he motions to the door in the boards, then pushes off and skates toward it.

By the time I step to the door and meet him here, my heart is ready to escape my chest. *Dammit*.

“Hey,” I murmur.

“Hi.” He smiles, his eyes glimmering. “How long have you been here?”

“Long enough to see you score twice.” I lift my chin toward the net. “Diego doesn’t look happy.”

“Maybe he’s having an off day.”

“Or maybe you’re just so much better.” I give him a bright smile. “He reached out to me. Told me he felt awful for what he said to you. I told him I wasn’t the one he needed to apologize to.”

His return smile falls. “I don’t need his apologies.”

“Okay.” I bite my bottom lip. “I saw you at the dining hall today.”

“Really?” His eyebrows hit his hairline. “Why didn’t you say hi?”

“You looked busy.”

“I was with my teammates.”

A whistle sounds, and he darts a look over his shoulder.

“I didn’t want to interrupt.” I shrug. “We’ve always run in different circles. I don’t see that changing now.”

“Thompson, get over here!” a deep voice bellows.

“Sorry, I need to go.” He steps back and then swings his gaze back to me. “You’ve always belonged in my circle.” He winks. “Don’t be a stranger.”

I stay for a few more minutes, my eyes never leaving his form, the butterflies in my stomach fluttering wildly. When I finally leave, the smile that plays on my lips makes my cheeks hurt.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

happy halloween

MICHAEL

Nineteen years old

I THINK I'VE BEEN INSIDE THE CAMPUS LIBRARY TWICE. THAT'S SAD, I guess, but I've never had the urge. If my grandma knew, she'd give me a lecture, I'm sure. She's a librarian on a college campus in Michigan, and, all my life, she's gushed about the place and her work. Then, there's Mom and her obsession with books. She created a PR company and works with authors, helping them achieve their goals, and five years ago, she became a literary agent. I've never seen her happier than when one of her authors gets a deal with a traditional publisher and makes the bestseller lists.

I may not share her passion, but she's inspiring as hell.

Women like Mom hold all the power in the world, no matter what most men think. My dad taught me that, and I live by the statement. It's never failed me.

As I stroll past bookshelves, people look up from the tables where they're working or reading, but I don't pay them any attention. I'm here to find Isla. Nothing else matters. Finally, I clock her near the window. She's sitting with her roommate, several books lying open on the desk between them as they type on their laptops. Her hair is pulled up in a messy bun, leaving her face and neck exposed. Focus trained on her screen, she chews on her bottom lip. Her brows tense and relax every so often as she types. She's in a pastel blue tee, the light color delicious against her skin.

Her roommate elbows her, and she yanks her hands away from the keyboard.

Only then do I even bother to look at the blue-haired girl. She stares at me with one eyebrow arched, a calculating smile tipping her lips.

With a sigh, I take a few steps and stop at their table.

"Hey," I say quietly. "Ash said you'd be here."

"Hi. Tell Ash I'll stop talking to him if he can't keep things to himself." Her tone has no bite to it, and her lips twitch, her cheeks pinking as she tries to scold me. "This is Blake, my roommate. Not sure you two have actually met before."

I lock eyes with Blake and dip my chin "Hi. It's nice to officially meet you."

"You too." Grinning, she snaps her laptop shut and stands. "I'm hungry. Think I'll go get a snack. Do you want anything, Isla?"

Based on the way she widens her eyes at Blake, all she wants is for her roommate to sit her ass back down and not leave us alone. "Um, no, thanks. Come back here ASAP. If you don't, I won't share my notes."

Gasping, Blake presses her laptop to her chest. "The betrayal."

Isla huffs. "I'm serious."

"Fine, fine. I'll be back in fifteen minutes." She sets her laptop on the desk and then trudges away.

In the last two weeks, we've crossed paths more times than I can count—in the hallways, at the rink, and in the parking lot. We've shared quick hellos, done some small talk and exchanged warm smiles, but that's it. I haven't reached out. She asked for space, so, for once in my life, I've been trying to do the right thing.

Though I've never been super great at staying away from her. So, of course, I ended up at her morning practice again. I don't hide as I did before. Now, I sit right in the middle of the stands, making sure she knows I'm here.

Our little talk at the rink a week ago when I first showed up at her practice reappears in my brain, and I can't stop myself from smiling.

"Michael," she sighed, skating toward the boards right before her time started. "Should I ask Coach Gonzalez to kick you out?"

"Why? I'm not here to interrupt you or mess with your ice time. I've been waking up at five-thirty every morning for weeks just to watch you skate. It seems like my body can't sleep past then." I crooked a smile. "And

since you don't talk to me, I need to get my fix somehow. Watching you skate before my day starts is all the motivation I need."

The way her eyes sparkled made my skin hum. Then, with a suppressed smile, she skated away. And that was how I knew she didn't mind me being here.

She's been busting her ass on the ice and at off-ice practice, all while taking a full course load, and the last thing I've wanted is to add pressure, to become another thing she had to deal with.

But fuck, I miss her.

A lot.

I round the table and take Blake's vacant chair.

Isla half-turns to me, her eyes glimmering with warmth. "What are you doing here?"

My chest opens with relief. "Just wanted to see you."

She smiles. "You've seen me twice today."

"In passing, sure, but I miss talking to you. I miss being close to you." I snag the seat of her chair and pull her closer to me. "That's better."

"You're ridiculous." She lets out a quiet laugh, but she doesn't move back. "How are you?"

"Okay, I guess. Been busy with school and hockey. It's like Groundhog Day over and over, the same thing day in and day out. Most of the time, I don't even know what day it is."

"Poor you." She pats my knee.

A zing of excitement rushes through my body. One touch, and I'm ready to drop to the floor and beg her to do whatever she wants with me.

With her lip caught between her teeth, her expression turns pensive. "How are things between you and Diego now?"

I tsk. "He's my teammate, and I respect him as a player. Apart from that, I can't stand the guy." I narrow my eyes and lean forward. "The two of you still talk?"

She inches closer, a challenge flashing on her face. From this close, her scent envelops me, taking away some of the uncertainty flowing through me. "Other than saying hi to each other in passing, no, we don't talk."

I don't want her to be friendly with him. I don't want her to be friendly with any other guy. It's even hard watching her interact so easily with Asher.

But I don’t want her to be friendly with me either. The things I want to do to her have no business being part of a simple friendship.

“Okay.”

She shakes her head, smiling. “That was the most unconvincing ‘okay’ I’ve ever heard.”

“You got me.” I take her hand in mine and massage the heel of her palm, enjoying her soft, warm skin. “How about coffee? Just you and me, so we can talk.”

“I can’t.”

My heart stutters a little. I didn’t expect a yes, at least not immediately, but the rejection still stings.

“Not because I don’t want to,” she murmurs, focusing on our joined hands. “I don’t know how your first year was, but I’m behind in most of my classes. All the hours on the ice, in the dance studio, and at the gym don’t leave me much time to study, and it’s affected my grades. I’m trying to catch up.”

Her explanation eases the knots in my muscles and gives me hope.

“Yeah, my first year was no joke, but my schedule is easier to manage now. Though that could be because I’m just doing what I need to do to get by for now, since I’m leaving after I finish this year.” I twine my fingers with hers, memorizing the feel of her long, slender fingers. “Are you going to the Halloween party at the frat house?”

“I think so. Blake mentioned it, and I’d love to.” She’s still zeroed in on our locked fingers. “I don’t think I ever went to a Halloween party back home.”

Her words are like tiny cuts with a sharp knife. I hate how little she experienced when we were teenagers. I hate even more that I played a role in taking away some of her opportunities. If we hadn’t fallen apart, if she hadn’t moved to Boston…if I hadn’t fucked it all up by letting that stupid dare play out and then hiding it from her, the last few years would’ve been so different.

I want to fix it.

“Then I promise you an amazing time at the party.” I drink her in, utterly mesmerized by her beauty. “What are you going to wear?”

“Nuh-uh. I’m not telling you.” She wags a finger. “And you don’t tell me what you’re wearing either. I want it to be a surprise.”

“Okay. But don’t think I won’t find you. I always will.”

We smile at each other, falling quiet. It's comfortable, familiar. I soak it in, but when she eventually glances at her laptop, I sigh, knowing I should let her study.

"Do you mind if I stay here a bit longer?" I release her hand, instantly missing her warmth.

"Please do." Her words are soft, barely audible, but they echo in my head as I pull a textbook from my backpack.

With the book propped open, I drape my arm over the back of her chair and draw circles on her shoulder as I start reading the notes I made.

When she doesn't move away, I mentally high-five myself. She's typing away, occasionally checking her textbook, when Blake returns. The girl with blue hair slides her laptop across the table and sits across from us, wearing a grin.

I can't help but smile in return.

From the look of things, she doesn't mind me spending time with Isla. More so, it seems like she approves.

ASHER HANDS ME A BEER, taps his against it, takes off his Jason Voorhees-style hockey mask, and sets it on the counter. "Happy Halloween."

"Happy Halloween." I chuckle. The Ghostface mask is propped on the top of my head as I tip my beer back. "I still can't believe you went with the *Friday the 13th* mask."

"Oh, because you're so original in your *Scream* mask?"

"Touché."

Music reverberates through the walls of the house. The air is hot and humid, making me really consider whether I want to put my mask back on. So far, I've spent the night people-watching. It's been interesting. The costumes alone are entertaining. A lot of people showed up in full-body costumes. Then, there were the usual masks, wings, and horns. In a black tee, black pants, and a Ghostface mask, I'm maybe a little underdressed, but the effort is what counts.

"Ready to go back in there?" Ash nods toward the living room.

"Yeah, I still need to find Isla." I set my beer on the counter. "I have no idea what she's dressed as."

“I don’t know either. What’s with the pink wig and the drawings on her face? Who is she supposed to be?”

My spine snaps straight. “You saw her and didn’t tell me?”

He slaps a hand over his eyes and hangs his head. “Her IG. She posted a picture of her costume in her Stories.”

Defeat washes over me. Dammit. The profile I still don’t have access to.

But now, I know what to look for.

I put my mask in place, wandering out of the kitchen without waiting for Asher. Right away, I’m back to observing the crowd, and before long, a pink wig catches my attention. Beside it is someone dressed as Velma Dinkley. In this costume, her face is completely exposed, so it’s easy to tell it’s Blake.

Without hesitating, I stalk toward them. The whole way there, I rack my brain, trying to figure out who Isla is dressed as. She’s half-turned toward the crowd, the side of her face covered in black markings. As they become clearer, recognition sets in, and a smile breaks over my lips. I should’ve known.

I stop at her side, facing her. As if she feels my presence, she immediately turns and freezes. Her attention flicks to my mask, and her breath hitches as she presses her hand to her chest. “Jesus, Ghostface. Could you not sneak up on people like that? You almost gave me a heart attack.”

Without a word, I drink her in. Long pink wig. Black markings drawn along her cheekbones and jaw, a black line over her pert nose and an ornament on her forehead. Her makeup is impeccable, and, to top it all off, she’s wearing red contacts. She’s dressed as Sukuna from *Jujutsu Kaisen*, and her fitted black dress hugs every soft line of her body, easily making her the hottest girl at the party.

“Hello, dude.” Blake waves her hand in front of my face. “You’re kinda creeping us out.”

With a snort, I lift the mask, propping it on the top of my head. “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“Dammit, Thompson.” Blake laughs. “In that mask, you *really* look scary.”

“Just wait until you see Asher. He’s dressed as Jason Voorhees.”

“What’s the obsession with serial killers?” Isla pouts.

“Fictional serial killers.” Ducking, I catch her eye. “You’re not much different. Sukuna was no saint, from what I remember.”

She blinks, her jaw dropping. “Um, you know who I am?”

“Yeah. From *Jujutsu Kaisen*. Though, from what I remember, the pink hair isn’t canon.” I gently touch her cheek with my fingertips, making sure not to smudge her makeup. “The markings, though? They look perfect, and so do you.”

“Thank you.” Her skin is hot, just like the fire now burning in her eyes. “I didn’t think you’d know. You weren’t into anime.”

“I watched it with you all the time.” I shrug. “It grew on me.”

I don’t tell her that even though we were apart, even after all the hurt and heartbreak between us, I watched anime as often as I had with her, every night before bed so it became a habit I couldn’t break, even after she left for Boston. I was clinging to something to connect me to her, even in the smallest of ways, to the point that some of those characters now live on my skin.

For a while, we stay like this, caught in one another’s orbit, together but not touching. Eventually, we join the hockey team, and, to my relief, Isla is relaxed and smiley.

Before long, though, Blake tells her she wants to find her sister, and the two of them scurry off with a quick goodbye.

Forty minutes later, when she still hasn’t come back, I make my way to the kitchen for a drink, searching the room for her as I go. I find her holding a red plastic cup, but she’s not with Blake. Some dude is standing too close, his hip propped against the cupboard, wearing a lazy smile, his eyes glassy. He’s not touching her, but just the sight of him hovering over her like that makes my body go taut.

Fuck no.

Muscles tensing, I stomp toward them.

“I’m not really in the mood for this,” Isla says.

He chuckles. “C’mon, I’m just curious. I have no idea what this all means.”

“I’m dressed as a character from one of my favorite anime.” Her words are clipped. She avoids looking at him. The tension in her shoulders is unmistakable. “Who cares what my costume is? It’s not like I came here naked.”

“Maybe you should’ve,” he retorts, excitement flashing in his eyes. “Your body—”

I drop a hand to his shoulder roughly, and, luckily, he shuts up. He peers at me, and when he registers my identity, his eyes widen. While I have no idea who he is, he surely has no trouble placing me.

His comment about her body buzzes in my head, but I rein in the urge to clock him in the face. “Watch how you talk to her,” I grit through my teeth.

He scoffs. “It was a compliment.”

I take off my mask, brows pulled together. “Does it seem like I’m asking?”

“Dammit, you’re like a fucking dog marking your territory.” He rolls his shoulder so my hand falls. Focusing on Isla, he says, “Good luck with whatever it is.”

With that, he stalks away.

I turn to her, and she shakes her head. “I could’ve dealt with him myself,” she mutters. “He’s in one of my classes. He came up to me like a minute before you showed up and asked about my costume.”

“Fine, but what about when he started talking about your body? That didn’t sound like a casual conversation.”

She humphs. “Was he inappropriate? Yeah. But I wasn’t really listening to him.” She lifts her chin. “I was going to send him packing the moment I got my drink.”

I run a hand down my face. “Isla, that’s not what I’m saying.”

“Doesn’t matter. I didn’t ask you to manage my space. I can handle myself.”

My gut twists. She’s right. And this need to protect her anyway scares the hell out of me.

“This dude was pushing his luck. He was crossing a line, and he definitely wasn’t taking the hint.”

“I’m not yours,” she says, her voice flat, not angry. “Maybe everything that happened when we were kids was supposed to happen,” she continues quietly. “I always thought we’d be more. But maybe this”—she gestures vaguely between us—“is how it’s meant to be.”

She turns away, walking off fast, like if she doesn’t leave now, she’ll break.

Absolutely the fuck not.

I follow her, ignoring the growing pit in my stomach. I’ve given her all kinds of space, and it hasn’t done me any favors. We need to fucking talk.

“Isla, stop,” I say as we step into a dark hallway.

She doesn’t listen. Shocker.

With one big stride, I catch up and grasp her wrist, making her stagger back.

She tugs free of my hold and whirls around. “What?”

“Look, I’m trying…I’m trying to give you space. To do this right for once. To not push.” I pull the mask off the top of my head and thread my fingers through my hair. “But hearing you say you’re not mine”—I falter, my voice breaking—“wrecks me. I didn’t like seeing you with other guys when I was ten, and I sure as hell don’t like it now.” My chest aches. “I know I haven’t earned the right to feel that way, but I can’t help it. All I want is to make things right. To show you who I am now. To get to know the new you. To talk about all the things that went wrong between us. That talk at the arena was the tip of the iceberg. We have so much more to work through.”

Eyes softening, she steps closer, her chest rising and falling quickly. “I’m not playing a game. I swear. I pull away because if I don’t…I will keep wanting more. And when it comes to you, wanting more has a way of turning into losing control.” She splays a hand on my chest, peering up at me. Her red irises are strange, but the rest of her expression is familiar. “You have no idea how hard it is for me to keep my distance.” She emphasizes the point by gripping my tee. “And there’s no competition. *None*. You wouldn’t even recognize the Isla who doesn’t have a crush on you.” She licks her lips, eyes burning into mine. “Because she doesn’t exist. It’s plagued me since we were kids. It never went away. It just—”

I drop my mask to the floor and cup her face, cutting her off. Her words steal the last of my self-control.

Without letting her finish, I kiss her, hard and fiery.

Her mouth moves against mine, and when she swipes her tongue along the seam of my lips, I open, letting her in, and back her against the wall. We explore one another, her fingers clutching my tee.

My whole being ignites, burning hot.

She digs her nails into my stomach through my T-shirt, and the sensation grounds me.

I gently slip my hand behind the long pink wig and relish the heat of her nape. That’s when it hits me: this isn’t just want.

It’s an undiluted need. This is Isla. The girl who’s been under my skin since we were kids. The one constant I could never let go of, no matter how

much I wanted to.

Fuck, I burn for her. No one has ever made me feel like this. This sensation is nothing like what I experienced while fooling around, while exploring, sating my curiosity.

This is terrifyingly real.

She breaks away, gasping. “Why was I keeping my distance? I can’t remember.”

Chuckling, I take her hand in mine. “Because you love to complicate things.”

“Not true,” she bites back, though her lips twitch.

Without releasing her, I shuffle down the hall. The first two doors I try are locked. The third leads into the bathroom, and once we step inside, I lock the door. The lights are off, casting us in the low glow of the streetlight outside. The blinds are closed, muting even that.

As the music pulses through the walls, my body vibrates, my nerve endings firing.

I press her against the door and dive back in, kissing her hard and unrelenting. She matches my fervor, her hands slipping under my tee and exploring my abs.

Circling her waist, I yank her against me. She’s soft in my arms, her skin burning under my touch.

Lips on her cheek, down her chin, I leave a trail of open-mouthed kisses.

She moans, arching her back, and when I slowly lower to my knees in front of her, I swear, she whimpers.

Her eyes are on me, her lips parted as I guide the hem of her dress up her legs until her black thong is on full display. *Fucking hell*. I didn’t think it was possible to want her more, yet here I am. My brain really is fixed on a single focus, and it’s Isla. She’s all I want.

“I want to taste you,” I tell her.

A beautiful smile breaks over her lips. She trails her hand down from her collarbone to her tits, then down to her panties. Back arched, she widens her stance and pushes her panties to the side.

The sight of her wet pussy makes my breath hitch and all my blood rush south.

Without a moment’s pause, I dive in and suck her clit into my mouth.

In response, she lets out a loud moan, the best sound in the world. Her reaction spurs me on. Lapping at her, I cup her ass, bringing her closer to my mouth. I lick and suck, alternating between soft and hard. She's soaked, urging me on. My cock throbs against my fly, signaling there's a good chance I'll come in my pants, but I don't fucking care.

"You taste so good," I murmur against her clit. "So fucking perfect."

Slipping one finger inside her, I suck hard on her clit. I add a second, then a third, sinking them knuckle deep and fucking her with them while I use my lips and tongue to work her over.

"Michael… Oh my God…" She pants. "I've never… Oh fuck…"

I keep up the rhythm, dragging the pads of my fingers over her inner walls and twirling my tongue over her clit. When she moans loudly, I pick up the pace. Her hips buck in time with my movements, and when she digs her fingers into my scalp, I know she's almost there.

She tugs, shoving her cunt in my face.

Obediently, I give her more, sucking on her clit, dragging my teeth over the bundle of nerves. Her insides spasm around my fingers, an orgasm taking over. As she rides out her release, I don't stop. I lap at her clit, circling it over and over again, prolonging her release.

A hot energy zips through my lower abdomen and goes straight to my dick. I hold back a groan, but there's no stopping my own release. Fuck. Coming in my pants is new to me, but I have zero regrets.

When I finally stand, my heart is racing, and my blood rushes in my ears. I brush a few strands of hair from her wig from her forehead, careful with her makeup.

Eyes hooded, she slumps against the door.

"I gave you space. I took a step back, but I can't do this anymore. I can't stay away from you, so that's how it's going to go," I tell her.

"I'm all ears," she murmurs, the corners of her mouth trembling.

"Do you really think that could be considered a mistake?" I ask quietly.

"No."

I gently grip her chin, guiding her face up so she's forced to look at me. "What we have isn't a mistake. True or not true?"

Her eyes search mine, the color disconcerting, but I wait with my heart in my throat.

She smiles. "True."

The tight knot in my chest unravels. It's been there since high school, aching and uncomfortable, but with that one simple word, it eases. Not fully, but enough to make breathing easier.

I kiss her lips, slow and tender. When I'm on the brink of passing out from lack of oxygen, I release her and burrow into the crook of her neck, inhaling and immediately comforted by the peach and vanilla scent that swamps me. "Let's get out of here."

"I…want to stay. I just… I told you before, I never went to parties like this."

Her response stings, but I don't let it show. Instead, I straighten, grimacing at the wet, sticky sensation in my boxer briefs, and take a step back.

She follows, looping her arms around my torso. "You'll stay with me, right?"

My body sings with triumph, my skin tingling.

I swallow and hug her back. "Yeah, I'll stay."

Because this is where I'm supposed to be. Always has been.

By her side.

I take her hand in mine and lead us out of the room. sombr's "Back to Friends" plays as we step onto the dance floor, and it pulls a grin out of me. Not fucking possible for us to ever go back to being just friends.

I want this girl for life.

She twirls and drapes her arms around my neck. I slide my hands down her hips, holding her close. We smile, moving to the rhythm. I feel people's eyes on us, but with Isla? It doesn't matter. They can all watch her choosing me right in front of everyone.

So I bend my face and capture her lips with mine.

I'm hers, and I don't want it to be any other way.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

breathe with me, baby

MICHAEL

Nineteen years old

I PARK MY CAR BESIDE ISLA'S, AND, WITH A GRIN I CAN'T SEEM TO WIPE off, I climb out. After the party last night, when Asher and I brought Isla and her very drunk roommate home, my girl asked if we could get together tonight to finally talk and clear the air. Of course, I said yes. I've been waiting for this for weeks.

We made plans for six, but because I've been itching to see her, I'm twenty minutes early. I've missed her so damn much. With any luck, our talk will go well, and she won't balk when I ask if I can watch her practice again.

My phone buzzes in my pocket. When I pull it out, a picture of Dad with Meg and me flashes on my screen, so I swipe to answer. "Hey."

"Hi, kid. I was worried something happened to you."

I pause outside the building, my hand hovering over the doorknob. "What are you talking about?"

He laughs. "When was the last time you called us? I can't even remember. Sure, you text us, but that's not the same."

Dang. I've been so caught up in hockey, classes, and Isla, I really have stopped calling my parents. They call me, and I always tend to cut the conversation short.

"Sorry. Things are kinda hectic these days."

He chuckles. “I understand that. Your birthday is coming up. Any plans to come home? We’d love to take you out to dinner.”

“Sounds great.” I put the call on speaker and then open the Calendar app to check my schedule. “We’ll have a game on Saturday. I could drive home after and spend Sunday with you.”

“Awesome. Let’s do it.”

As much as I don’t want to rush Dad off the phone again, the arena closes in fourteen minutes, so I end the call, then head inside. The hallway is dark, the lights from the rink the only ones lighting up the space. An unfamiliar song echoes off the cinderblock walls as I walk toward the ice. The words are in French, I think. Maybe she chose it for her free skate program?

When I approach the ice, I scan it, expecting to see her spinning or jumping, but she’s not here. The music is the only sound, no skates scraping across the ice.

She could be in the locker room, but I don’t think she’d leave the music on if she were.

I step closer to the boards, frowning, a sixth sense telling me something isn’t right. Two more steps, and I see her.

Isla is sitting on the ice, arms wrapped around her knees, shoulders trembling. Her skates are still on, blades flat against the surface beneath her, and her head is bowed.

Something’s wrong, really fucking wrong.

I grip the door in the boards and lean forward. “Isla, hey,” I call out to her. “Baby, look at me.”

No response. She doesn’t even lift her head.

Fuck.

I step onto the ice in my sneakers, careful not to let my feet go out from beneath me, then make my way to her as fast as I can.

When I crouch beside her, adrenaline surges through me. Her breathing is fast and shallow.

Is she having a panic attack?

“Hey, I’m here,” I say, trying like hell to sound calm. All the while, my heart hammers inside my chest. “You’re okay. I’m here. Can you look at me?”

She’s trembling like a leaf when she finally lifts her head. When her eyes meet mine, the hair on my arms and nape stands on end.

Gaze glassy and unfocused, she shakes her head. “I c-can’t… I… I can’t…”

“That’s okay. I’m here, I’ll help you.” I slide an arm around her back. “I’ve got you, baby.”

I lift her, noting how stiff her body is and how violently she shakes. Without skates on, I creep slowly across the ice. If I fall, that’ll only make the situation exponentially worse. I’m scared shitless. It’s a feeling I’ve never experienced on the ice. I hold her against my chest, and she presses her face into my hoodie, her hands clutching at the fabric like she’s drowning.

I carry her into the sin bin, sit on the bench, and hold her close, letting my warmth seep into her.

“It’s okay,” I whisper into her hair. “You’re okay. Breathe. Just breathe. In—one, two, three, four, five. Out—one, two, three, four, five. Breathe with me, baby, please.” I demonstrate, inhaling, counting in my head, then exhaling.

Her breathing is erratic at first, her heart pounding against her ribs like a bird trapped inside a cage.

I close my eyes and whisper, counting from one to five, breathing in and breathing out.

It takes a lifetime, but eventually, her breathing evens out. The music is still playing, but the sound is dampened, like time has been divided into two parts: before I stepped inside, and when I found her on the ice.

I’ve never been so terrified in my life.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers, her teeth clattering. “I didn’t want you to see me like this. It just happens…sometimes.”

“You don’t have to apologize.” I lean away just a little and tuck a loose strand of hair behind her ear. “Do you know what triggers it?”

She burrows her face in the crook of my neck, her hot breath against my skin. “It’s worse before competitions. When I’m struggling with something. When I mess up. When I’m being too clumsy. It feels like the world is ending, and everyone is judging me. Like they all know what a failure I am. With every wrong landing, every failed combination, I hear voices telling me I am a fool, that I’ll never be the best.” She hiccups a breath. “And I just… My chest gets tight, and I can’t catch my breath. Then, the panic strangles me, pinning me to the spot, and the world starts to spin.”

“I’ve got you,” I say softly into her hair. “You’re safe. I’m with you. I’m not going anywhere.”

Nodding slowly, she releases my hoodie and cuddles closer.

I tighten my hold, my chin on her head. “You said it gets worse before competitions. Does that mean you have one coming up?”

“Uh-huh.” With her head tipped up, she swallows thickly. “I’ve been invited to compete at the Grand Prix de France in Paris. It’s in early December.” She sniffles, shuddering. “Coach Gonzalez and Elena have my classes worked out. I’ll get my work done ahead of time, and then I’ll be back for finals.”

Pulling back, I duck so my lips are at her ear. “You’re a star, you know that? And you’ll be great. I have no doubt.” I kiss her forehead. “I’m proud of you.”

She rears back and looks up at me. Her dark blue eyes are rimmed red, but they’re mostly clear. “Proud of me? After I fell apart like that?”

“Especially then,” I say. “I’ve been watching you skate since we were five, and I always knew you’d reach the stars. You’re one of a kind, Isla, and I’ll always cheer you on. I want you to win, I think even more than I want that for myself.”

She tugs at my collar, pulling me down so my mouth hovers over hers. Our breaths mingle as we stare at each other. Then, she gently presses her lips to mine. I lean into the kiss, lean into her, holding her close. The music has cut out, leaving us sitting together in the cold, empty arena, the lights above humming.

Despite the temperature, my skin is on fire.

I’m holding the girl of my dreams in my arms.

I LEFT my car at the rink so I could drive Isla home. As I accompanied her to her suite, I sent a quick text to Ash, letting him know I wouldn’t be back tonight. There’s no way I can leave her alone after what I witnessed.

“You want to eat something?” She appears in the doorway of her room, phone in hand, a towel wrapped around her head. After her shower, she changed into black shorts and a pink tee. She looks just as good as ever.

“Nah, I’m fine. You?”

She shakes her head. “Maybe just tea or soda? Or hot chocolate, if you still like it?”

“Hot chocolate would be awesome.” A thrill zips through me, making me grin. “I will never stop liking it.”

“Good to know.” She breaks into a small smile. “I’ll be back.” With that, she leaves, closing the door behind her.

While I wait, I pull off my hoodie and throw it over the back of the chair. From here, the pictures on her bookshelf catch my attention, so I pad closer.

Wearing a dark blue dress, she stands on the ice, hands lifted. The five rings to her left are blurry but still unmistakable. The image is from her time at the Olympic games.

In another one, she’s surrounded by her grandparents. Pauline and Greg stand on her right, and Nana Millie is on her left. Her Boston family. In this photo, she looks more like the girl I used to know, less muscular and with fewer curves, so I don’t think it’s very recent.

Another one *is* recent. I know because I’ve always listened carefully when my parents mentioned the Walker family. It’s from their trip to Germany this summer. Uncle Xander stands between Aunt Bella and Isla, Ian crouched in front of them. Cologne Cathedral towers behind them in all its glory.

The fourth picture makes me frown. Isla is wearing a white summer dress and standing on the terrace of what looks like a restaurant. String lights glow overhead, the background blurred just enough to feel warm and intimate. Elena is at her side, both women smiling.

And behind Isla, *he* stands, smiling. Dean.

Her back is pressed to his chest, and his arms are wrapped around her, his hands folded over hers easily, like it’s natural. She’s laughing, head tilted slightly, relaxed.

My chest tightens. I saw the Instagram post. I know they dated. But if she keeps this picture up in her room, then the relationship must have really meant something to her.

I swallow hard, forcing myself to breathe. I don’t get to be angry. I don’t get to be territorial. It’s her past. Yet, jealousy creeps in and settles in the pit of my stomach like a heavy weight.

“I wasn’t sure if you wanted a snack with your hot chocolate.” Isla’s voice rips me out of my trance. “So I brought these, just in case.”

I whirl around and find her stepping into the room carrying a tray with two steaming mugs and a pack of Oreos.

I smile despite the storm in my chest.

“Oreos are a nice addition.” I hustle over and take the tray from her, easing my way to her bed.

We settle in. Sitting across from her, I can’t help but study every detail. This feels so normal, like we haven’t spent years apart. It’s like I’ve finally found the missing piece to the LEGO set I’ve been trying to build.

My heart definitely feels whole again, so much heavier now. Loaded with emotions. For her. I don’t mind it. It’s finally the right weight.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

it was always you

MICHAEL

Nineteen years old

"We wanted to talk, and now, neither of us knows what to say," Isla murmurs.

"Yeah, something like that." I glance at the pictures on the shelf again. "I have a feeling I missed a lot these last few years."

"I feel the same way. I know a little, thanks to my parents and Ian, but I always wondered if that's really how life was going for you. Because we both know how closed off you can be sometimes."

"True." I take a sip of my drink, letting reality sink in without getting upset.

"I guess it's safe to say Sienna lied to me. A lot." She takes a shaky breath. "I'm sorry I believed her. About the kiss. About the dance. About…" She trails off, face turned away.

My chest tightens in sympathy. It's got to be hard for her, but I appreciate her willingness to open up.

"When I came to school to say goodbye, I found Cade and Ash, but I still thought…maybe I'd see you. Maybe we'd talk. I hoped we would."

Her eyes flick up to mine. They're teary again, a deep sadness swimming there. A shiver dances down my spine. Whatever she says next won't be good. I just know it.

“I ran into Sienna instead. She made it sound like you hated me. Like you blamed me for your hand just like everyone else did. Like you hadn’t stood up for me when the whole school was against me.” She sniffles. “I’m ashamed to say it, but I believed her.”

My stomach drops.

“I wish you hadn’t.” I swallow past the lump in my throat. “But I get why you did.” Head bowed, I squeeze the back of my neck. “Ash was right; I should’ve told you everything. When I saw that video, I lost my mind. Was I still angry with you then? Yeah. But there was no way I’d ever be okay with someone hurting you.”

Lips parted, she searches my face, a lone tear tracking down her cheek.

“I dealt with it. The video was gone the same day. The guys who messed with you never would’ve touched you again, and they promised they wouldn’t let anyone else either. But no one knew the video was taken down because of me. I thought you wanted me out of your life. I thought you wanted me gone.”

“I’m sorry, Michael,” she whispers, tears streaming now. “If I’d just talked to you—”

“Hey.” I move closer. “And I should’ve talked to you. We both messed up.”

She nods faintly, looking away and blotting at her face.

“The moment we stopped talking…” I exhale. “That’s when we fell apart.”

“Yeah,” she whispers. “It is.” She worries her bottom lip, her gaze fixed on the tray.

“I’m sorry,” I say quietly. “For not checking on you after your concussion. For missing your birthday.” My throat tightens, making it nearly impossible to force the next words out. “I was a really shitty best friend. I was so focused on my own hurt, I didn’t stop to think about what you were going through.”

She clears her throat. “I was focused on my own hurt too. We were a lot alike.”

“How did you celebrate your sixteenth birthday?” I pull back and use my thumb to wipe at her cheeks. “You always had so many plans.”

Her eyes fill with tears again, breaking my damn heart. I take her mug, setting it and mine on the tray and moving the whole thing to her desk. Then, I drop back onto the bed and haul her to my chest, holding her tight.

She presses herself to me, her face in my tee. “I didn’t plan anything.” Her words are muffled, her face buried. “I was waiting for us to make up. To be friends again. It worked out in the end anyway. After my concussion, I couldn’t go anywhere loud or crowded. My family had a nice dinner and some cake. That’s it. Meg was with us, actually.” She hiccups, her shoulders trembling. “That night, she asked me if you’d wished me a happy birthday,” she whispers, “and I lied. I didn’t want to admit my best friend was so angry with me, he wouldn’t even speak to me on my birthday. Or, worse—that he forgot about it altogether. But my answer appeased her. She said if you hadn’t, she’d have whooped your ass when she got home.”

Snorting, I cling to her tighter. “You shouldn’t have lied. I deserved that ass-whooping and so much more.” I lean away and look down at her tearstained face. “I’m sorry, Isla. For everything. For being an asshole. For hurting you. I swear, I’ll never do that again. Never. You’re too important to me.”

She licks her lips. “Thank you.”

We sit quietly, not moving, not talking. The warmth of her body seeps into mine, setting my skin ablaze. This proximity messes with me because despite how soothing her presence is, my heart beats as if I’m running a marathon.

“Only you have this effect on me.” She nuzzles her face into the hollow of my neck.

“What effect?”

“You make me feel safe. Like we’re eight again, and the world can’t touch me.”

Chin tucked, I push a few wild locks behind her ear. “I wasn’t with you when I should’ve been.”

A small smile tips her lips. “You’re here now. That’s what matters, not the ghosts of our past. We can’t change what’s already happened, so we might as well move on.”

“Have you always been this smart?”

“I’m a genius. Didn’t you know that?”

Head thrown back, I laugh. “Right.”

As I straighten, my gaze falls on her lips, and I can’t look away. The heat that’s settled in my lower abdomen burns hotter and stronger. I bring my face to hers and kiss her gently, savoring every brush of our lips and the

tangling of our tongues. She tastes like hot chocolate, and, combined with her scent, it's like the sweetest poison.

When she sneaks her hands under my tee, caressing my abs in slow strokes, my cock hardens. God, I want this so much. I want *her* so much. This intensity is unfamiliar, almost overwhelming. I've fooled around before, but this? This is one hundred times more intense.

It's like standing on the edge of a cliff and knowing there's no going back, like getting ready for a freefall that will change my life forever.

I pull back, my forehead resting against hers.

"There's something you should know," I say between shallow breaths.

"That doesn't sound ominous at all." She giggles.

"I'm serious." I huff, squeezing my eyes shut. With a steadying inhale, I force myself to look at her. "I haven't…I haven't slept with anyone. Ever."

Her mouth drops open, and she blinks rapidly, pulling away and rubbing her collarbone.

"But you…" She frowns, attention darting around like she's racking her brain for the right words. "You went down on me yesterday, and you"—her cheeks flush a bright red—"you knew what you were doing…"

I chuckle despite the goose bumps running all over my skin. "I've done other stuff. I'm not clueless. But actual sex?" I shrug. "It never felt right. I never wanted it enough."

"Why?"

Because I only ever wanted it with you.

The answer hits me so hard, it almost knocks the breath out of me. I swallow around the lump forming in my throat. "I guess I wanted it to mean something. I grew up surrounded by people who really loved one another. I witnessed what a real relationship looks like. And every time I got close to crossing that line with someone, it felt…wrong. Like I was forcing myself into a moment I didn't belong in."

Isla shifts, putting a little space between us but facing me head-on. Then, she presses her hand over my heart. "And how does it feel now?"

"It feels right. This is exactly how it should've been."

She bites her bottom lip, trying to suppress her smile. "You realize what you're telling me is the exact opposite of what everyone thinks about you, right?"

"So many people have something to say about me while they know absolutely nothing about who I am. Sadly, that's the story of my life."

Silently, she assesses me, her focus drifting over every inch of my face. Then, an open smile breaks over her lips, disarming me completely. She cups my cheek, her thumb caressing my skin. “I can’t actually believe it’s happening. That we still ended up on the same page…despite everything.”

A fluttering feeling in my stomach sends a thrill down my spine. “What do you mean?”

“I’ve never slept with anyone before either.” She bites her bottom lip, looking at me from under her lashes. “I did other stuff, but I never went all the way. I wasn’t ready.”

“And now?” My voice cracks.

“I want you.”

“Are you sure?” I ask, even though every part of me is screaming *Yes*.

She nods.

I rear back, grab the hem of my tee, and pull it over my head. She homes in on me, her gaze slowly drifting down my throat, my chest, my arms.

“You have so many tattoos.” With her bottom lip caught between her teeth, she takes off her T-shirt, leaving her in a black sports bra. “Will you tell me about them?”

“Not tonight,” I say hoarsely, watching her get rid of her shorts.

“Definitely not tonight.” She nods at the headboard. “Can you move up there?”

Nearly stumbling to free myself, I slip out of my sweatpants. Then, I hop back onto the bed and sit with my back pressed to the headboard. My heart is going absolutely ballistic inside my chest, and I’m pretty sure the heat radiating from me could set the whole room on fire.

At the end of the bed, Isla gets on all fours, giving me a peek of her cleavage beneath her sports bra. She crawls to me, her eyes never leaving mine, and settles between my legs, then leans in and brushes her nose over mine.

The simple touch makes my breath hitch. And when she covers my lips with hers, my heart jumps.

As we kiss slowly, teasingly, I float, enveloped in her scent, in her heat, in her softness. But then, she places her hand over my dick, and a bolt of electricity arcs through me.

A low groan escapes my mouth. “Fuck.”

Eyes searching mine, she pauses. “Is this okay?”

I cuff the back of her neck and pull her to me. “More than okay.”

A seductive grin spreads over her lips as she slips her hand under the waistband of my boxer briefs and grips my shaft.

A wave of need washes over me, making my eyes roll to the back of my head.

She jerks me, keeping her rhythm deliberately slow. In seconds, my spine tingles, my release building far too quickly.

“Isla, I want you,” I whisper against her lips.

“I want you too.” She pulls away, eyes sparkling. “I need you naked.”

She moves aside, giving me space, and as I shuck off my boxer briefs, she slips out of her panties.

“Wow.” She gapes at my erect cock and then forces her eyes to mine. “Your dick is…so big. I’ve never…” Her cheeks flush as she trails off.

Smugness rolls through me. The surprise in her tone gives my ego a boost, sending it through the roof.

I pull her to me, fusing my lips to hers. This kiss is slower, gentler, as I turn us around, putting her on her back. I lean away, admiring how devastatingly stunning she is. Her eyes shine brightly, and a pinkish hue creeps up her cheeks.

“I’m on the pill,” she tells me. “And just in case…all my tests are negative.”

“Mine…” I clear my throat, my voice failing me, my hands trembling with anticipation. “Mine too.”

I nestle between her legs and press my hand to her cheek. The warmth her skin radiates is maddening.

“Michael, please. I’m so wet already…”

Dammit. That low tone and those words make black spots dance in my vision.

I whisper, “If something doesn’t feel right, or it hurts…tell me.”

She nods.

I wrap my hand around my shaft and rub the crown of my cock over her clit. She sucks in a breath, her hand sliding to the back of my neck. Her wetness makes me lose my goddamn mind.

Slowly, I push into her.

She gasps, and my heart stops.

Instead of grimacing, though, she smiles. “Keep going.”

I pull away and then slide inside her once more, deeper this time. I do it again and again. The sensation is all-consuming. It's almost more than I can bear.

"It feels so good…" she moans.

I push deeper, the sensation nothing like I've ever felt before. "Fuuuuuuck," I groan, stilling inside her, our eyes locked. "Is everything okay?"

"Yeah." She nods, wrapping her legs around me. "You're perfect."

Pressing my mouth to hers, I roll my hips, and every time I slide home, a visceral need flares to life inside me. I've had plenty of releases in the past, but already, this is different. Because we fit together perfectly. Because I'm with her.

"Fuck, Isla…you feel so good."

I bury my face in her neck, kissing and nibbling her skin. When I suck on her throat, she moans, encouraging me to do more. Happily, I do it all again, my mouth never leaving her body, even as her movements become faster.

"Michael, I'm so cl-close…" She moans louder.

"Me too," I breathe out, clenching my abdominal muscles to stave off my orgasm. I've got to get her there first.

I pick up the pace, trying to be careful. Her moans mix with my groans as I continue thrusting into her at a steady pace. I twirl my tongue over her neck, sucking on her throat, over and over.

Her pussy spasms, strangling me in a way I never could've imagined. The heat traveling up my legs is more insistent now, heading straight to my dick. I slam my lips to hers again, drowning out the sounds of our pleasure.

I come and come, spilling myself inside her. With my lips on hers, I continue moving, anything to prolong this feeling for both of us.

When I finally fall onto her sheets, breathing hard, I know I'll do anything to have her again. Sex is even more satisfying than hitting the road on my bike. For two years, those rides were the only way I found true relief from the pressures of my life. Now? Isla and her pussy will be more than enough to keep me in good spirits day after day.

"How do you feel?" I ask, propping my head on my hand, hovering over her.

She peers up at me, her eyelids heavy. "Like I'm on cloud nine. So weightless." A smile breaks over her lips as she lifts her hand and brushes

some locks off my face. “What about you?”

“Like my world finally clicked into place.” I drop my lips to her forehead and then lean back.

She gives me a soft smile. “Yeah, it honestly was…everything and more.”

“Everything and more?” I echo as I drink her in. Already, my cock is thickening again. Her body isn’t just beautiful—it’s earned. Every line, every curve, has been shaped by early mornings, by bruises and falls, by dedication and the determination to get back up again. It’s discipline, years spent on the ice, and it leaves me a little bit undone.

“You’re unreal,” I murmur. “Do you know that?”

She lifts her hand and traces my eyebrows with her fingers, dragging them down the bridge of my nose. She lingers on my nose ring and then presses her thumb to my bottom lip, slowly sliding it over.

I gently catch her finger with my teeth and then release it. “Think I could convince you to do it again in a few?”

She giggles. “You bet.”

“Exactly what I wanted to hear,” I whisper. “But I need one more thing from you first.”

Brows knitted together, she studies my face, the question in her gaze making my heartbeat stumble.

“Can I finally call you my girlfriend?”

Her lips part, and her eyes go wide. “Wh-what?”

“Unless”—I jerk my head, worried we fucked up—“you’re dating someone already.”

“No, no. I’m single.”

A lightness fills my bones, making me giddy. “Good. Then how about being my girlfriend? You aren’t the only one with a crush that’s lasted over a decade,” I tease her. “I still choose you. I don’t want anyone else.”

Her eyes narrow, like she’s searching my expression, trying to see if I’m being serious. Then, she nods. “I’ll be your girlfriend.”

The smile that spreads across my face is so big, it makes my cheeks hurt. I hold her gaze for a moment and then kiss her again. My first time didn’t feel rushed or overwhelming. It felt right.

And I know without a doubt that I’m exactly where I want to be.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

this is my girlfriend

MICHAEL

Nineteen years old

I WAKE UP BEFORE ISLA DOES. SHE'S CURLED INTO ME, HER SKIN SOFT AND warm, the familiar scent of peaches and vanilla flooding my veins with heat. I've never shared a bed with a girl before, and in this moment, I'm extra grateful for that. I have no doubt nothing could ever feel this good.

Of all the incredible moments I've dreamed we would share, turns out, the best part of being with her is waking up with her body pressed to mine. I'm exactly where I've always meant to be—by her side. And damn, if that doesn't feel like winning.

I tighten my hold on her and close my eyes, welcoming the images from last night that flood my mind, replaying her moans and the sounds of my name spilling from her lips. My skin simmers with need. I've got it so bad.

She stirs in my arms and then slowly turns. One eye cracked open, she peers at me. Then, a smile spreads over my lips.

"Hey, sleepyhead."

"Hi," she whispers, nuzzling into the crook of my neck. "How long have you been awake?"

"A few minutes." I bury my nose in her hair, inhaling. "How do you feel?"

She chuckles softly. "A bit sore."

Dread sweeps through me, and I suck in a breath. Hurting her is the last thing I ever want to do.

She rears back, locking eyes with me. “That’s not a complaint. Last night was magical. Don’t doubt that for a second. You were amazing.”

“*You* were amazing,” I tell her. “I didn’t know I could experience so many emotions at once.”

A smile tugs at her mouth, and I can’t help myself. I capture her lips with mine, kissing her slowly. She trails her fingers over my abs, dipping them into the waistband of my boxer briefs.

Grunting, I grip her waist and roll on my back, hauling her on top of me.

She sits up, her palms splayed over my chest.

“Like what you see?” I ask teasingly.

“How can I not?” She arches a brow. As she exhales, her eyes drift lower to my neck, down my chest. “Can I ask you something?”

“Anything.”

“We used to talk about everything, and you never mentioned wanting to be covered in tattoos.”

Heat pricks at the back of my neck. Not because I’m embarrassed of them or ashamed, but because when I tell her why, I worry it’ll be too much for her.

“You have tattoos on your arms, your neck, your chest, your back, and even your thighs…” She tilts her head, her hair spilling over her shoulder. “What made you do it?”

I lick my lips, my heart thudding heavily. “You.”

She blinks, focus flying back to my face. “Erm, it’s either really sweet or really concerning. I’m not sure.”

“You used to talk about your dad’s tattoos all the time, like they were the coolest thing in the world.” I brush a strand of hair behind her ear. “I’ve always liked them too. At first because of him, because I looked up to him, but then I started liking them because of how much *you* liked them.”

“Careful, Pretty Boy.” She walks her fingers over my pec. “You’re setting my standards too high. Like, sky-level high, unreachable high.”

“Maybe unreachable to everyone else, but not me.” I cup her cheek. “You deserve only the best and to be treated right.”

“Smooth.”

She studies my arm, and her lips part. “Is it…?”

I turn my arm a little so she can get a better look.

She presses her fingertips to my tattoo, tracing the ink. It's a manga panel, one of a few I have scattered all over my body, but it's my favorite—a Rengoku tattoo. The whole scene from the end of *Mugen Train Arc* left me speechless. Hell, it made me fucking cry.

"Did you really still watch anime even after…" She pauses, then looks up, eyes locked on mine. "Even after we stopped talking?"

I nod. "I always thought anime was fun, but you made me fall in love with it. Watching it with you, talking with you about the episodes, about new seasons, were some of my favorite things to do."

"So this one means something to you?"

"Most of them do."

"Most of them?"

"Well, some ink is here simply because I thought it looked cool."

She snorts. "Gotta love your honesty."

A low growl rolling through her stomach makes us both freeze. She curls forward and hides her face in my neck.

"You heard nothing," she rumbles, her voice reverberating through me.

"Isla."

"Michael."

"I think that's my cue." I turn, flipping her onto her back. Her hair spills over the pillow, her cheeks flushed. She's so beautiful. I could look at her all day, and it wouldn't be enough.

"Cue for what?" she whispers.

I press my lips to her forehead and then push myself up. "For breakfast." I snag my sweatpants from the floor and put them on. "Stay here. Breakfast will be ready soon."

I collect all the supplies I need for scrambled eggs and avocado toast. While I'm mashing an avocado into a bowl, the door to her room opens, and she steps out, wearing tiny shorts and an oversized white tee. Her eyes meet mine as she makes her way to the kitchen counter.

"Nope," I say before she even opens her mouth.

"I haven't said anything."

"You were about to offer help."

She drags her teeth over her bottom lip. "Maybe."

"The answer is no." I wink at her. "Go sit. I'm almost done."

I pluck the toast from the toaster and spread the avocado on top. “You still put chili flakes on yours?”

“You remember that?” she asks in a breathy whisper.

Head lifted, I smile at her. “Of course. I remember everything about you.”

“Yeah, chili flakes would be great.” She nods.

I’m adding a squeeze of lemon juice when she makes a beeline for the coffee pot. I sigh.

As she passes, I catch her and throw her over my shoulder, then smack her ass lightly.

A squeal escapes her. “Michael!”

“I asked you to sit down.” I lower her to the bar stool and hover over her.

She looks like a ruffled bird with her lips pushed out in a pout. *Adorable*.

“I can help.”

“You can, but you’re not going to.”

“That’s—”

I press my finger to her lips, silencing her. “Let me take care of you. Please.”

That does the trick. Her shoulders drop, all the tension leaving her body, and, finally, she nods. “Okay.”

“Good girl.” I peck her lips and go back to making our breakfast. Taking care of her might be my new favorite thing to do.

HOURS LATER, I pad out of Isla’s bedroom and pull a glass from the cabinet. I fill it with water, and when I turn around ready to take it to her, I come face to face with Blake.

“Going somewhere?” I ask.

“I have a date,” she replies, lips twitching.

“That’s great. Um, I hope it’s okay that I’m staying here.”

“I don’t mind.” She lifts one shoulder. “Isla hasn’t stopped smiling all morning.”

Warmth spreads over my skin. “Yeah, she hasn’t.”

Blake fixes her ponytail, narrowing her eyes on me. “But for a record, if you make her cry, I’ll help her hide the body.”

“My body?”

“Undoubtedly.”

I snicker. “That’s fair.” I head back to Isla’s room. “Though, if I hurt her, I’ll probably beat you to it.” At the door, I glance over my shoulder. “Good luck on your date, Blake.”

“Thanks, Thompson.” She winks at me.

ASHER:

you alive?

ME:

👍

ASHER:

coming home today?

I TAKE a picture and send it to him. Isla is sitting between my legs, her laptop in front of us with *Spy x Family* playing.

ASHER:

you’re unbelievable

ME:

you would’ve done the same

ME:

see you tomorrow

I silence my phone, toss it onto the covers, and wrap my arms around her waist.

She leans her back on my chest, sighing contentedly. “I don’t think I’ve ever been this lazy in my life.”

“You’re not being lazy. You’re slowing down.” I kiss the top of her head. “It’s good to do that from time to time.”

Her laughter is light and sweet. “Says the guy who’s always treated every practice as if it’s Game Seven.”

I hum. “That’s different.”

“How?”

I push her hair aside and press a soft kiss to the sensitive spot below her ear. “Because I earned this moment with you. This quiet.”

“You’re ridiculous.”

“Maybe.” I rest my chin on her shoulder. “And I’m still not leaving.”

She covers my hands with hers. “You’re going to be sick of me soon.”

“Never.” I tighten my hold. “I’ve waited for this, for you, for years. There’s nowhere else I’d rather be.”

IF IT WERE UP to me, I’d never leave Isla’s side. Unfortunately, life doesn’t work like that. She looked at me as if I’d suddenly grown another limb when I joked that maybe she could sleep in and skip morning practice. I knew she wouldn’t, but I figured it wouldn’t hurt to try. Sleeping with her in my arms is the best sleep I’ve had in years.

Asher is sitting beside me now, talking my ear off about what he did after the Halloween party while we eat lunch. Diego is in the dining hall too, mixed in with the group of guys at our table. I’m playing it cool, because as long as he stays away from Isla, I’m okay with him.

The skin on the back of my neck tingles, like I’m being watched, so I look up and scan the open space. When I find Isla looking at me, my heart expands, and I smile.

With a deep breath in, she makes her way to our table.

My pulse takes off, and pride settles in my chest. For her to join me at my table like this is huge.

She wants the world to know I’m hers.

I have no complaints about it.

She stops beside me, head lowered, worrying her lip. “Hey. Can I have a seat?”

“Of course.” I turn to Ash. “Do you mind?”

He rolls his eyes. “I don’t have a death wish, so no, I don’t mind at all.” He shoves the guy beside him, and they both move down a seat, leaving room for her to sit between us. “It’s good to see you, sweet Isla.”

“You too.” She nods and slips into the seat.

My skin buzzes when she’s this close, and my hands itch to touch her. The urge to jump onto this table and scream at the top of my lungs that this girl is mine is nearly overpowering. Instead, I once again play it cool.

I wrap my arm around her shoulders. “Most of you already know Isla, but I figured I’d introduce her for real.” I look around the table at my teammates. “This is my girlfriend, Isla. Be nice—or else.”

The guys rumble in response, keeping their greetings respectful.

“Likewise.” She nods, blushing. “Such a show-off,” she mutters, side-eyeing me.

Chuckling, I turn toward her.

She lifts her head, her blue eyes sparkling like sapphires. There’s no sight of anger or annoyance in the way she looks at me.

I hover closer and peck her lips once. Then again, and again, and again.

She giggles, trying to wiggle out of my embrace. “Michael, stop,” she murmurs.

“One more time,” I whisper against her lips.

It’s a lie. One more time will never be enough. She’s in my very bones, in every fucking cell of my body, and that’s exactly how it always should’ve been.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

all because of michael

ISLA

Nineteen years old

As practice nears its end, I'm still full of energy. I want to do more, I want to make sure every move is perfect. I stop, catching my breath, considering what to work on. The answer comes naturally—cantilever. It's one of my favorite moves, mostly because of how impossible it looks from the outside.

The music turns into a hum as I build speed, and the wind swishes in my ears. Starting with spread eagle, I glide on both feet with toes turned out to the sides. My body tunes itself to the rhythm, and, right on time, I push my knees forward and my blades inside. My thighs burn, and my balance shifts. I tighten my core and lean back, lower and lower.

The moment I touch the ice with the back of my hand, the world clicks into a place. The lights blur above as I glide forward with my head tipped back, my back nearly parallel to the ice.

A smile blooms on my lips. This is a sensation I'll never get tired of. The control I have over my body. The pressure in my edges. I hold the line, and when I can't ignore the burn in my legs any longer, I pull myself up and skate forward, catching my breath.

A whistle sounds, echoing through the large space. My muscles tense and my breath catches. What the…? I thought I was here alone. I turn, and when I meet Michael's eyes, time slows.

He sits on the players' bench, a smile lighting up his features. I've seen every one of his smiles. The teasing one. The cocky one. The mischievous one. But this one has to be my favorite. This one is full of pride.

I head toward him, the temperature of my body increasing under his scrutiny.

"Hey." I grip the boards, steadying myself.

Angling over, he pecks my lips. His scent—mint and citrus—slides under my skin, making my heart beat faster. "Hi." He holds my gaze. "You were unreal. I've seen you perform cantilever before, but I swear, you get better every time."

I let out a little laugh. "Practice makes perfect."

"Nah, it takes talent, perseverance, and stubbornness too. That's what makes you perfect."

Heat crawls up my cheeks, and yet, I can't hide my smile. "You're such a flatterer."

"Only for you."

We're quiet then, just studying one another. I don't know if I've ever felt so content, so at ease.

"Ready to spend the rest of the day with me?" He tilts his head, his eyebrow cocked.

Excitement flutters through me. "Always."

"Then go change. I'll wait for you outside. I need to make a few calls before we leave."

I furrow my brow. "Did something happen?"

"Nah." He shakes his head. "Just need to make sure your surprise is ready."

My breath catches. "My surprise?"

"Well, surprises plural would be more accurate."

"You don't have to do anything for me. Spending time with you is all I need."

"I want to." He shrugs before he turns on his heel and heads down the hallway. "I'll be outside."

THIRTY MINUTES LATER, we walk through downtown hand in hand. Michael refuses to give me a single hint about where we're going, no matter how much I beg, bribe, or threaten him.

"You're enjoying this way too much." I huff.

"Maybe."

"You're impossible."

His fingers tighten around mine. "And yet you're still holding my hand."

Scoffing, I pull away, but he only tightens his fingers around mine.

A chilly breeze sweeps along the street, making me shiver. Before I can complain, he steers me toward a small coffee shop tucked between a bookstore and a flower shop.

Inside, I'm immediately engulfed in warmth. The place smells like fresh coffee, cinnamon, and baked pastries. Soft music plays in the background, and nearly every table is occupied by students studying or talking quietly.

It's cozy and sweet; I like it.

"What are we doing here?"

"Getting a drink and something sweet. I've been told the pastries here are delicious."

Joy lights me up inside. "I'd love a hot chocolate and cheesecake if they have it."

"I'll go order." He plants a kiss on my temple. "Go sit at the table by the window."

Once I'm seated, I look around, people-watching. A few years ago, I would've pulled out my phone and scrolled. Now, I'm limiting the time I spend on socials and games. They provide me with a dopamine boost, yes, but I noticed how unmotivated I become afterward, so I cut way back. Besides, staying present is so much more interesting.

"Here you go." Michael sets a tray on the table, then he shucks off his bomber, and throws it over the back of his seat. "It all smells and looks delicious."

A few girls from school sit two tables away, stealing glances at Michael. I can't blame them. My boyfriend is gorgeous. Taking my cue from them, I check him out again. A tingling sensation starts in my lower abdomen. The way my body reacts to his closeness is still so unreal.

"Tuck in." He pulls a slice of chocolate cake toward him.

As we sip hot chocolate and make small talk, my attention keeps drifting back to Michael. My mind spins, considering what the surprise could be.

I want to be patient, but the smug little smile that tugs at his lips makes it impossible.

"So…"

He cocks an eyebrow. "So?"

"Are you going to tell me what we're doing next?"

"Maybe I'm enjoying your squirming."

I roll my eyes. "You're annoying."

"And you're impatient." Smirking, he reaches into his bomber jacket and places a small box on the table between us.

A breath gets stuck in my throat as I stare at the box. "What is it?"

"This one is for your sweet sixteen."

My heart skips. "Wh-what?"

"You came to my birthday party. You gave me a hockey tape decorated with inspirational quotes in your handwriting. I still have it, you know. I keep it for special occasions and important games." He takes a deep breath. "And I forgot about yours." He pushes the box toward me.

My eyes veil with tears as I pick up the little box. I open it slowly, finding a pair of beautiful earrings winking back at me. They're smaller than the tip of my thumb, yet detailed enough that every arm of the snowflake stands out. Tiny diamonds glimmer against the silver, making the earrings look as if they were carved from ice.

"Do you like them?" His voice is quiet and a bit raspy.

"They're gorgeous. So delicate." I look up, blinking back tears. "They're perfect. Thank you so much."

With a smile, he leans over the table and cups my cheek. I move closer, bringing my lips to his in a slow and gentle kiss. The world around us fades away, and, honestly? That's the only way I want it to be.

"WHERE ARE WE GOING NOW?" I ask as we step out onto the sidewalk.

"To this bookstore." He pulls me toward the store on the left of the coffee shop. "I need to pick up a package."

Instead of interrogating him, I shake off the anticipation prickling through me and decide to go with it. I trust this man with my life. He will always keep me safe.

While he goes to the counter, I head straight to the romance section. Blake mentioned a series she recently read and loved, and while I'm here, I might as well pick up a couple of them. As much as I love e-books, nothing rivals the smell of a physical copy.

I trail my fingers along the spines, scanning titles as I move through the romance section. When I finally spot the books—*Saving 6* and *Redeeming 6*—I pull the first book, open it, and skim the first couple of pages. I fall into the story right away, and I'm so immersed that when a person stops behind me, I almost jump out of my skin.

"I thought I'd find you in the manga and anime section. You went for romance first, huh?"

I whirl around and gape at Michael. "Don't sneak up on me like that." I whack him on his shoulder. "You scared me."

"You got lost in the book you were reading in the middle of the bookstore, and I'm the problem?"

I tsk. "It's not like that. You're just—"

He shuts me up with his mouth on mine, the kiss so searing and consuming, I lose my train of thought. Backing me up against the bookcase, he slips his hand to my nape, fingers sliding in my hair. I part my lips, welcoming his tongue, and tingles erupt all over my body, my skin humming with pleasure.

"I'm getting carried away," he whispers against my lips. "And this is not a fucking place for it."

"Yeah, being thrown out of the bookstore for inappropriate behavior is not on my bucket list."

"Mine either," he says between dropping featherlike kisses to my lips.

"Michael."

"One more." He kisses me again.

I'm giddy, practically floating, when he takes a step back.

His eyes glimmer, as he studies me. "It's nearly impossible to think straight when you're around." He shakes his head. "Like I'm under your spell."

"Maybe you are." I glance at the paper bag I only now notice in his hand. "What is that?"

“A gift for your seventeenth birthday.” He extends it to me. “I couldn’t have done it without your mom’s help.”

I turn, searching for the opening to slide this book back onto the shelf, but before I can, he snatches it from me.

“Is this the only book you wanted to buy?”

“And *Redeeming 6*.” I jab my thumb over my shoulder. “I’ll buy it later. No worries.”

He hands me the bag, then plucks the second book from the shelf and marches to the counter. “Check your gift, Isla,” he throws over his shoulder.

I open the bag and my breath hitches. No way! Nestled inside are the missing volumes of *Frieren: Beyond Journey’s End* I’ve been trying to get my hands on for months.

“You shouldn’t have...” I murmur.

I carefully pull one of the books out, examining the cover, taking in every detail.

When he returns, carrying another bag, I’m still standing in the same spot, flipping the pages of the last volume.

“You like it? Aunt Bella told me you were having a hard time finding these.”

I look up at him, my heart swelling.

His lips tick up, as if my joy is plastered all over my face. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

“I don’t like it.” I slip the book back into the bag and step into him. “I *love* it. You’re the best boyfriend in the world.”

He wraps his arm around my waist, pulling me against his chest. “Don’t make me wish we were alone right now.”

I bite my bottom lip, trying to hide my smile. “Too late. I’m sure you’re already thinking about it.”

“I am.” He drops his head and kisses me again, slow and gentle this time. “Damn, I love kissing you, but it’s really time for us to move on to our next spot.”

“As long as I’m with you, I don’t care where we’re heading.”

“Good to know.”

And with that, he pulls me toward the exit.

AT THE PARK, we find a secluded bench and sit side by side. It's windy here, but with Michael's arm wrapped around my shoulder, I'm perfectly warm.

He pulls an envelope from the inside pocket of his bomber and hands it to me.

I can't help but smile, my head dizzy. "What birthday is this for?"

"Eighteen."

With my bottom lip trapped between my teeth, I open the envelope and pull out a picture. Eyes narrowed, I study it, and when I realize it's a photo of Emi Lo, the English voice actor for Maomao in *The Apothecary Diaries*, I whip my head Michael's way.

His eyes are full of mischief, lips curled into a smug smile. "Turn it around."

I do as he tells me, and my jaw drops. *To Isla* is written on the back with Emi Lo's autograph below it. The loud squeal that slips out of my mouth frightens a bird from a nearby tree.

"How?" I ask him.

He shrugs. "I know people."

Head tilted, I bump his shoulder with mine. "No, you don't."

He lets out a loud chuckle. "Okay, okay, my mom knows people in the publishing industry. She helped me out."

I throw myself at him, hugging him, and he pulls me closer. For several heartbeats, we stay like that, enjoying the feeling and each other's company.

"There's one more present," he finally says, shifting over.

"And what is it?"

He pulls out a little card and extends it to me. With an eyebrow arched, I note the QR code. I pull my phone out of my pocket and scan it. The Spotify app loads, and a playlist labeled '*Songs that remind me of you*' appears.

My heart pitter patters and my hands tremble, making my phone shake. Tightening my grip, I scroll, reading each title. It's full of songs I skated to throughout the years, songs we both loved. Songs we listened to in the car on the way to and from practice with our parents. Songs we sent each other before things fell apart.

With tears streaming down my face, I look up at him. "When did you put this together?"

"When I heard a song that made me think of you, I added it."

"For how long? Since school started?" I ask, my voice hoarse.

He shakes his head, a sad smile on his face. “No. Since you left for Boston.”

A sob claws its way out of me.

He moves closer and hauls me to him. I hide my face in his chest, and he cups the back of my head, letting me cry. I am a mess, my emotions all over the place. I’ve spent years thinking the boy I loved never thought of me as more than a friend, and then, I was sure he hated me. Now, I’m learning that it always was the same for him.

That I was always the one he wanted.

“One more stop,” Michael says as he helps me out of his car.

I’m tired and a bit overwhelmed with emotion, but I follow him without a question.

The bell above the door jingles as we step into the tattoo parlor, and the scent of disinfectant mixed with ink hits me immediately.

“Michael,” I say slowly.

He shoves his hands into his pockets and rocks back, looking entirely too pleased with himself. “Yeah?”

“Why are we here?”

“I need a new tattoo, and I need you with me.”

“Why?”

“Because it’s romantic.”

I roll my eyes, but there’s no stopping the smile that splits my face.

He’s led back to a station right away, and I claim the stool beside him. When the artist retrieves the stencil he’s already prepared, my chest tightens. A snowflake. Exactly like the earrings he gave me earlier today.

With my mouth open, I search his face. “Are you sure?”

His answer comes without hesitation. “One hundred percent.”

Sam, the tattoo artist, looks from me to Michael. “Does that mean the snowflake is representative of your girl?”

“You’re very observant,” Michael says.

I swat his arm. “Be nice.”

Sam drops his head back and laughs. “He’s nice. Don’t even worry about it.”

As he turns on the machine and presses the gun to Michael's skin, I expect him to least flinch. Instead, he leans back in his chair and drinks me in.

Cheeks burning, I fidget in my seat. "Stop staring."

"Sorry, can't."

"And why is that?"

His smile is slow and lazy. "Best view in the room."

Sam snorts. "God, you two are disgustingly cute."

"Thank you," Michael says.

"I wasn't complimenting you."

This time, I'm the one who snorts, and, a moment later, Michael and Sam laugh along with me.

The next hour passes surprisingly fast. The three of us chat about hockey and figure skating and anime and reality TV shows. At one point, Michael and Sam argue about their favorite characters from *Solo Leveling*. I'm too entranced with the way the snowflake is taking shape beneath the buzzing needle to get involved.

Maybe it's the place.

Maybe it's the city lights glowing outside.

Or maybe it's the man in the chair. The guy I've loved since I was ten has spent an entire day making up for the birthdays he missed.

I can't stop smiling. My chest is full and my skin is warm and tingly. And as I listen to their banter, I realize this is the best date I've ever been on.

All because of Michael.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

obedience looks good on you, pretty boy

MICHAEL

Nineteen years old

"WHAT TIME WILL YOU BE BACK?" ASH TURNS TO ME AS I PUSH THE DOOR open.

He's taking my car back to the dorms, and I'm going to head inside the dance studio and check on Isla. It's almost 9:30 p.m., so she should be finishing up soon.

I shrug. "Not sure. I might stay with Isla."

"Again?"

Excitement flares in my chest. "Um, yeah."

Ash sticks his lip out, pouting like a child. "In case you forgot, I'm your roommate. *Your best friend*."

"I'm aware."

"Really? I barely see you anymore. I can't even remember the last time we hung out outside of hockey. "

Shaking my head, I haul myself out of the seat. "I'm not going to apologize for spending time with my girlfriend."

"That's not what I mean." He groans, banging the back of his head against the headrest. "I know how long you've been pining after her. It's just…could you make time for me too?"

The amusement rolling through me fizzles. "I will," I tell him, and I mean it. "Night, Ash."

I close the door, and, with my hands deep in my pockets, I head into the building. Most of the lights on the second floor are already off. All but one room, actually, so I wander that way. Through the glass wall, I spot Isla moving across the floor.

The music is low, barely audible from the hallway, but I recognize it anyway. “Ma Meilleure Ennemie.” It’s a song I’ve heard dozens of times since I first showed up at her practice.

I prop my shoulder against the doorframe and watch. For a second, I forget to breathe. She turns. Spins. Then seamlessly transitions into a series of movements that look effortless, despite the amount of strength and flexibility they require.

When the song ends and she stops, catching her breath, she notices me and breaks into a smile.

“How long have you been standing there?” she asks, tucking wayward hairs behind her ears.

“Long enough.”

Chin tipping down, she scrutinizes me. “That’s not an answer.”

Not bothering to hide my smile, I say, “It’s the only one you’re getting.”

Head thrown back, she laughs. Then, she reaches for her water bottle. “When you asked about my plans, I had an inkling you’d show up.”

“I hope it’s a nice surprise.”

Her face softens. “It is. You’re always the best part of my day.”

“Same. That’s why I’m here, even though the practice was brutal.” I step into the studio and close the door behind me. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d think you were training to be a ballerina.”

She takes a swig of her drink, nearly choking on her water. “Michael,” she sputters.

“What?”

“You do remember who my coach is, right?”

I grin, the image of Elena popping in my mind in an instant. “Of course. Hard to forget the way she always called you Solnyshko.”

“Well, to Elena, every problem has the same solution.” She sets the bottle down.

“More ballet?”

“More ballet.”

I laugh. “Sounds terrifying.”

“It was, but not anymore. I love this routine. Plié, arabesque, pirouettes. They bring me joy, especially when I land them right.” She stretches her arms above her head, surveying the empty room. “Anyway, I’m done.”

“Done done?” I tease.

“Done done.”

The studio is empty. I didn’t pass a single person on my way up here.

“Have you been here alone?”

“Yeah. I’m closing tonight.”

I take a step closer. “Need help?”

“With what?” She raises an eyebrow, resting her hands on her hips.

I wave a hand vaguely. “With whatever people do when they close dance studios.”

Her laugh echoes through the room. “And do you have any experience? Doing whatever people do when they close dance studios?”

“I’ll just follow your lead,” I tease. There’s no way she’ll kick me out, so she might as well put me to work.

She leads me through putting away equipment; though it’s a mundane task, it feels like one of those moments I’ll remember forever, the ordinary kind that ends up turning into a favorite memory.

All because I’m with her.

Eventually, Isla picks up her bag, instructing me to turn off the lights. One by one, I flip the switches, plunging the room into semi darkness.

When I turn around, she’s standing a few feet away, close enough that I can see the faint smile playing on her lips, lit by the lights coming in through the windows.

Suddenly, helping her close feels like the best idea I’ve had all week.

I step closer and snake my arm around her waist, pulling her against my chest. “Hi there.”

“Hi,” she murmurs. “What’s got you grinning like that?”

“My gorgeous girlfriend.” I lower my face to hers. “Because she’s in my arms. And because I just came up with the best idea.”

“Care to share it with me?”

I curl my fingers around the strap of her bag and slide it off her shoulder. Our lips are just a hairbreadth away, her sweet scent enveloping me. Resisting the urge to kiss her, I turn my head a little, my mouth now at her ear, and say, “I want you.”

A shaky breath escapes her lips. “Michael…”

“There’s no pressure.” I brush my fingers over her cheek. “Only if you want this too.”

She searches my face and then whispers, “I want you.”

I press my lips to hers. The kiss is slow and gentle at first, but the intensity quickly grows. Tongues twirling, mouths locked. She tugs at my hoodie, slipping her fingers underneath it and dragging them over my abs.

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I groan into her mouth, my skin scorching. She pulls back, catching her breath, but doesn’t step away. I twirl her around and yank her closer again, her back pressed to my chest. She finds me in the mirror, her cheeks flushed, hair in disarray, her eyes glimmering. She looks like a real-life goddess. My goddess, the one I’m ready to worship every fucking day.

I slide my hand down her stomach, fingers splayed. She sucks in a breath and presses her back into me more.

Need and excitement flood my veins as I slip my hand under the waistband of her leggings, staying above her panties. I brush the fabric, the wetness I find sending a zing of desire down my spine.

“You’re dripping, baby,” I tease her.

She lets out a laugh. “And you’re practically trembling, so I’d say I’m not the only one struggling.”

I huff. “Trembling?”

“You really going to argue that?”

“Isla.”

“What? It’s accurate.”

Smart mouth.

Instead of giving her the comeback she’s clearly expecting, I get even. I push her panties aside and press my fingers to her sweet spot. She gasps and then mewls as I pinch her clit. Her eyes fall closed. She’s putty in my arms, her skin warming under my touch. I drop my lips to her neck, nibbling and sucking on her delicate throat.

“Look at me, babe.”

She does, finding my gaze in the mirror. Lips parted, she pants, and as I massage her clit faster, her chest heaves more violently. The pleasure so clear on her face is enough to make me rock hard in my pants.

“Michael, I’m so close…” She breathes, her eyelids hooded.

Grasping her chin, I tilt her face up. Our lips meeting in a fiery kiss, I rub her clit with more fervor, her wetness coating my fingers. She trembles, her legs giving out. Holding her up, I swallow her moans, prolonging her orgasm.

When we finally break apart, she’s breathing rapidly, and I have a raging hard-on.

She twirls in my arms, her eyes blazing.

“Sit on the mat.”

“Why?”

“Because,” she pulls me down, so we’re eye to eye, “I want to ride you.”

All rational thought flies out of the window. It’s only me and her and an immense desire to bury my cock inside her pussy.

With her hand in mine, I pull her toward the mat in the corner. Then, I lower myself and look up at her.

“Obedience looks good on you, Pretty Boy,” she taunts.

“It will look even better once I’m buried in your cunt.”

Smirking, Isla pushes down her leggings and panties. Licking my lips, I pull out my dick and give it a few pumps.

Once she’s kicked her clothing to the side, she straddles me. With one hand on my shoulder, she grasps my shaft. I suck in a breath, my heartbeat pounding in my ears, its tempo fast and loud.

Slowly, she lowers, taking my tip only. Quickly, though, she’s rising again, taking her warmth and her wetness with her.

Tingles travel up my spine. “Isla, please…”

Mouth to my ear, she murmurs “You sound so nice when you beg.”

My dick pulses. *Dammit.*

She lowers herself again, taking me deeper this time. I close my eyes, swallowing back the desire to fuck up into her. She repeats the motion again and again, taking me in and then hoisting herself up.

She tears her tee over her head, and the sight of her tits in her sports bra makes my mouth water. She’s a fucking perfection.

With a sigh, she takes my length again, only stopping when I'm fully seated.

"You're perfect," I whisper. "Warm and—"

She circles her hips, and I swear, I see the fucking constellation behind my eyelids.

"Fuck, Isla…you feel so good."

Fusing her mouth to mine, she rides me slowly. Each dip of her hips is deep, stirring primal need inside me. Every orgasm with this woman is more intense, more perfect, than the last.

"Oh God…" She throws her head back.

I yank her bra down and catch her nipple between my teeth.

She gasps, clutching my shoulder, and rides me rougher and faster. Her moans mix with my groans as I continue playing with her tits. I twirl my tongue over her nipple and then close my teeth over it and tug, over and over.

With my name spilling from her lips, she orgasms. Her pussy spasms, and I see stars, shooting my load inside her as my release hits me too. I cuff the back of her neck and kiss her senseless—not only to silence our moans, but because I don't think I'll survive if I don't get her mouth on mine.

Panting, she rears back, her eyes searching mine. Then, she lets out a quiet laugh. "I can't believe we had sex in the dance studio." She shakes her head. "I can't believe I agreed to it."

"You folded so easily." I wink at her, and it earns me a smack on my shoulder. "You were amazing."

She bites her bottom lip, her lashes fluttering. "You too."

I pull her bra up, and she stands, collecting her clothing. Once we look presentable, we head out of the studio. Her hand is in mine as we walk down the stairs.

"Are you staying with me tonight?" she asks.

"For round three?" I'm only half joking. I can't get enough of this woman.

Her laughter reverberates around the quiet building. "Maybe." She lifts her shoulder in a shrug.

"Maybe?"

"Or we could watch *Spy x Family* until we fall asleep."

I bring her hand to my lips and kiss it. "Sounds perfect either way."

A pinkish hue creeps on her cheeks. "Good to know."

Hand in hand, we step outside and head toward her car. There’s nowhere else I’d rather be, and I think it’s the same for her.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

it's not fine

MICHAEL

Twenty years old

"THANK YOU SO MUCH, DAD." I LEAN BACK AGAINST MY CAR, PHONE pressed to my ear. "You guys really didn't have to do this."

"Of course we did," Dad says. "We love you. There's nothing we wouldn't do for you."

My heart swells. "I love you too."

"Well, I won't keep you from your friends. I just wanted to say again how proud I am of you. You're doing such a good job with the Hawks. I love watching you play. You've grown so much this season."

The words lodge in my throat. I want to tell him about the pressure. About the noise from social media. About how hard it is to constantly be compared to him. But I don't know how to say any of that without making him feel like he's the problem.

"Thanks, Dad."

"All right. Go have fun, kid."

I slip my phone back into my pocket and take a deep breath. I don't remember the last time I felt this steady. Classes don't feel like a waste of my time anymore. Training and practice still kick my ass, but they don't drain me the way they used to. I wake up with energy. With purpose. Like the battle that's been raging in my head has finally come to an end.

Even the comments and DMs I get on social media don’t get under my skin the way they usually do.

Part of it is having my best friend back.

The bigger part is knowing the girl I’ve wanted since forever is finally here—with me.

“Happy birthday, Thompson.” Blake gives me a quick hug. “Hope it’s a great one.”

“Here’s hoping.” I smile at her, though my attention quickly shifts to the door that leads into the dorms.

Stepping back, Blake chuckles. “Isla will be here in a minute. She was ready to leave when I headed out, but she said she forgot something and rushed to her room.” She shrugs. “She sent me here to tell you she’s coming.”

“Good.”

The door opens, and Asher swaggers outside. Grinning like usual, his eyes on me, he stops beside Blake. “Here you are, birthday boy. I thought I was running late.”

“You’re right on time.”

“Where is our Ice Princess?” he asks.

How is it that ‘“Ice Princess” sounds so much nicer than “Ice Queen”? I can’t help but smile at the term of endearment. She’s a princess indeed.

“She should be here any minute,” Blake tells him.

Just then, the door opens, and Isla appears. My breath hitches, warmth spreading through my veins. She’s so fucking gorgeous. Being this close to her makes it hard to think clearly. Her hair is down, cascading over her shoulders in soft waves. She’s wearing a short black dress that fits like it was made for her, highlighting every perfect curve, with a black leather jacket and nude stilettos.

My girl is stunning.

“Sorry I’m late,” she breathes, her chest rising and falling rapidly. “I forgot to send the film from today’s practice to Elena.” She presses her palm to her chest and inhales deeply. “Should we go?”

I unlock my car and guide Isla to the passenger side, but Asher darts around us and climbs into the front seat.

Pulling up short, my hand still on the small of Isla’s back, I scoff. “Ash, you sure you took the right seat?”

“Positive.” He keeps his focus fixed on the world outside the windshield rather than looking at us. “It’s my seat.”

Head thrown back, Isla laughs. “Promise me you’ll never change, Ash.” She peers up at me, her lips twitching. “It’s fine. I’ll sit in the back with Blake.”

A thread of disappointment winds through me at the idea of not being able to touch her while I’m driving. “You sure?”

“Positive.” She pops up onto her tiptoes and kisses my lips. “Don’t worry about it.”

She steps back, heading around the car to sit behind the driver’s seat, but I call out, stopping her. “No, you’re sitting behind Asher.”

Face scrunched up in confusion, she returns, “But why?”

“Please?”

She shakes her head but does as I say, opening the door Blake has already closed.

Blake scoots to the other side, and I guide Isla in. Once she’s buckled up, I close the door and climb behind the steering wheel. I start the engine and then reach back to place my right hand on her knee.

The laughter that erupts in my car doesn’t bother me in the slightest.

I’m obsessed with her, have been for years. I don’t mind the world knowing it.

WE’RE SEATED at a corner table, and this section of the restaurant is quiet, just like I requested. Tomorrow, I’ll celebrate with the team after the game. Then, I’ll drive home to spend time with my family. Tonight, I wanted to keep the gathering small, just me and my favorite people. Blake isn’t exactly my friend, but she and Isla are close, and I wanted Isla to feel comfortable.

My girl sits next to me, her right leg dangling over my left, my hand resting on her knee. Asher saw me maneuvering her into this position and only shook his head, grinning. There’s no judgment there, only happiness and a need to give me shit. That’s okay. I don’t even try to hide how I’m looking at her. I don’t want to.

We haven’t hidden our relationship at all, and it seems everyone on campus knows. I overheard one of the guys on the team whispering about how Isla isn’t my usual type, and it took all my restraint to keep my mouth shut. She’s been my type for years. No one else could fit the criteria. I avoided fooling around with any girl who had even the slightest resemblance, knowing it would’ve felt like betrayal. She’s the only brunette with deep blue eyes, plump lips, and a body to die for that I want.

The server brings out our food, and as we dig in, jokes come easy, and the conversation flows. My mood couldn’t be better, making it easy to smile and talk freely. All because of her. I swear, Isla looks at me like I’m her whole world. Her soft smile hits me in the chest every damn time, and I almost forget how to breathe.

The effect she has on me needs to be studied. It’s like she’s bewitched me, put me under her spell to ensure I’ll only ever look at her.

“You know what’s funny?” Blake asks, picking up her drink. “My sister said people on campus keep joking, asking if Michael’s got what it takes to be an Olympian’s boyfriend.” She snorts.

My body goes rigid. I don’t mind being known as Isla’s boyfriend. I’m proud to be with her because she’s incredible. I just don’t know if I’m good enough to be with her.

Before I can come up with any type of response, Blake goes on, oblivious to the blow she just delivered.

“Like first you had to live up to your dad, and now, you’ve gotta live up to her too.”

I clear my throat. “I hope I can.”

Asher is frozen with his fork halfway to his mouth, his brows drawn together. My expression must be similar, because Blake surveys me, and then her mouth drops open.

“Oh my God, Michael, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it… I didn’t want to hurt you or anything. I just mentioned it because I think they’re all idiots.”

Her words are earnest. She didn’t make that comment to hurt me. But she said it, and now, it’s there, hanging in the air, heavy and sticky.

I wiggle, my collar too tight, my chair uncomfortable.

Isla turns to me, frowning. She understands. Maybe she can even feel the shift inside me.

Not wanting her to be upset, I force a smile and survey the three of them. “It’s fine. People love to say stupid shit.”

It’s not fine.

I’ve spent my whole life living in the shadow of my dad’s legacy, and now, people are wondering if I measure up to Isla.

I’ve never been just me. Never “Michael Thompson, a talented player with a bright future.” Always someone who has to prove he’s good enough to stand next to the people he loves.

I fucking hate it.

Dinner goes on, the three of them talking and laughing. I join in when I can, acting as if nothing happened. I answer, I smile. I act unbothered, but there’s this iceberg in my chest that won’t melt. Beneath the table, Isla holds my hand and squeezes every so often, as if she can see what’s going on in my head.

After dinner, I hold the door open for Isla. The moment she steps outside, she shivers, pulling her jacket tighter.

In two quick strides, I catch up with her, leaving Asher and Blake behind to bicker the way they have been since the moment they started talking basketball.

I take Isla’s hand, noticing the slightest wince on her face.

“What’s wrong?” I ask, loosening my grip, worried I’ve hurt her.

She lifts a foot a little higher than usual as she takes another step. “Heels. It was stupid of me to wear them, especially after the hours I’ve spent this week on the ice. My feet are dying.”

I chuckle softly and scoop her up. “Come here.”

She yelps, surprised, and cuffs the back of my neck, holding on tightly.

Body relaxing against mine, she circles her arms around my neck. “You didn’t have to—”

“I wanted to.”

She’s light and warm, her familiar scent of peaches and vanilla comforting. With her head resting against my cheek, her soft hair tickles my skin, and for a second, all the negative thoughts in my head go quiet.

But it doesn’t last long.

Despite trying to focus on the way she feels, my mind drifts back to those words: do I have what it takes to be an Olympian’s boyfriend?

“You okay?” She presses her warm palm to my cheek, making me look at her.

I tighten my hold on her a little. “Yeah. Just tired. It’s late, and we have a game tomorrow.”

“You’re being honest with me—true or not true?”

Not true. “True,” I lie.

It’s not that I don’t want to talk about things that bother me, and it’s not because I think she won’t understand. I’m keeping this to myself because I don’t want her to know about the storm inside my chest tonight. Not when she’s working her ass off on the ice, preparing for the Grand Prix in France. She’s got enough on her mind without worrying about me.

I’ll figure out how to deal with this noise and move past it.

With an exhale, I kiss her temple and whisper, “Let’s get you home.”

THE ARENA IS PACKED—GBU students, parents, locals, and a good number of fans from Santa Clara, who are here to root for the Dolphins.

I’m buzzing to be on the ice. The crash and its consequences are my fuel tonight, along with the stress and anxiety that came along with being off the ice while I recovered and the social media circus and mean comments I block on a daily basis. I want to win this game, and I want to win it on my terms.

And with the start we’ve had? The chances are pretty strong.

After a 2-on-1 alongside Ash, I scored the night’s first goal. The Dolphins are good, but their goalie, Kenzo Tanaka, failed to block the puck I sent into the net with a precise flick of my wrist after Ash’s assist.

The first period ended with a score of 1-0.

The Dolphins returned for the second period determined to change the game. Their defense woke up, intercepting and winning at the puck possession.

Their efforts have been valiant, but they aren’t the only ones playing their best.

Not long after a successful penalty kill by the Dolphins, I double our lead. With seven minutes left in the second, Bouchard, our right wing, set me up for a shot close to the net.

“Yeah, baby!” I yell, throwing my fist into the air.

We’re ahead by two, the lead giving me a little relief, but three minutes later, when Braun puts the Dolphins on the board, I’m reminded of why it’s not wise to count one’s chickens before they hatch.

The goal came six seconds into the Dolphins' second power play of the night. Flores was fuming, and I couldn't blame him. Our defense failed him with that one.

No matter how GBU student Michael Thompson feels about fellow GBU student Diego Flores, it means nothing during the game. I'll do anything for the Hawks, for my teammates, and so will he.

As the third period is set to begin and I step onto the ice for face-off, I glance at the stands, quickly finding Isla watching me. At the sight, a smile takes over my lips, and my whole body hums. She's sitting two rows above our team's bench, my number drawn on her cheek in dark blue, one of the team's colors. Practically bouncing in her seat, she blows me a kiss. I pretend to catch it, then press my hand to my chest, over my heart. All her kisses belong there. *She* belongs there.

Breaths evening out, I focus on the game. It's time to win the face-off for my team.

I keep my eyes on the puck in the referee's hand, ignoring the commotion around me. He drops the biscuit between Lewis, the Dolphins' center, and me. I get as much of the blade of my stick on the ice as possible, a trick my dad taught me a long time ago, the secret skill he used to win the playoffs.

I drag the puck my way and shift so I'm facing the direction Lewis was trying to draw to. Then, I send it sliding to our defenseman.

With eight minutes left in the third period, the score is still 2–1. The Dolphins are locked in, cutting off every single one of our attempts to score, though they haven't made much effort to score themselves, playing defensively.

My breaths saw in and out of my lungs as I skate with Ash and Bouchard toward the Dolphins' net. The spectators are going nuts, yelling and cheering, pushing us to do more.

Bouchard executes a perfect drop pass, and I catch the puck with my stick. With sweat dripping down my back, I pick up speed, putting distance between myself and the Dolphins' defense.

Then, with a wrist shot from the high slot, I send the puck soaring between Tanaka's pads and into the net.

The game ends with the Hawks winning 3–1, and I just fucking scored my first hat trick of the season.

Me—Michael Thompson.

Not my dad.

Not the kid who crashed his bike, putting the Phantoms' investment at risk.

Me.

I am good enough to stand with Isla Walker.

And they all better remember it. I'm going to make them eat their words, now and in the NHL.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

i've got you

ISLA

Nineteen years old

I CAN'T STOP SMILING. YEAH, THE WIN IS EXCITING, BUT MICHAEL'S HAT trick is making me giddy. I dare anyone to accuse him of being nothing more than a well-known name. He was phenomenal, a real leader. It was hot.

And the icing on the cake is that the Hawks beat Santa Clara. As far as I know, Sienna is still a student there. Honestly, I kind of hope she's here and witnessed the way the Hawks wiped the ice with the Dolphins. Our team was like a living, breathing monster, every move calculated, every pass direct and precise. The pride I feel for the whole team is so big, it barely fits inside my chest.

"Are you happy you came?" Blake asks as we take the stairs down to the rink.

"Are you kidding me?" I yelp, grasping her hand. "I had a blast."

"Wow. I've never seen you so enthusiastic." She laughs, shaking her head. "Now I know how to cheer you up next time you're down. Just bring you to a game so you can watch your boyfriend play like a god."

The crowd is loud, laughing and talking and whooping. The chanting that started up when Michael scored for the third time is all I hear. The whole place was shouting "Thompson!" over and over. The game ended 3–1, and I think I'm as happy about the win as Michael and his teammates. It's

what he needed after the whole “if he’s good enough to be with me” debacle.

Because while he assured me he was fine after Blake mentioned it, I’ve known him since we were little, and I can smell his lies from miles away.

Blake babbles on, talking about the party at the frat house tonight. It’s the go-to spot after a win like this. I’m not super into partying, and I’m leaving for Paris in three days, so I’ve been focusing on getting enough sleep, but I’ll go there for Michael. Only ever for him.

Halfway down the stairs, the back of my neck prickles, causing me to stop. I scan the people around me, certain I’m being watched, and find a familiar blonde with her blue eyes narrowed on me. Sienna Hartman.

My stomach sinks. Dammit, how does the saying go? *Be careful what you wish for.* Despite my wanting to witness her disappointment after a game like this, she’s the last person I ever wanted to see.

She pauses at the railing, a smug smile lifting her lips.

Shoulders back, I walk toward her. At this point, anything Blake says is nothing more than white noise.

Blonde hair down, Sienna looks like she owns the place. She’s beautiful, sure, but she’s as cold as ice. The Ice Queen nickname would’ve suited her so much better than me.

“Wow,” she says as I approach. “Didn’t expect to see you here.”

“Likewise.” I lift my chin. I won’t let her rattle me. “I came to support the Hawks. It was an amazing game, don’t you think?”

“You’re here to support the Hawks? Or Michael?” She points at my cheek, where Blake drew the number 17 for me.

Speaking of Blake, the goddess steps closer to me, her shoulder brushing mine, silently reminding me she’s here. She doesn’t ask to be introduced, but I can feel tension rolling off her, as if she’s already sensed my discomfort.

Sienna’s eyes drift down my jersey, and when she notices Michael’s number there too, her lips twist into a scowl. She quickly tamps down the expression, and when she looks up, she’s grinning again.

“Looks like my question has been answered.” She shakes her head. “I shouldn’t be surprised. Just like I shouldn’t be surprised you ended up here, out of all the places you could’ve gone. You’ve always followed him around like a shadow.”

The words hit me in the solar plexus, stealing my breath. Maybe because, at one time, they were true.

Blake splays her hand over my back, her palm radiating a warmth I desperately crave.

My breathing evens out. I'm so grateful she's here with me.

"I don't know who you are," she comments, looking Sienna up and down, her lip curled, her eyes cold. "But that accusation is laughable. Isla and Michael are dating, and if one of them follows the other like a shadow, it's definitely him. The boy is obsessed, and you sound bitter as hell."

For a second, Sienna's façade cracks. Her expression turns pinched, and she crosses her arms over her chest. Oh, she's annoyed big time.

"I'm not bitter," she says lightly, a knowing smile curving her lips. "Why would I be? He and I have been close for years."

My shoulders tense. This jab hits where it still hurts, because no matter how we've mended things, the way our friendship exploded left a very deep cut in my heart, and it will take time to heal fully.

"I know what he's like when he's drunk," she continues, eyes glimmering. "How he lets his guard down. How he forgets himself."

Blake stiffens beside me. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

Sienna shrugs, sighing. "I'm just saying he may be playing the perfect boyfriend now, but that history is still there."

What she said is like a knife to the chest. My muscles quiver, and heat rushes through my body. The image of Michael standing with his back pressed to the wall, his arms dangling at his sides while she kisses him, flashes in my mind. But then, his words from the rink follow, when he told me Uncle Colton thought his drink was spiked with something more than alcohol, and how he admitted barely remembering what happened that night. A bitter tang fills my mouth, my skin crawling.

I inhale sharply, banishing it, then straighten to my full height. "That's funny," I drawl, balling my fists. "Because what you're describing sounds a lot like taking advantage of a guy who could barely stand."

Her smile falters. Then, she snarls, "I didn't force anyone."

"Didn't you?" I shoot back. "He was drunk. Hurt. Not thinking straight. And you knew exactly what you were doing."

"Shit," Blake mutters. "That's not history. That's fucking gross."

Sienna's face reddens, but she holds her chin high. "You don't know what you're talking about."

“I know enough.” I step closer to her. “I know he didn’t choose you then. He never actually did.”

She puffs her cheeks, her eyes flashing with malice. “Careful,” she hisses. “You don’t know everything about him.”

I shrug. “Neither do you.”

With that, I walk away from her.

Blake follows me in silence, covering me physically and metaphorically. My steps are steady, but it honestly feels like I’m walking on thin ice.

The whole way down the stairs, I still feel Sienna’s eyes on me. They weigh a ton, burdening my soul.

God, why did I have to bump into her?

“Don’t pay her any attention.” Blake drapes an arm over my shoulders as we exit the building. “She’s a fucking loser who had a crush on the boy who was always crazy about you. She means nothing.” She pulls me in tighter. “And after what you said she did, she doesn’t deserve even an ounce of your attention. She’s no one.”

“You’re right. She’s probably the only person I *really*, really don’t like.”

“I can see that. It was written all over your face.”

“Let’s get out of here,” I tell her, changing the subject. “I want to change before the party.”

THE HOUSE IS EVEN MORE PACKED than it was on Halloween. Probably because several groups of students from Santa Clara found their way here too. The voices are loud and the music is louder, but it’s all background noise to me. All I can think about is Michael.

When I find him, he’s laughing with his teammates in the kitchen, cheeks flushed, hair still damp from the shower. He’s practically glowing. And God, I love seeing him like that.

His name echoes around the house. Chatter about his hat trick. His level of dedication. Declaring him the star of the game. Here and there, I hear people mention how impressed they are with how fast he recovered after his motorcycle accident, how it didn’t seem to affect his game at all.

Leaning against the wall near the stairs, I watch, letting him have his moment. He deserves it. This is his win. And after all the whispers, the comments about him not being enough to be with me, I don't want to stir the pot or snuff out his light. We can have our moment in private, inside the walls of one of our bedrooms. For now, my desire is that he enjoys his time and really believes he's not his dad's last name. He's not just my boyfriend either.

He is Michael Thompson. Captain of the Hawks. Future center for the New York Phantoms.

He is a very talented player, always has been. He needs to remember that, even when the naysayers get loud. They are nothing but noise—*he* is everything.

Blake dances in front of me, singing along with every song at the top of her lungs. Just being near her makes me smile. She's so enthusiastic and carefree in a way I've never experienced, but her presence alone calms me, especially after seeing Sienna. As perceptive as Blake is, my guess is that her goal is to get me to relax and forget about it.

"Babe, let's dance?" She clutches my hand, pulls me to her chest, then twirls me around.

I laugh the whole time. When she finally lets go, I feel lighter.

"I want to go find the girls from the team. Come with me?"

I shake my head, glancing at the gaming door. Michael and the guys migrated that way shortly after I spotted him. It's probably a little more private, so this may be a good time to check on him. To show him I'm here. That I support him.

"I'll go check on Michael and then find you. Okay?"

"Fine. Find me later." Grinning, she spins and flounces off.

With a deep breath in, I move farther into the house. The music thumps, vibrating the walls, the floors, even the ceiling. The air smells like sweat, alcohol, and sweet perfume. Too sweet, actually. When I get another whiff of it, it sends a shiver down my spine.

Inside the gaming room, LED lights glow purple, and a big window overlooks the backyard. Several people sit on couches and armchairs, talking, drinking, and scrolling through their phones. Diego and Asher are arm wrestling, both red-faced and too focused on their locked hands to notice my arrival.

Why am I not surprised?

I scan the room again, this time finding Michael. A smile blooms on my lips, though it quickly dies when I realize he's with Sienna.

They're standing near the window. He has a drink in his hand, his eyebrows knitted together, lips pursed. Sienna is in front of him, one shoulder pressed against the wall. They're not close. While he's tense, she looks relaxed.

Not a single person greets me. They're all engrossed in what they're doing, and I'm just one more person in a packed, dimly lit room. With curiosity fueling my steps, I walk closer, desperate to know what they're talking about.

Maybe it's wrong, but there's no fighting the urge to eavesdrop.

Sienna's head is tilted, her blonde hair spilling over her right shoulder like a heavy curtain. "I don't get you. First, you lived in your dad's shadow, never able to step out and be considered an individual, always attached to your last name. And that makes sense, really. We don't get to choose our parents. But how can you be okay with existing in her shadow now?"

He clenches his jaw. "Don't start."

"Oh, please, Michael. I'm not starting anything." She lets out a curt laugh. "I've been here for thirty minutes, and I've heard more than one group of people talking about it."

Wow. This level of malice is cruel, even for her. Yes, she pulled this kind of shit with me, but I didn't realize she'd done it to Michael too. It's like it comes naturally to her, the way she's planting her own ideas into his head and pushing his buttons, knowing exactly what'll hurt the most. She's a fucking manipulator.

"You hear what people are saying, right?" she goes on. "Have you seen the comments under your posts? Under the Hawks' posts?" Sienna grimaces, pressing her hand to her chest in mock sympathy. "It's sad so many people don't believe you have enough talent and ambition to play in the NHL. That you were only drafted because of your dad. And now…" She pauses dramatically, letting out a huff. "Now, everyone is wondering if you have enough to be with her. Doesn't that bother you?"

The vein in his temple pulses so violently, I can see it from here. Lip curled, he crushes his empty cup and sets it on the windowsill.

"You don't know what the fuck you're talking about," he snarls. He's practically shaking, like he's ready to completely explode.

Sienna’s smile grows. With her shoulders back and her posture straight, she smooths the front of her tee. She’s totally enjoying this.

Heart aching, I take a tiny step forward. I can’t watch any longer. It hurts too much to witness the subterfuge.

Instantly, his head snaps to the side. His gaze locks on me, and the world slows. I take another tentative step, and this time, he sags against the wall and presses the heels of his palms to his eyes.

Then, straightening, he rolls his shoulders and strides my way. His long legs eat up the distance between us quickly. He doesn’t greet the people around him, even the ones who call his name. And he doesn’t give Sienna another look, as if she doesn’t exist to him anymore.

“Hey,” he says quietly, cupping my face. “I missed you.”

Before I can respond, his mouth is on mine, and his fingers are tangled in my hair. The kiss is the opposite of soft. It’s intense and certain. He’s not doing it for show; he’s doing it for himself. Because he needs me, just like I need him.

The noise around us gets louder, guys whooping and laughing, girls squealing, but I tune it all out, narrowing my focus to only him, soaking up the warmth of his skin, relishing the way his muscular body feels pressed to mine. When he pulls back, he doesn’t step away. Instead, he rests his forehead against mine.

He breaks eye contact and turns his head to one side. “I’m not living in anyone’s shadow, Sienna,” he says, loud enough for her to hear. “And I do belong to Isla. Always have. Just like she belongs to me. You could never handle coming in second. Not on the ice. Not in real life. And the reason this bothers you so much is because you know *exactly* why she was always the one I chose. The only one I ever wanted.”

Then, he’s zeroed in on me again, his brows pulled together. “You okay?”

Only now do I realize I’m shaking. I pull at the collar of my tee and scratch at the skin beneath it. My chest aches, and my breathing has become shallow.

Shit. I know this feeling all too well.

Taking a step back, I duck. I don’t want anyone to see me like this. I don’t want them to see me falling apart.

“Y-yeah.” Another step back, toward the door.

Eyes darkening, Michael grasps my hand and turns me away from the crowd. “We’re leaving.”

In a rush, he pulls me through crowds of people still dancing and drinking and making out, and he doesn’t stop until we’re outside and the cold, fresh air hits my skin.

Eyes closed, I try to regulate my breath. My lungs burn. My eyes sting. Panic rises again, stronger this time.

If we don’t keep going, I’ll have a breakdown right here on the porch.

As if he’s thinking the same thing, Michael scoops me into his arms and strides toward his car. He manages to dig his key fob out of his pocket without putting me down, and then the two of us climb into the back seat.

With my knees pulled up, I drop my head, shutting my eyes. One, two, three, four, five—breathe in. One, two, three, four, five—breathe out.

Michael presses his warm palm to my back, running it up and down. “That’s okay, baby,” he says quietly. “You’re safe. I’m right here.”

Minutes pass, maybe longer. All the while, he tells me he’s got me, reminding me to breathe. When I can fill my lungs again, I sit straighter and slump back against the leather seat.

“I…” My voice cracks, and my mouth is dry. I swallow, trying to dislodge the lump in my throat but failing. “I’m sorry. It doesn’t usually happen like this. Only when it’s about my career. I don’t know why…”

He tucks a few locks of hair behind my ear, his fingers gently caressing my skin. “When was the first time it happened? In high school? You used to pick at your nails and chew on your bottom lip till it bled when you were anxious, and I once overheard our moms talking about how you fainted from nerves. I didn’t realize you were having panic attacks regularly.”

Head shaking, I peer up at him through my lashes. “I didn’t have my first panic attack until I moved to Boston.” I wipe away my tears with my fingertips. “I didn’t feel well, and practice was hard. Elena told me I needed rest. She wasn’t angry or anything, but I was. I was angry with myself. I missed my family and felt like I was failing. It just became too much suddenly.”

Eyes emitting warmth, he nods. “Did Elena help you through it?” he asks gently.

I jerk my head, rubbing at my chest. “No. It was Dean. He’d just shown up for practice and found me in the hallway. He and my uncle are the only

people there who knew about the panic attacks. After that, Dean was typically the one who could ground me."

His eyes flash, his expression pinching. But when he speaks again, his tone is soft. "How long were you two together?"

I duck my head, rubbing one thumb over the nail of the other. I knew I'd have to talk to him about this eventually, especially after he requested to follow my private Instagram account. Dean and I are still friends, and there are several photos of us together there.

"For about seven months." I meet Michael's gaze, studying his reaction, but he keeps his face neutral. "We were friends for a while. At first, I was sure that's all we'd ever be. The year we trained for the Olympics changed everything. I lived on the ice, he and Cassie too. We spent a lot of time together, and, eventually, we kind of fell into a relationship. Honestly, I think we both needed a person who could understand what we were going through, someone to lean on when our schedules were killing us. When we didn't have time for anything except sleep." I take a deep breath. "He and I are still friends. He's dating a girl named Lauren now. She's lovely."

Silently, Michael scoops me up and pulls me into his lap, guiding my legs to either side of his.

He pushes hair out of my face; his skin on mine is scorching. "Okay," he murmurs. Then, a lazy smirk breaks over his lips. "And you don't need him anymore. I've got you now."

He puts his hand on the back of my neck and pulls my face to his. When he kisses me, my whole world recenters.

Michael is my constant.

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CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

a true winner

MICHAEL

Twenty years old

ISLA'S BMW IS AT THE RINK WHEN I SHOW UP FOR HER PRACTICE, BUT SHE shouldn't be on the ice today. Elena reminded her she needed rest before she leaves for France in two days. She needs the time off, both physically and mentally.

After her panic attack last night, I couldn't agree more. I'd never mention it to her, but I'm worried she isn't mentally ready for the competition. It kills me to see her struggle. She's phenomenal. She gives more than a hundred percent of herself when she's on the ice. The dedication, the focus, her mastery? I'm in awe. My heart damn near sings when I watch her on skates. It doesn't matter if she's doing her short program or her free skate performance.

She's a true winner to me.

When my phone pings, I snatch it up from the passenger seat. The device feels heavy in my hand, metaphorically speaking. Because, once again, I lost myself to the negativity on my socials. If not for my need to see Isla tonight, I would've stayed holed up in my room, stuck in my head again, believing all the shit I read about myself.

Fuck, this pressure is driving me nuts.

I turn off the engine, but instead of climbing out of my car, I unlock my phone. I know better, but I don't know how to tune it all out.

I navigate to my notifications, and when the comments appear, my heart spasms painfully. Some of the mentions and tags are positive. Some fans are praising the hat trick. There are even a few edits posted, highlighting the goals I scored. In one, Ash, Bouchard, and I rush to the Dolphins' net, damn near on fire. The quick video makes me smile. Coach was the happiest I'd ever seen him when he entered the locker room. So happy, he even gave us a day off.

But my smile slips when I scroll to a new comment. There's a whole slew of them in a row, each fan acting like a fucking scout with a clipboard, like they have the kind of knowledge that makes them qualified to judge every shift, every lift of my stick, every scrape of my skates.

A good handful of them don't pretend to have anything nice to say about me.

let's see if he can keep it up 🤫 I highly doubt he will

stop this bs! one good game doesn't erase the damage caused by the accident

lmao, at this age, his dad was a real star, this one is a cheap replica

still living off his dad's name 🤷 have no idea what Phantoms see in him

My jaw tightens, and a wave of nausea hits hard. I close my eyes and press the back of my head against the headrest.

It's fascinating and absurd how my brain scrolls past the numerous good comments and chooses to highlight only the hateful ones. I've tried to work it out, to understand why it happens…but I didn't like the answer I got.

What I discovered when I finally dug deep is that I only see the negativity because it reflects how I think about myself. I don't need validation to confirm I'm doing well. I'm actively looking for evidence to prove to myself I'm shit.

Will it ever stop?

I open my eyes and focus on the screen again.

idk I actually love watching Thompson on the ice, he's hot af. Does some really nice stuff to my lady parts iykyk

he's only twenty, but I'd let him have his way with me if he was willing

does anyone know if number 17 is single?

I shudder. Instead of feeling smug about the comments, I feel objectified. I went from being a disgrace, a talentless, entitled asshole, to just a hot guy women want to fantasize about.

Still struggling to step away from the bullshit media about me, I continue. A comment catches my attention…and makes my blood boil.

Thompson isn't single, and unless you're a girl from a wealthy family, he won't even look at you. unless you're ridiculously talented at something. Then, he'll latch on like a parasite

I scroll faster, pushing that comment from my head. A headline flashes by, and when I catch the name Jim Ross—the Phantoms' center—I swear, my fucking head is ready to explode, so I don't stop to read more. I finally close the app and lock the screen. I can't spiral today.

Isla's leaving in two days, and I want to spend as much time with her as I can.

I want to be present for her.

I just need her.

So, with the setting on Do Not Disturb, I shove my phone into my pocket. Then, I take a deep breath to steady myself, open the door, and climb out.

It's windy today, the cool air biting my cheeks as I hurry into the rink. It's exactly what I need to knock the negativity out of my head.

Excitement builds inside me as I approach the door. In a matter of minutes, I'll see Isla. None of those nasty comments matter now.

Inside, Kellan gives me a knowing smile. "Michael, hey. Came to watch your girl skate?"

“Hi, and yeah.” I thread my fingers through my hair, the move centering me. “She’s preparing for France, so she always seems to be here.”

He chuckles. “She asked me if she could stay for another hour, but I can’t stick around. I’ve got plans with my wife.”

An idea pops into my head, excitement building, this time heating me from the inside. “How about we close up for you tonight? I could drop the keys off at your place.”

“I don’t know…”

“C’mon,” I beg. “Isla works so damn hard. If she needs another hour of practice, I can stay with her and then close the rink. No problem.”

He studies me, chewing on the inside of his cheek, his eyes a little cloudy below his bushy brows. Then, he fishes the keys from his jacket pocket. “Here. I have a spare set at home, so just bring these with you to practice tomorrow.”

“You’re the best.” I take the keys and pocket them.

“Don’t make me regret it,” he says as he turns away. “Lock the door after me so no one else comes in.”

As the door closes, I do as Kellan told me. Then, I head toward the rink. “Ma Meilleure Ennemie” is playing, mixing with the sound of her blades scraping the ice as I sit in the stands.

She’s dressed in black leggings and a light blue sweatshirt. Her hair is in a high ponytail, and her cheeks are pink from exertion.

She hasn’t noticed me yet, making it feel like one of the days I’d sneak in and hide in the shadows to watch her. She called me a stalker, but I’d say I was more of a fan? A very dedicated one.

The song starts again, and Isla pushes off. Her strokes are long, and her edges are deep. Like always, her movements are effortless but precise.

The arena is her safe place. Even her posture changes the moment she steps onto the ice, her confidence and certainty growing. Her eyes glimmer with determination and power.

She doesn’t follow rules; she creates them.

She glides forward, starting to turn backward on the inside edge of her skate. I know this one; it’s a flip jump. She uses her toe pick to assist with liftoff and launches herself into the air. Her body rotates—one, two, three times—and then she lands on the outside edge of her skate.

Yes! I pump a fist.

She moves straight into a double toe loop, the transition flawless. Her eyes shine, and a small smile tips her lips, but she stays locked in, as if she isn't just listening to the music but breathing it in, allowing the rhythm to flow inside her, spreading through her veins.

A long spiral sequence comes next. Like this, with her back arched, her free leg high and steady, her body control is insane. It always has been. Discipline, repetition, consistency. She's spent her whole life doing this. Behind this beautiful image are years of pain, of training until her feet are torn up and bloody, of falling and then getting up and doing it again. That's what is hidden behind every move, every jump.

She gathers speed down the long side and then skates backward, preparing for an inside-edge launch. A Salchow, I bet. She jumps and again rotates three times before she lands on the opposite outside edge. And she doesn't stop. She goes from facing forward on the inside blade edge to skating backward on the outside edge. She uses her toe pick for assistance again, and then, she's in the air, pushing from the outside edge. One, two, and she lands on the same outside edge.

Triple Salchow, double toe.

Fucking right! She nailed it.

Her landing is smooth, her knee bent just enough to absorb the impact.

I grin, my chest tightening with pride.

She's breathing heavier now, the rise and fall of her shoulders faster. A light smile ghosts over her lips, evidence she's happy. But the rest of her expression stays calm, Ice Queen calm, even if I know better.

Her spin starts slow in rhythm with the music, and then she lifts her free leg. Leaning backward, she grasps the blade and pulls it up above her head, only stopping when her spine curves into an impossible arc. The spin tightens, accelerates. It looks so easy, but in reality, the flexibility it takes to get into the position is intense, and so is the pain of holding it.

The Biellmann spin.

She finishes with a step sequence—rockers, counters, twizzles, all perfectly timed. The music fades out, and when the final note hits, Isla drops to one knee and presses her hand to the ice. While she catches her breath, I rein in the urge to leap onto the ice and scoop her into my arms. She is my greatest inspiration and my biggest strength. Just watching her makes me want to do better myself.

I stand from the players' bench, and she looks up. When our eyes lock, a small smile curves her lips.

"How long have you been here?" she asks, getting to her feet.

"Long enough to see the whole program. You are…" I blow out a breath. "You're out of this world."

She skates over to me and grips the boards, steadying herself. With an eyebrow arched, she looks me up and down. "Don't I deserve a kiss?"

"You sure do." I cup her cheek, noting the coolness of her skin against my palm. I kiss her slowly, savoring every brush of her tongue against mine. "I missed you."

"Sorry I disappeared again," she murmurs as I rest my forehead against hers. "I wanted to come in one more time to make sure my program is ready."

"It's ready."

Groaning, she pushes me away. "I can do better."

There's no point in arguing with her. In that way, the two of us are alike. Unless *I* think I've done well, no one will convince me of it.

"I saw Kellan on his way out," I tell her as she skates toward where she left her things. "He told me you wanted to stay longer, and I kinda convinced him to give me the keys."

With her phone and water bottle pressed to her chest, she gapes. "Really?"

"Yeah, I told him I'd stay with you and bring him the keys tomorrow." I grin. "You can skate more if you want to. Just know we have the whole rink to ourselves. Even the locker rooms."

She returns to the boards and studies me for a moment before a snort escapes her lips. "And here I thought you were an altruist." She shakes her head. "How long have you had this fantasy?"

"What fantasy?" I arch an eyebrow.

"Michael…"

She steps off the ice, and I stride over to stand in front of her. Even with her skates on, she only reaches my chin.

I snake a hand around her waist and press her to my chest. "What fantasy?"

"The one that includes fucking me in the locker room."

Head thrown back, I laugh. "Bold of you to assume the locker room is the only place I want to fuck you." I place my lips near her ear and whisper,

“Locker room. Showers. Penalty box. The stands. I want to fuck you on every surface here.”

She shivers, and when I pull back, her eyes are hooded, like she’s as excited about the prospect as I am.

“Wanna skate longer?” I murmur.

“I did, but since Kellan said he couldn’t stay, I’ve already finished everything I planned.”

“Then let’s go to the locker room.” Snagging her wrist, I tug her that way.

“I’m not having sex with you here,” she taunts.

I don’t reply…because why bother arguing with words when I can easily prove her wrong with my cock?

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CHAPTER FORTY

it's you in general

MICHAEL

Twenty years old

IN THE LOCKER ROOM, SHE INSISTS ON TAKING A SHOWER ALONE, SO I SIT ON the bench and wait. For several minutes, I look around, trying to keep my mind from going back to the comments on social media. Before long, though, I realize it's not working. My phone weighs a ton in my pocket.

I pull it out, ready to unlock it and torture myself some more, when Isla returns with a towel wrapped around her body, heading to her sports bag.

"Are you happy with how practice went?" I ask, grateful for the distraction her presence provides.

"Yeah, it was good."

"Just good?" I chuckle. "You were ethereal. Absolutely flawless."

"Stop it." With a roll of her eyes, she digs into her duffel. "You have no idea what you're talking about."

"Um, agree to disagree," I counter. "I've watched you on the ice hundreds of times. I know you're exceptional."

With a huff, she strides over to me. "Give me your phone. Mine is buried somewhere under my clothes."

I unlock the screen and hand it to her. She taps a few times, scrolls, then gives it back, a video pulled up on the screen. She taps the triangle in the middle, and "Top 10 Best Female Figure Skaters Now" starts.

"Isla…"

“Just watch it, okay?” She goes back to her duffel bag and gets dressed.

It takes effort to focus on the screen rather than her body, but I give it my all, watching short clips of several skaters. She’s one of the ten, though whoever created this compilation put her in ninth place. I’m biased, obviously, but she deserves to be much higher.

When the video ends, I look up. “What was I supposed to see?”

In her sports bra and a black skirt, she trudges over and plops down on the bench beside me. She starts the video again. “This is Ogawa,” she says. “What she does on the ice is art. Here’s Sato, also from Japan. She makes quads look like a walk in the park. And don’t get me started on the Russians.” She throws her hands in the air. “Sokolova could do a backflip at fourteen, and I only nailed it for the first time when I was seventeen. I am no match for these girls. I’m no match for the girls on my team either.”

“Hey.” I grab her hand, halting her musings, aching at the disappointment in her voice. “You don’t need to be like them. You are you. There’s no other Isla Walker, and the Isla Walker I know is an incredibly talented figure skater. You have the ability to be the best of the best. I believe in you.”

With tears in her eyes, she smiles. “Thank you. You always know just what to say to me.”

“That’s me. Michael Thompson—your personal pep-talker.”

A laugh rolls out of her. “I almost forgot what a goofball you can be.”

“I’ve gotten good at hiding it, I guess.”

“You sure have.”

My phone buzzes in her hand, snagging her attention. Eyebrows drawn together, she taps a few times, and then her lips collapse into a scowl.

“Why do people say this?” she asks softly, turning the screen toward me.

can’t wait to see if he’s actually worth the hype

daddy’s name helped him in the draft, anyone think it will help him with the Phantoms?

I shrug, the tightness in my chest making it hard to breathe.

“Why don’t you block these people? Remove the tag option so they can’t tag you, limit comments. You can change the setting so only people

you follow back can comment on your posts and mention you."

I look away, rubbing the back of my neck. "It doesn't bother me."

"Clearly." She slips off the bench, then kneels in front of me, her hands on my thighs for balance. "Michael, talk to me. Please."

"None of this matters," I drawl, ignoring the way my gut churns.

She assesses me, seeing right through me, straight past my bullshit. She knows I'm lying.

"But it does," she says. "It matters to you."

I take the phone from her and lock the screen, like that will make me forget the comments.

"Yeah," I admit quietly. "I think I just got good at pretending it doesn't."

She takes my hands in hers, blue eyes depthless. "Talk to me."

Head low, I exhale hard. "It's fucking exhausting. I don't feel like I'm the one out there playing, scoring, helping my team win. It's my last name. My dad's legacy. Echoes of his successful career. The comparison game is constant. People are always mentioning what Dad was already capable of at my age, what he was already known for." I huff out a humorless laugh. "Sometimes, it feels like I'm failing at something I haven't even started yet."

She practically growls, "You're not failing."

"Maybe not right now." I lift my eyes to hers. "But I'm terrified that one day, they'll be right. That without him, without the name, there's nothing special about me. That I will always be Colton Thompson's son and never just myself."

She slides her fingers to my wrist, massaging it. "You're wrong."

"You don't know what they say. What they've been saying for years."

"I do know," she says softly. "And I know what they say about me too. That I'm not enough. That I'll never be an Olympic medalist. That I only made it this far because of my dad's money and connections. That I'm taking the place of more talented girls." Her voice pitches high, and she pauses, taking a deep breath. "It doesn't bother me because I am my own harshest critic. Their words and my worries don't make it true."

I hate everyone who ever made her feel this way. I want nothing more than to prove to her what a brilliant woman she is, what a talented figure skater she is. She has a bright future. She's so strong and resilient. When she falls, she gets right back up and tries again. Honestly, I think I'd rather see her win than win myself.

And I know that with her, I don’t need to pretend. I can be real.

So, I tell her what’s really on my mind. “What if what they say about me is true?” I ask, my voice hoarse. “What if I join the Phantoms next season, give it everything I have, and it still isn’t enough?”

“That still doesn’t lessen your value. You are a great player. You are talented, and everyone who cares about you is really proud of you.”

I swallow hard. The words hit deeper than any headline, any comment, any comparison ever has—but shame hits me too. I shouldn’t be fishing for compliments.

“You shouldn’t have to say that,” I murmur. “About me.”

She flashes me a small smile. “Why not? It’s the truth, and I’m your best friend. And what a terrible girlfriend I’d be if I didn’t support you.” She twines our fingers, eyes roaming over my face. “Is this what it’s like for you? All the time?”

I nod. “Every single day for a long time, since I was old enough to really pay attention to what people were saying about me. Actually, Turner’s parents were some of the first. I overheard them saying I’d never be at the same level as my dad, and that stuck with me for years.”

“I wish I could shut all those stupid people up,” she whispers. “I wish I could fix it.”

“You may not be able to erase the problem, but you help. So much.”

Her brows pull together. “How?”

“You’re my inspiration. My moving force.” I clear my throat. “I look at you, look at how ambitious you are, how relentless, and I want to be worthy of you. I want to be the best for you.”

For a second, she just looks at me. Then, she slowly stands and climbs onto my lap, her fingers fisting the fabric of my hoodie. “You’re already the best for me.” She inches her face closer to mine. “Wanna stop thinking about all that for a while?”

Relief washes over me. “Yes, please.”

She takes my face in her hands and molds her mouth to mine. It’s gentle at first. Her soft lips move in deliberate strokes, her tongue tracing my bottom lip, seeking access. I open for her—of course, I fucking open for her. Kissing her is an addiction at this point, one I never want to find a cure for.

My cock thickens, straining against my fly. The occasional breaths we take are short and sharp, as if neither of us wants to part, even for a second,

even for oxygen. I've fantasized about kissing her so many times, and I can say my fantasy pales in comparison to the real thing. Every single time I kiss her is better than the last. My heart is beating out of my chest. Familiar heat pools under my skin. I want more.

I slide my hands down her hips and cup her ass. The feel of the perfect curve turns my brain into a mushy mess. *Fuck*. I stand from the bench, taking her with me, guiding one leg around my hip, then the other before I turn and press her back against the locker. On contact, a whoosh of air escapes her, and I rear back, searching her face for any sign of distress.

She stares at me, her lips swollen, her deep blue eyes darker than usual. The color of a twilight sky. Like the moment when the sun drops below the horizon, but its light still illuminates the sky. My favorite time of the day. My favorite color.

"If you don't want me to fuck you against this locker, then you better tell me to stop," I whisper, nuzzling the crook of her neck, inhaling her intoxicating scent.

Her chuckle rings in the room. "No."

I suck on her neck, leaving a mark, and she lets out a loud moan. The sound shreds the control I've tried to maintain. I lower her a little, making sure her core is lined up with my hard length beneath my jeans. Pupils blown, she breaks into a beautiful smile.

"You have one second to change your mind," I tell her. "We can still go to my room, or yours."

She grinds against me, and my voice cracks. *Fuck*. "Isla, dammit…"

She brings her mouth to my ear, her breath ghosting over my neck. "I want you."

She doesn't need to tell me twice. My need for her is almost animalistic. Obsessive.

I lower her to her feet and undo the button, then unzip my fly. Before I can yank my jeans down past my hips, she sneaks her hand beneath my waistband and traces my crown. I groan and close my eyes. *Fuck*. I could come in my jeans right here, right now, just like this.

Knees shaky, I lower my jeans, giving her access to pull my cock out. Her eyes are locked on it, mesmerized, as she moves her hand up and down my shaft. Nothing has ever felt better than her touch. It's nearly enough to make me lose my mind.

With my hands on her waist, I hoist her up. Her skirt drifts up her thighs as I position myself at her entrance. With one arm looped around my neck, she uses her free hand to push her panties aside.

Then, she peers up at me, wearing a sly smile. “I’m soaked already…”

I smile back, my head in the damn clouds. There’s no way this is my reality. Eyes locked on hers, I push into her. Slowly, I move in and out, letting her adjust to my size. She’s wet, but she’s tight. The way she grips me makes me see stars.

“You feel so good, baby,” I whisper against her throat. “So fucking right.”

I fuck her slowly and gently, relishing the way her pussy sucks my dick deeper. Fuck, if I’m not careful, I’ll come too soon. While I may not be new at this anymore, sex with her gets better every time. It’s like something out of the world. Divine and unforgettable.

“More,” she moans, digging her fingers into my shoulders. “Please.”

With a smirk, I pick up my pace, burying myself so deep, my vision blurs. She seeks my lips, her tongue battling with mine as we capture our sounds in our locked mouths.

The heat forming in my lower abdomen grows stronger. I’m close, but I want her to come first, so I pick up my pace, pumping into her in a steady rhythm.

“Oh my…” She trails off, mouth falling open.

Her walls spasm around me as her orgasm slams into her. The intensity with which her pussy pulses sends me hurtling toward my own release; in seconds, I’m coming too, spilling myself inside her, my face buried in her hair as we ride out our orgasms together.

As she relaxes and I come down from my high, I kiss her again, and again, and again, only stopping when my vision goes dark and I think I might pass out from the lack of oxygen. Inhaling deeply, I press my forehead to hers, reveling in her scent.

“Before you came back into my life, the only stress reliever I knew was my bike,” I confess. “I’m sad I can’t ride anymore, but I have to say, this is even better. You make me feel light and capable, and you drown out all the voices in my head.”

“You ground me too, in a way no one ever has.” She nuzzles her nose against mine. “Let’s go to your room. I kinda love your bed.”

I put her on her feet. “So it’s my bed and not my cuddles?”

Laughing, she scurries to the restroom stalls, throwing, “It’s you in general,” over her shoulder.

AFTER WE CLEAN up and make sure we’ve left no evidence of our extracurricular activities, I lock up the rink, and we head to our cars. With my arm around Isla’s shoulder, I hold her close. If it were up to me, I’d never let her out of my sight.

Her phone buzzes, and she takes a step to the side so she can retrieve it from the pocket of her jacket. “It’s Ash.” With a quick look at me, she swipes the screen. “Hey… Yeah, he’s with me.”

She puts him on speaker and steps closer.

“What’s up, man?” I ask.

“Where is your phone?”

“In my pocket.”

“Is it on?” he asks, his tone clipped.

I frown. “It’s on Do Not Disturb. Why?” I’d forgotten, but the point was to have uninterrupted time with Isla, and that’s exactly what I got.

“Your dad called. Said he couldn’t get ahold of you. Your agent called next, since he couldn’t find you either.”

Cold dread spreads down my spine. “Did something happen?”

“Call your agent, Michael.” With that, he ends the call.

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CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

goodbye for now

MICHAEL

Twenty years old

I PULL MY PHONE OUT OF MY POCKET AND TURN OFF DO NOT DISTURB. IN my call log, I discover five missed calls from Pablo and three from my dad. It's cold outside, but the anxiety coursing through me has my body temperature skyrocketing. Eyes squeezed shut, I rub at my brow. The churning in my stomach makes me wonder if I should head back inside or throw up right here in the parking lot.

"Michael?" Isla's voice is soft, hesitant.

Blinking, I look down to where Isla has placed her hand over my heart. "Huh?"

"You okay?" She tilts her head to the side, watching me intently.

"I don't know. Why would my agent be looking for me so late in the day? What if the Phantoms changed their mind?"

A small, reassuring smile pulls at her lips. "They haven't. But you won't believe it until you call him back."

I shake my head. "I just…" I rock back on my heels, my insides practically quivering.

"How about we go to the dorms? You can call him back from your room. Or we can go to mine."

With a dip of my chin, I blow out a loud breath. "Will you stay with me?"

“Of course.”

She stands on her tiptoes and cuffs the back of my neck, pulling my face down. When her warm lips connect with mine, some of the tension holding my body hostage dissipates. I wrap my arms around her waist, erasing the distance between us. My tongue slides into her mouth and curls around hers in a frenzied motion. Kissing her anchors me, and right now, it’s exactly what I need.

More than just right now, because I’m pretty sure I’ll need her and her perfect mouth forever.

Foreheads pressed against each other, breaths mingling, we stand in the parking lot. I know we should leave, but I can’t make myself let her go.

“Let’s go,” she tells me. “The sooner you make that call, the sooner you’ll have answers.”

I snort, my breath catching. “What if he wants to tell me that—”

With a finger pressed to my lips, she shuts me up. “There is no sense in letting your mind run wild. We’re not going to make assumptions or consider what-ifs. We’re going straight to your room, and then you’ll call your agent. Okay?”

A little of the lightness that infiltrated me in the locker room returns. “Yes, ma’am.”

She playfully swats my chest and then steps back. “See you there. The last one inside the building makes hot chocolate and scrounges up snacks.”

I round my car, unlocking it in the process. “I hope you have snacks in your room, because there’s no way I’m coming last.”

“Hm.” She opens her car door right before I get to mine. “That’s not what they say about good guys, though, right? I thought they always finish last.”

“Too bad I’m not a good guy.” I wink, yanking open my door. “But don’t worry. I’ll always make sure *you* come first.”

Her jaw drops, and I use the moment of distraction to slide inside my car.

“See you there, Isla.”

With the push of a button, I start the engine and shift into drive. As I pull out of the parking lot, that lightness grows, relaxing my muscles and making my smile wider. Only she can set me straight when I’m diving headfirst into a pool of troubling thoughts.

ISLA'S MUG of steaming hot chocolate is cradled between her palms. Mine is on the nightstand, just like the pack of Oreos I brought from the kitchen.

Naturally, I let her win, but I don't think I can eat anything right now.

"Call him." She nudges me with her shoulder. "I'm here, and whatever it is, we will figure it out together."

I unlock my phone and navigate to Pablo's contact. He answers on the second ring, and I put him on speaker so Isla can hear the conversation.

"Finally," he practically shouts. "I've been running around like crazy, trying to find you."

"Sorry." I scratch the back of my neck. "I was at the rink, and my phone was on Do Not Disturb."

"That's okay." He clears his throat. "You sitting down?"

I straighten and glance at Isla, who's next to me on the bed, her eyes glued to my phone. "Yeah."

"Okay. Summer has come early. I'm not sure if you've heard yet, but Ross' injury is worse than we thought. He's out for the season, and the Phantoms want you up before winter break. Paperwork's already moving."

The words land all at once, like a deluge, nearly drowning me.

"What do you mean summer has come early?" I mutter, my mouth dry. "As in—"

"As in, you're packing, Michael. Medicals, meetings, media. You'll skate with them in January, but they want you in the building immediately. Visibility matters. Getting you here ASAP is crucial."

I thread my fingers through my hair, tugging at the roots. "What about school? The Hawks?"

"That's not what you should be focusing on," he says firmly. "You've been working your whole life for this opportunity. This has been the plan since you were drafted. It's just happening a little earlier than expected."

"But I thought I'd still have time—"

"Michael, this *is* the time. Talk to your dad, discuss college with him." He softens his voice. "I'm booking our flights. We need to be in New York in two days."

Two days…

Tuesday?

Heart in my throat, I turn and lock eyes with Isla.

Her pupils are blown out, her lip caught between her teeth. Her flight to Paris is on Tuesday too. She's going to France, and I'm going to New York. After her competition, she will be here, and I will be in New York.

"Michael?" Pablo asks, breaking through my spiraling thoughts.

Sucking in a breath, I nod once. "Thanks. Um…I need to talk to Dad, and I need a little time to digest the news." I clear my throat. "Talk to you tomorrow, or should we just wait until Tuesday?"

"I'll send you flight details in a few and call you tomorrow."

He ends the call, plunging my room into a heavy silence.

"Wow." I drag a shaky hand down my face. "That's not what I expected."

"You want me to stay?" Isla whispers. "Or would it be better if I leave? You probably need space. This is…huge."

I turn and clutch her hand to my chest. "No. I don't need space. Not from you."

"I don't want to distract you. You need to talk to your dad."

"You're not a distraction." I scoot closer and kiss her knuckles. "I need you here."

She nods, her lips pressed together. "Then I'm staying."

I take the mug from her hand, put it on the nightstand, and pull her to me. She sits between my legs, her back pressed to my chest. When we were kids, I liked cuddling her like this. It was comforting. Peaceful. Having her in my arms put me at ease, and that hasn't changed a bit.

"How do you feel?" she asks.

"I don't know yet. I'm still processing."

"Understandable. It's probably similar to how I felt when I found out I was going to the Olympics. It was my dream, still is, and this one is yours."

"It is, but a life with you is my dream too," I confess. "I can see my future clearly, but only because you're in it. Because you are an inevitable part of my life."

She swallows. "I just don't want to be in the way."

"You never were." I squeeze her tighter. "And you never will be."

She tilts her face up, our eyes meeting. I bend and kiss her slowly. The need to be closer is maddening. Since the moment she kissed me in this room that first time, this desire has been burrowing deeper and deeper, and now, I can't imagine my life without her in it.

The buzzing of my phone tears us apart. She picks it up from where I dropped it on the bed and holds it out to me.

Another story, whenever you're ready.

Come to Lokepub to pick your next novel.

Slowly, I untangle myself from her and stand. Phone pressed to my ear, I answer, “Hey, Dad.”

“Hey, kid.”

“They’re calling me up,” I say, voice cracking despite my effort to keep it steady.

“I know,” he says simply. “Pablo called me when he couldn’t reach you. I don’t know many details, but he gave me enough to paint a picture.”

“I don’t know much either. But I have to be in New York on Tuesday.”

“Okay.” He lets out a long breath. “I’ll be on campus tomorrow to meet with the dean. We’ll figure out what to do about school.”

“I wasn’t expecting this at all. My mind is a mess.” I stop in front of the window and run my fingers through my hair.

“Don’t overthink it. You’ll do well,” he says confidently and without a second of hesitation. He’s always believed in me.

“I don’t know. I…” I tug at my hair.

“What’s on your mind? Talk to me, Michael.”

“I’ve been compared to you my whole life. You were my role model. An NHL legend. I wanted to be just like you. But hearing over and over that I’m nothing like you, that I’ll never measure up…” My voice cracks. “What if they get me there and realize I’m a fraud? That I only got this because I’m your son?”

There’s a pause on the line. Then, Dad clears his throat. “Why haven’t you ever mentioned this before?” he asks quietly. “Michael, I’m sorry you’ve been carrying that alone.”

I press my forehead to the window and close my eyes.

“Yeah, my name might’ve put a spotlight on you,” he continues, “but that’s where it ends. Everything else? That’s you. Your work. Your talent.

Your grit.”

I suck in a breath. My lungs constrict.

“I love watching you play. Always have. For me? You’re amazing. I always knew you were gonna be better than me. Greater. Not because you skate like I did, but because you don’t. Because you are Michael Thompson, and you’re carving your own path to the NHL. Building your own legacy.”

I ball my fist, my eyes stinging.

“I’m proud of you, kid,” he continues. “Whatever comes next, remember who you are. Remember what you’ve already achieved and focus on what you want to achieve in the future. Don’t let the noise touch that.”

I nod, even though he can’t see it. “Thanks, Dad.”

The second I hang up, Isla’s arms are wrapped around my torso, her cheek resting against my back.

“Everything’s going to change,” she whispers, her voice going right through me.

“Yeah.”

A tight knot forms in my chest. Not only is my life about to change, but this life we’ve just begun creating together will too. That’s the part I’m not ready to think about.

“Michael, we need to talk.”

I nod.

“Can you please turn around?”

I do as she tells me, head hanging, and wind my hands around her waist. She’s so small and fragile right now, looking at me with her deep blue eyes full of intensity. “We’re both standing on the edge of something huge. I’m flying to France, and then I’ll go to nationals. Then, there’s Four Continents. Maybe Worlds. And I’ve only started college.”

The tightness in my chest turns painful. I already know where this is going, and I hate it. I hate that she’s right. Because how do we make this work? Me in New York. Her in Paris. Then nationals. Training camps. Games. Flights. Different time zones.

We’re about to live two completely different lives.

And while I don’t doubt us, the timing sucks.

I nod slowly. “I know.”

“I’ve always believed in you, Michael. I know you’re going to be incredible. The NHL won’t know what hit it.” Her voice wavers, her eyes

welling with tears. “And I don’t want to be the thing that pulls your focus away from that.” She places her hand over my heart, which is currently thundering in my chest. “You won’t be here. I can’t be in New York. We’ll be controlled by clocks, flying to and from different airports.” Her fingers curl into my shirt. “And I know it’s true that if you want something enough, you’ll make it work. But I’m afraid if we do this now, we’ll only become another pressure point in each other’s already high-pressure lives.”

“I don’t want to lose you—” My voice fails me at the end of the sentence, my lungs nearly incapable of inflating.

“I know,” she whispers. “But I don’t want to be the reason you’re exhausted or distracted or feeling like you’re failing because you’re trying to be where you’re supposed to be while making time for me too.” She presses her forehead to my chest, and a sob escapes her. “And I don’t think you’d want me to feel that way either.”

Fuck. It hurts so damn much.

“So what are we doing?” I ask quietly, pressing her tighter against me.

“We’re not breaking up,” she says. “We’re not pretending this doesn’t matter.”

“A pause then?” I ask, the words barely making their way out.

“A pause.”

I plant a kiss on the top of her head, breathing her in like I’ll need the memory later. “This isn’t goodbye, baby,” I whisper.

She tilts her head up, her eyes shining with tears. “No. It’s just a ‘see you later.’”

I cover her lips with mine, desperate to lose myself in her. To forget about what happens next, even if only for a while.

Because even though we found each other…we’re yet again living in the wrong timeline.

HER FLIGHT LEAVES from gate twenty. Mine leaves from seventeen.

The two of us stand in front of gate eighteen, her arms circled around my torso, mine looped around her back. We talk about everything. Anything. Like we’re trying to talk for months ahead.

I don’t want to leave her.

I don’t want to say goodbye.

But I need to.

Playing in the NHL has always been my dream. Being on the ice, qualifying for the Olympics in two years, is hers.

And sometimes, sacrifices have to be made. But damn, it hurts.

“I will always cheer you on. I believe in you, and I support you. That won’t change. And I will always be yours,” I tell her. “And you’ll always be mine. True or not true?”

She breaks into a beautiful smile. “True. And I plan to be your biggest cheerleader, no matter where I am.”

We’re silenced by an announcement through the overhead speakers. The attendant at gate twenty announces boarding has started.

“Kick everyone’s asses in Paris, Ice Queen.” I kiss her lips.

She shakes her head. “And you, Pretty Boy—make all those critics eat their words. Trust me. You, Michael Thompson, will be the greatest.”

I kiss her again, harder and faster this time. God, I never thought saying goodbye would be this painful.

“We’ll find our way to each other again,” I whisper against her mouth, my eyes filling with tears. “That’s a promise.”

She closes her eyes, breathes me in like she’s memorizing this moment, us, me. Then, she pulls back and lets go of my hand.

“Bye, Michael.”

Turning on her heel, she heads to the line waiting to board the plane. She doesn’t look back.

The organ beating in my chest follows her…because my heart doesn’t know how to survive without her.

Isla Walker will be mine. She’s my end game.

My everything.

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part four

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texts

December

MICHAEL:

you were phenomenal! proud of you

ISLA:

thank you ❤️

MICHAEL:

that tells me everything I need to know about what you think of your free skate. can I call you?

ISLA:

I'm with Elena now. I'll call you later

ISLA:

I didn't win

MICHAEL:

you placed second, of course you won

ISLA:

I didn't win gold. everything else is a loss 🤦‍♀️

MICHAEL:

you're lucky you're an ocean away from me

MICHAEL:

call me when you have time

January

ISLA:

omg! it’s your first NHL game and you scored!

MICHAEL:

I did my best though going from college hockey to the NHL is crazy af

ISLA:

I can imagine. Ash and Blake say hi

MICHAEL:

tell them I said hi too

ISLA:

call me when you have time

MICHAEL:

I miss you

ISLA:

I miss you too

MICHAEL:

this shit is fucking awful

ISLA:

tell me about it 💔

February

MICHAEL:

can I call you?

MICHAEL:

today’s loss is all my fault

MICHAEL:

I should’ve done better. should’ve given more

MICHAEL:

one fucking mistake and there’s Dad’s name again. I fucking hate it

MICHAEL:

fuck. I wanted to hear your voice so badly that I didn’t even realize its 4am in Berlin

MICHAEL:

sorry. hope your day will be better than mine was

March

ISLA:

congrats! your hat trick was out of this world

MICHAEL:

thanks!

Missed call from Isla

MICHAEL:

sorry! going to celebrate with the team. call you later?

ISLA:

I’m in Torino 😅 it’s already 2am

April

MICHAEL:

proud of you

ISLA:

thank you!

Seen

MICHAEL:

are you okay????

Seen

May

MICHAEL:

how are you?

ISLA:

same. my screen time is very limited so it's meh

MICHAEL:

should I book a ticket?

ISLA:

you have one day off! you better rest. I promise I'm fine

MICHAEL:

I was just being polite

MICHAEL:

my flight is in an hour

ISLA:

so sorry about tonight's game

MICHAEL:

everything's okay

ISLA:

you did such a good job on the ice. your assist and your goal? highlights of the game

MICHAEL:

media doesn't think so 🤷

Missed call from Isla

June

MICHAEL:

I missed your call again. I feel like a total loser

ISLA:

you're not! And you have a busy life, don't you worry about it

Seen

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CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

to be continued

ISLA

Twenty years old

My second year at the GBU has been creeping by slowly. I all but live at the rink, at the gym, and at the dance studio. My classes are barely more than an afterthought, and two professors have already hinted if I can't be bothered to show up consistently, I'm going to find myself in big trouble later.

But after my fall, I desperately need to work on my jumps. My Axel and Lutz are still far from perfect, and it drives me up the wall. If I want to even be considered for the Olympics, I *need* to work harder.

My Olympic dream isn't going to fulfill itself.

My muscles ache, my legs like jelly after three hours at the dance studio with almost no breaks. Blake has a date with a girl from the cheer squad, so I've got the room all to myself, but I'm too tired to think about anything but taking a quick shower and curling up in bed.

As I slip under the covers twenty minutes later, I check my phone and discover I've missed three FaceTime calls from Michael, along with a regular call. My heart squeezes. Dammit, I can't believe I missed his calls again. I push myself up and sit with my back to the headboard, sighing. Lately, it's been hard to touch base. Our busy schedules just make it too hard. I press my palm to my breastbone and rub at it, hoping it will stop the pain that spreads through my chest.

I miss him so damn much.

Should I call him back? It's 11 p.m. in New York, but his last call was only fifteen minutes ago.

I dial his number, and he answers after the third ring.

"Hey, baby," he says in a husky voice.

The greeting eases some of my sadness. "Hey. How are you?"

"F-fine." He yawns.

My stomach sinks. "Did I wake you up?"

"Uh-huh, but I'm glad you did. Falling asleep without hearing your voice sucks."

I close my eyes, willing myself not to cry. "It's the same for me, but I'm sorry anyway. I should've checked my phone the moment I left the studio."

He chuckles. "Stop apologizing. You probably stepped out of the dance studio and started replaying every second of practice in your head."

"I did." Warmth spreads all over my skin, my heart growing with love for this guy. No one knows me and understands me better than he does.

"How is your jump restoring going?"

"Honestly? Not great." I bow my head and pick at the fabric of my comforter. "Elena thinks I'm doing fine. Coach Gonzalez thinks so too, but…" I look up at the ceiling, replaying the moment I couldn't land an Axel right today. "I don't know. I feel like I should've fixed it all by now." I catch my snowflake earring between my fingers and trace its sharp little edges, hoping it will ground me. "So if I'm not in class, I'm either at the rink or in the studio."

"You're being too hard on yourself." He sighs. "Your fall was fucking brutal. Nobody comes back from something like that overnight."

I chew on my bottom lip and sigh. While I expect irritation to flare to life in my chest, my body relaxes instead, his words soothing me. But I'm ready to put thoughts of my issues aside. "How was your practice?"

"Good. Coach pulled me aside and told me he admires my dedication, and he's impressed with how hard I'm working on skills and building a rapport with the guys."

"See? Guess it's a good thing you're staying put in New York rather than trying to see me every time you have a spare moment," I tease.

He huffs. "Gotta do something to make sure this season is better than last."

I tighten my hold on my earring, hating the disappointment that sweeps through me.

His tone of voice is soft, our conversation light, but my mind keeps drifting to every call one of us has missed over the past two months. Every conversation cut short because one of us was running to practice, or because I was busy with school, or because he was boarding a flight with the team.

The worst part is that I'm relieved. Because I understand what he means. Because I've started doing it too. Doing all I can for my career, for a dream I've had since I was little.

I clear my throat. "Have you ever felt guilty? For…spending time with me instead of practicing?"

My heart thunders in my chest, my breathing growing shallow.

"Yeah…" he says in a quiet voice. "Every time I fly to see you, I feel guilty…like I should be training instead." He exhales shakily. "And then, when I'm training, I feel guilty for not being there for you."

A lone tear slips down my cheek. Every word resonates with me.

I love him. I love him more than anything in this world. I've loved him for my whole life, and all I want is for him to be happy. I want him to succeed and chase his dream of becoming the badass hockey player he was always meant to be.

"Maybe…" My throat closes, but I clear it and push myself to continue. "Maybe we're trying to force something that doesn't fit our lives right now." I dig my nails in my palm, my vision blurring from the pain.

He's silent for a long moment, but then, he lets out a long breath. "You've been thinking about that too?"

I close my eyes, my heart cracking open. "It's more like I've been trying not to."

"I don't want to lose you," he whispers.

"You will never lose me," I tell him. "I just don't want either of us to start hating this."

He snorts. "We both know I could never hate you."

"Yeah, I know." I smile, even though my eyes are prickling with tears. "But we could easily hate ourselves for getting in the way of our dreams."

The next pause lasts longer, and when he finally speaks again, his voice is rougher, a bit on edge. "You still want to go to the Olympics?"

"Yes."

"And…" He exhales. "You still want us?"

I cover my mouth, the pain in my chest blinding. “Always,” I croak. “Maybe it’s time to stop asking each other to choose.”

“For how long?” His voice cracks.

My heart cracks right along with it. “Until after the Olympics.”

He sucks in a breath. “Isla…are you sure?”

“Yeah.” I lick my parched lips. “Or is that too long to wait?”

“No,” he says. “I’ve waited for you before, and I’ll wait for you again. For as long as you need.”

“Me too.” Tears fall freely down my cheeks now. “I love you, Michael.”

“I love you too,” he whispers. “Though if we keep talking…”

“I know…”

“So…we’re letting each other go?”

I nod, even though he can’t see me. “Yes, but it’s not a goodbye; it’s to be continued.”

“Fuck,” he curses, the sound low and broken. “I…I better…”

“Goodnight, Michael. Sleep tight.”

“Goodnight,” he echoes. Then, the line goes silent.

On autopilot, I put my phone on the nightstand, then grab my laptop and turn on *Witch Hat Atelier*. It’s one of my comfort anime, and dear God, I need that comfort right now. I burrow under the covers, eyes trained on the screen, and allow myself to cry.

Tomorrow is a new day.

A new day, and we’ll both continue to chase our dreams.

But tonight, I let myself be sad. Because sometimes, even the right decision hurts.

Because letting go is the only way to make sure Michael is happy.

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CHAPTER FORTY-THREE

everyone?

MICHAEL

Twenty-two years old

"Ah, feels good to be in New York." Ash sighs, leaning back in his seat. "Not gonna lie, this place hits differently when you've got a Cup ring on your finger."

I roll my eyes and pick up my cup. "Fuck off, Vaughn."

"Don't be salty, man. You'd be gloating too."

"You're mistaking me for someone else."

Chuckling, he shakes his head. "You haven't changed a bit, Thompson."

That isn't entirely true. My world changed overnight when I left school to join the Phantoms more than two and a half years ago.

The first season was brutal. It took months to adjust to a new schedule and adapt to a new lifestyle, and at the same time, I was busting my ass to prove myself. To make sure the world finally saw who *I* really was. To show it with my game, to prove it with assists and goals. We made it to the playoffs that year, but we lost in the first round.

That bolstered my confidence and gave me a sense of accomplishment, and yet, there was so much more to work on. Not only physically, but mentally and emotionally. It all happened so quickly—the unexpected call, the decision to leave school, the move to New York, the changes to my relationship with Isla. I may have looked cool on the outside, but by the end of the season, I was drowning.

Eventually, the façade crumbled. It happened faster and more epically than I could've imagined. All it took was one call. One call from her, and I let go of all the broken pieces I'd been holding together. Because she was right. Because I felt it too. We were prolonging the agony. But understanding that didn't make it any better. I was a mess, and my career was on the line. I couldn't risk it. I couldn't risk my future with the team or with Isla, so I went to the team's mental performance coach and started therapy.

Therapy didn't change who I am, and the growth didn't happen instantaneously, but it has allowed me to keep my focus where it belongs. I stopped chasing comparisons. I stopped caring about the opinions of others and stopped feeling bad about the name on my jersey. Instead, I chose to be proud of who I am and who my dad is. Dad's career doesn't hang over mine anymore. At least, not in my mind.

I don't pay attention to social media or news outlets. I keep my head down and my focus where it belongs: on my skills, my game, my body. I trust my own pace now—I am where I'm supposed to be. Of course, the doubts still show up sometimes, but I don't let them influence what I do with my life or how I do it.

We made it to round two of the playoffs this year. The Vipers won the Cup, which has made Ash kind of insufferable. I get it, even if he is annoying, because I made it another step closer to knowing what it means to win the Cup. Close enough to know it's coming—hopefully next season. Losing in the second round didn't make me question myself like it would have before.

Because I know who I am now.

Not my dad.

Not just a last name on a jersey.

Not a nepo baby who was only drafted because of Dad's legacy.

I am Michael Thompson.

The center for the New York Phantoms. A team player my coaches trust in the last minute of a tied game. The man who listens when his teammates have something to say. Who's earned their respect and gives his in return. A player fans love to cheer for.

I'm building a solid career, one brick at a time. Even if I want more from life than just this, I know my career has to come first. For now. It's the same way for Isla.

Blinking, I refocus on Ash. “Ready for tonight?”

“I was born ready.” He grins at me.

“We’ll see. I don’t think you know what you’re getting into. The media crowds in New York are unreal. Everyone’s gonna be there.”

Head tilted, he asks, “*Everyone*?”

A little lead ball forms in my gut. Head down, I tell him, “I don’t know.” Because the pause Isla and I took has turned into complete silence. Not because the feelings have died—quite the opposite, actually. We made this decision because every new “goodbye for now” was more painful than the last. Every call we couldn’t take, every message left on *seen* when one of us barely had time to breathe, let alone respond, added to the heavy weight pulling us down, forcing us to make choices we were unhappy with.

How can two people maintain what they had while their lives move in opposite directions? There was no space for us. Only longing. And pain. Lots of pain.

“I’m talking about the NHL, the NBA, and the NFL,” I tell him with a lift of my shoulder. “I don’t usually stay long. These events aren’t my scene.”

He leans forward and sets his elbows on the table. “C’mon. You’ll stay longer for your charming best friend, right? I could use your company.”

I snort. “You haven’t changed at all either.”

Kicking back again, he laces his fingers behind his head and surveys our surroundings. This café is a short walk from my place and only a block from Central Park. That’s why I suggested it when he invited me for breakfast. Today’s going to be a long day, and the last thing I want is to run around the city like my ass is on fire.

“You didn’t actually answer my question. Will you stay with me, yes or no?”

I inhale deeply. “We’ll see.”

It’s hard to explain, and if I did, he’d probably call me an idiot. So, I’d prefer to deal with the consequences later, just like I’m going to deal with the consequences of this night out. But I didn’t have much of a choice unless I wanted to find myself on the Phantoms’ GM’s bad side.

“I don’t like it when you’re so mysterious. Creeps me out.” Lips pursed, he pushes himself away from the table. “You better not pull any stupid shit at this event.”

“I won’t.” *I hope*.

He huffs. “That wasn’t even a little convincing.”

Without a word, I pick up my cup and take a sip. Anything to keep him from drilling me for an answer.

MY PLACE on the Upper West Side may be expensive, but it’s close to the rink and quiet, with thick walls and doormen who nod and don’t ask questions. To top it all off, my neighbors all keep to themselves.

The apartment is spacious, with floor-to-ceiling windows in neutral colors—a mix of gray, blue, and white. It’s not flashy at all. It’s my home. My fortress. No one except my family and Ash have been here, and I’d prefer to keep it that way. At least for now.

I easily could’ve purchased a penthouse on the Upper East Side, but the slower pace over here, the anonymity, called to me. I can breathe here. Focus. When I shut the door, the noise stays outside, and for me, that’s worth every penny.

Sleep Token’s “Fall For Me” plays as I step closer to the full-length mirror in the corner of my bedroom and look myself over.

Cora was right. The tailored suit looks good. I skipped the tie because it often feels like a noose. Focusing on my reflection, I adjust the cufflinks and then fix my nose ring. The tattoos on my hand and neck are visible, but they look good with the black jacket and crisp white shirt.

I wouldn’t tell Pablo this, but his suggestion I hire a personal stylist was a good one. I was very opposed at first, but he convinced me I’d need one for public outings and game days. Cora is respectful and very understanding, and she always listens to me. In the two years we’ve worked together, I don’t think I’ve rejected a single outfit she’s prepared.

And now, I’m staring at the reflection of a man I didn’t know how to be two and a half years ago.

When my phone buzzes on the nightstand, I stride over to it.

Mom. No surprise there. Anytime I have something important—a game, an event, or a photo shoot—she calls to check on me.

After I swipe the screen to accept the call, I press my phone to my ear. “Hey, Mom.”

“Hi, sweetheart. Are you still at home, or are you already on your way?”

“Still home, but I’m leaving soon.” I pull at the neckline of my shirt. Despite the lack of a tie, it’s still hard to breathe. “Don’t want to be late.”

“Ah, so I’m right on time,” she says with more cheer than usual.

I frown. “Is everything okay?”

She snorts. “Of course! I wanted to check in, see how you are.”

Yeah, not suspicious at all.

Holding back a sardonic laugh, I pinch the bridge of my nose. “I’m good, really. You don’t need to worry about me. All these events are the same. I know what to do, when to do it, and what to say.”

“If you say so…” She trails off, then clears her throat. “You’re still planning to come in two weeks, right?”

“Why are you being so weird?” I ask her. “I never miss your birthday, so why would I now? What’s going on?”

“Nothing is going on.” Her words are filled with faux innocence.

“Did you ask him already?” Meg shouts in the background.

“Meg! Dammit.”

“Language, Mom,” my sister counters, bursting into laughter. “Michael, hi!”

“Hi,” I say loudly. “Whatever it is, just tell me. We’ll figure it out.”

“I’m applying to schools in New York! If I get in, do you think I could live with you?”

What? “Er—”

“Meghan Thompson, you’re playing on my last damn nerve!” Mom grits out. “Michael, don’t listen to her. It’s all just talk.”

I clear my throat. “Okay. Then do you mind if we talk tomorrow? I really need to leave.”

“Of course. I’m sorry if we interrupted your plans.” She sighs. “Don’t forget to smile and be yourself. You’re amazing.”

My lips kick up on one side involuntarily. “Thanks, Mom.”

I end the call, check the time, and slip my phone into my pocket. Time to get out of here. Being late won’t do me any favors with management.

I breathe in for four counts, holding my breath for seven. As I finally exhale, I count to eight. I repeat the ritual several times, grounding myself. Then, I straighten my shoulders and head out of the apartment.

I’m ready.

The warm August night air hits my face, sending a pleasant thrill down my spine. Summer always reminds me of Santa Clara, of a time in my life

when my biggest problem was not knowing how to prove to the boys on the team I was the fastest player, of a time when Isla would beat me every time we raced. Not because I couldn't beat her, but because I never really wanted to. Watching her win was far more rewarding.

New York hums around me. It buzzes with life, like it always does, fueling my body with the energy I need to keep going.

"Hey, Rhett," I say as I slide into the back seat of the car waiting outside my building.

Usually, I prefer to drive myself, but on nights like this, it's all about appearances, not reality, so it's important to show up with class.

"Sir." My driver's blue eyes meet mine in the rearview mirror. "Upper East Side first?"

"Yes, and then downtown."

With a nod, he pulls away from the curb, heading east.

Emily is waiting at the doors of her building when we pull up. She's dressed in a dark blue gown with her blonde hair cascading down her shoulders.

As she looks up from her phone, I get out of the car and open the door for her.

"Hey," I say as she slides into the back seat. The scent of her perfume fills the car. It's way too sweet, but I think it's intentional.

"Hi, Michael." She leans in and plants a kiss on my cheek. "Thank you for doing this. Really."

Mouth pressed into a flat line, I shift a little closer to my door and buckle up. "Of course."

As Rhett gets back on the road, Emily smiles, settling back. "My dad says thanks too. He really appreciates you doing this."

There's the reminder I need. As badly as I wanted to find a way out of this situation, Pablo was right.

You don't go back on a promise you made to your team's GM. If you didn't want to do it, you should've said no right away.

As if I didn't know that, dammit. But the answer escaped before I'd even considered it.

On the drive to the event, Emily talks about the guest list she's somehow seen, about the people she hopes to meet, and how nights like this matter for connections, for visibility. She calls it "networking." She's the

Phantoms' new PR assistant, so to her, maybe this feels like another task she needs to complete. She's confident and excited, already in work mode.

I listen. I nod when I think it's expected of me. And I keep my answers short.

This is my role tonight, among other stuff I'm not particularly fond of, like walking the red carpet and enduring the reception and dinner. Talking to other athletes is probably the only activity tonight that has any appeal, but I can't even focus on who I hope to see because Emily talks my ear off the whole way.

So, I sit back, letting her voice fill the space while my thoughts drift.

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CHAPTER FORTY-FOUR

my michael

ISLA

Twenty-two years old

BLAKE LIFTS ME OFF THE FLOOR AND SQUEEZES ME TIGHT. "OH MY GOD! I can't believe you're actually here."

I hug her back, inhaling her perfume—it's something citrusy yet flowery. While the combination might sound strange, it works, and it goes well with her personality. She's vibrant and cheerful and never afraid to take up space, no matter what critics say about her. She doesn't care about the buzz in the media, about the noise. She lives her life to the fullest, not at all bothered by what people think about her.

"I missed you," I tell her as I take a step back. "It's been, what? Eight months?"

She looks up at the ceiling of my hotel suite and hums. "That sounds right." Eyes bright, she studies me. "How are you? How is your shoulder?"

I snicker, locking the door and stepping farther into the suite. "How about we go sit on the couch before we dive into conversation?"

The hotel on the Upper East Side is quiet, with great views of the park. It's exactly what I need to prepare for the gala tonight. With the whirlwind my life is about to become, it seemed like the best solution. A moment of calm before I dive into the madness that is the media circus.

"How are you?" Blake takes off her sneakers and folds her long legs under her.

I can’t help but smile at her. “I’m good. I’ve got six months until the Olympics, so every day is as nerve-racking as the last, but I’m so much better now at managing my fears and worries—”

“And your panic attacks.” She snaps her mouth shut, her brows pulled together. “Sorry.”

“That’s okay. I’m still so sorry about freaking you out that day.” I pick at an invisible piece of lint on my leggings and then look up. “I’m still seeing the therapist I found while I was recovering from my shoulder injury. She specializes in cognitive behavioral therapy. Dr. Brown honestly saved me. I’ve been seeing her for two years, and I haven’t had an attack in over a year.”

Blake nods. “I remember Dr. Brown. She’s hot. With those glasses and her red hair, she was hard to forget.” She flashes me a smile. “Anyway, I’m happy you’re doing so well. How’s the shoulder?”

With a sigh, I shift on the couch. “It’s been two years. I’m fine.”

“You’re *fine*?” she says, a little too loudly. “I still have PTSD from watching you go down like that. Your poor shoulder…and your pretty face. I thought you were done.”

“It was an AC joint sprain. It’s relatively common for athletes, really. You must know that. I was back on the ice in eight weeks.”

“Yeah, sprains are common, and so is the concussion you ended up with. Doesn’t make it any less scary.” She shudders. “And the right side of your face was one big bruise.”

I take a deep breath and focus on her. “I’m fine, I promise. Physically and mentally, I’m in a very good place. This is my last chance at the Olympics, and I’m dedicated to doing my best.”

She assesses me with her lips twisted into a scowl, but eventually, she sighs, letting her shoulders droop. “Fine. I’m only acting like this because I care about you. I hope you know that.”

“I know.” Angling across the couch, I pat her hand. “I care about you too, so I want—”

“Nuh-uh.” She shakes her head. “We’re not done talking about you yet.”

“You’re impossible.”

“Babe, I’m nosy. You’ve known this about me for a very long time.” A wide grin spreads across her lips, her gray eyes shining. “So…New York, huh? You’re here training for the Olympics, right?”

Pursing my lips, I give her a look. “You already know the answer.”

“I do, but I love messing with you.” She waggles her brows. “Does *he* know you’re here?”

I fix my focus on the wall over her head, chewing on my bottom lip, my heartbeat picking up.

“Oh my God!” she shrieks. “You’re unbelievable! Why haven’t you told him?”

“Because the plans didn’t fall into place until the last minute. And because I was…” I swallow past the lump in my throat. “I was the one who suggested the pause. He agreed it was for the best, but it hurt both of us. We haven’t talked since.” Head bowed, I wring my hands. It’s not the full truth. There were the occasional holiday texts we sent each other and the irises that still find me every year on my birthday, as if he never forgot they’re my favorite. I just never counted any of it as real communication. “Can you imagine if I’d called and told him there was a chance I’d be training here for six months, only for the plans to fall through? I couldn’t do that to him.”

“When you put it that way, I get it, but it still sucks. The whole situation does.” She scoots closer and wraps her arm around my shoulders. “You and Michael are the definition of soulmates. Seeing you put your relationship on the back burner for your careers made me think all athletes are a bit crazy, including me. Because what we do to our bodies to achieve the results we want is torture, and then on top of that, we give up the relationships that mean the most to us for short-lived careers.”

“You’re not wrong.” I put my head on her shoulder. “It’s been two years, and I still remember what it feels like to have his hands on my body. All I need to do is close my eyes, and I can feel him next to me, pressing me to his chest, whispering sweet nothings to help me relax after a long, exhausting day on the ice.” A sob escapes me, and I close my eyes. “I miss him so damn much, even watching the Phantoms play is hard. All I do is stare at him. I don’t actually watch the game. But I can’t *not* watch, because I want to support him, even if he doesn’t know about it.”

“It’s probably the same for him too. The guy was obsessed with you, and I genuinely can’t imagine that’ll ever stop.”

My chest tightens at the unknown. “He keeps his life private, never posts anything not hockey related, so I don’t even know if he’s single.” I swallow the lump clogging my throat. “I didn’t want to know. I told myself I’d accept it if he moved on, but I couldn’t bring myself to find out.”

“You promised each other you’d talk about your future after the Olympics, right?”

“Yeah. And now I’m here.” I let out a breath. “God, what if this is a mistake? Maybe I should have stayed in Santa Clara. Or gone to Boston. It’s just six months.”

She shifts and places her hands on my shoulders, turning me toward her. “I forbid you from thinking like that. You made this decision to focus on your careers together. And at the time, it was the right one. You were recovering from your sprain, getting your jumps back, basically living on the ice. He was starting his second season with the Phantoms. That’s a lot of pressure.”

“I know.” My voice cracks, and the backs of my eyes get hot. “I felt like I was slowing him down. And every time he flew out to see me, I felt so torn. I wanted to be with him, yet I needed to focus on healing and rebuilding what I’d lost after my injury. No matter what I chose, I felt guilty.” I sniffle, wiping a tear from the corner of my eye. “And once his season started, he struggled the same way. If he flew out to see me, then he wasn’t working on his game, and it was important for him to prove he’d earned his spot with the Phantoms.”

“You did what was right for both of you,” she says gently. “That doesn’t mean it was easy. Sometimes, you have to sacrifice things you love to get where you want to be. And for you, that was another shot at the Olympics. For him, it was building an NHL career.” She brushes my hair back from my face. “Everything’s going to be okay. The second he knows you’re here *to stay*, he’ll be glued to your side.”

Vision blurry, I chuckle. “You’re like Gojo. So wise. How is it that you suddenly know everything?”

The rumble of laughter that rips out of her throat is loud and contagious, lightening my mood and easing some of the tension in my body.

“I don’t know everything, but unlike you, I don’t mind being snoopy.” She waggles her eyebrows. “Your account is the only one Michael follows on socials, and he always reposts your stuff. The man is obsessed. And if he’s as serious about you as I think he is, nothing will make him let you go. Not even *you*.”

My lips part. Adrenaline spikes in my body, and my breath bottles up in my chest. I liked his posts whenever they showed up on my feed, but I

never went to his profile or watched his Stories. I was too afraid of what I might see there.

"Babe, just talk to him, and you'll see nothing has changed for him. It's only you he wants."

Blake's right. Now that I'm here, I need to talk to Michael, and I will do it first thing tomorrow morning.

Tonight, I promised Blake I'd attend a gala with her. I don't typically go to events like this, but she was nominated for an award, and honoring my friend because she had a phenomenal season with the Boston Emeralds is necessary.

THANK God the mirror in the suite's bedroom is full-length. I tried three dresses my stylist brought for me before I found this one. It's the color of dark red wine, and the fabric drapes over one shoulder, crossing my body in soft, delicate lines, leaving the other shoulder bare. It looks almost regal, really.

My long hair cascades over my shoulder as I tilt my head, studying my reflection. Mentally and physically, I'm not the girl I used to be. I believe in myself. I believe in my body and in my skills. Yes, I fall sometimes, I get bruises all over my legs, but I always get up. I always push for more. My mentality in regard to wins isn't perfect because I've spent all my life believing anything that isn't gold is a loss. It's still difficult to accept my successes and not see them as failures when it comes time for the podium, but I'm consciously working to appreciate what I have and trying to treat each non-first-place as an experience, another step to achieving my goals.

I don't look for approval. I take what I want, and I feel like I'm finally a version of myself I can feel proud of. I am where I am because I belong.

Breathing in and out slowly, counting the way my therapist taught me, I ground myself. Then, I smile at my reflection. I'm not the biggest fan of media events, but sometimes, they're necessary, and I've made peace with that. And, most importantly, I can handle it.

If tonight is all about being seen, then this is who I want them to see.

Me. A competitive figure skater, getting ready to take her second shot at the Olympics.

And this time, I intend to win.

WITH EACH STEP along the red carpet, the ground feels steadier, though when voices call my name and cameras flash in my face, my heart lurches. With a practiced gesture, I put a smile on my face and move along. I let them guide me to the places reserved for photo ops, turn slightly, shift my weight the way I've learned to. Chin up. Shoulders back. Don't forget to breathe.

It almost feels like one of the hundreds of competitions I've attended. All eyes are on me. The lights and flashes are familiar. So is the awareness that every small movement is being watched, measured, remembered.

I give them what they want. I'm calm and collected. I don't rush to leave the carpet, and I don't mind smiling and posing for the cameras. At least, that's what the crowd around me thinks.

"Michael, look over here," a man shouts, and, of its own volition, my head snaps to my left.

Eyebrows pulled together, I search the crowd. Michael isn't a rare name, and it doesn't mean he's here.

But the moment my eyes land on the tall figure twenty feet away, my heart stutters, and I lose all semblance of calm.

It *is* Michael.

My Michael…but he's not alone. With a hand on the small of her back, he guides a beautiful blonde forward.

My breath hitches as I watch them. I don't know who she is, but maybe I shouldn't be surprised. It's been two years. So many things could've changed.

"Isla, can we have your attention?" a woman yells.

Shit. People are watching me. What the hell am I doing?

At the sound of my name, he whips around. When his gaze collides with mine, I nearly wobble in my heels. But instead of allowing the moment to destabilize me, I force a smile and turn away from him. It's better this way.

"Sorry," I say, shifting into the kind of pose that's expected of me. "I'm all yours now."

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CHAPTER FORTY-FIVE

only ever you

MICHAEL

Twenty-two years old

THE BUZZ IN MY EARS INTENSIFIES, MIXING WITH CHATTER AND SHOUTING and camera clicks. My body is stiff as I stand next to Emily, a fake smile stretched across my lips. All I want is to drop the act and race inside to find Isla.

What is she even doing here?

"Michael, over here." Shoulders straight, I shift and focus on the guy calling my name. My posture hopefully comes across as casual, while in reality, my hands are in my pockets, balled into fists, and my body temperature is steadily climbing.

Luckily, the photographers are professionals and don't ask me to pose with Emily. They let us decide how we interact and snap photos from there.

Yes, I briefly rested my hand at the small of her back as I guided her forward. It was the easiest way for the two of us to get where we needed to go. But the second I locked eyes with Isla, I put distance between myself and Emily in every way I could.

I don't look at her, and I keep my body angled away, my focus fixed straight ahead, never on her. To her credit, she picked up on the shift in my demeanor right away, and she stays close enough to look appropriate, but there's an invisible line between us she doesn't cross.

The elevator ride to the rooftop takes a lifetime. While I stand with Emily in the stainless-steel box, my heart beats faster and faster, and sweat covers my forehead. I pause on the periphery of the event. My extremities tremble, so I shift my weight to hide it.

Isla is the only person who has the power to make a mess out of me so quickly. Where is she?

The sounds of cameras and shouts of photographers have disappeared, replaced by soft background music and low voices as people mingle. Glasses clink. To my right, someone laughs too loudly.

I scan the room, instinct taking over. I need to find her. We have to talk. It's been two years full of silence, full of longing and heartache. I watch her skate all the time, no matter how badly it hurts, knowing she was mine yet wasn't.

She's not at the bar, and I've looked at the face of every woman here to no avail. I scan the tables. Still, nothing. Not even a flash of deep red like I saw a few minutes ago.

"Michael." Emily tugs at my sleeve, diverting my attention to her. "Do you mind if I mingle a little?"

I shrug. "Of course not. That's why you're here." I crook a smile I don't feel. "Have fun."

Eyebrows knitted together, she assesses me. Then, she nods. "Find you later."

Once she's gone, I move, still hypervigilant and searching. When I find the Vipers' captain, Pete Morgan, I shake his hand, mumble, "Congratulations," and then move forward. I nod at familiar faces, barely registering what anyone has to say. I can't focus on anything except the question circulating in my head: Where is Isla?

This place is bigger than I initially thought. There are too many people, too many places she could be hiding.

When a flash of red finally catches my attention, my heart rate spikes, and my temperature climbs once again.

She's not the only woman wearing red tonight; I counted at least four others. But in my gut, I know it's her. With a deep breath, I roll my shoulders back and make my way to the wall on my right.

The closer I get, the harder my heart thunders in my chest. A couple chatting ahead of me moves away, and I finally get a clear view of the person ahead of me.

My breath hitches.

I was right. It's her.

My Isla.

My legs move quickly, desperate, eager. She doesn't see me. She's too busy looking at her phone, her bottom lip trapped between her teeth.

"There you are," I say, my voice hoarse, as I stop in front of her. "I've been looking everywhere for you, Ice Queen. Even started thinking you're a figment of my imagination."

Her gaze snaps to me, her lips parting and a soft sound escaping her. Her makeup is impeccable, highlighting her high cheekbones and dark blue eyes. Her plump lips are painted red, and her hair is covering her shoulders in soft waves. There hasn't been a day I haven't checked her profile. She hasn't performed at a single event I haven't watched, either live or later, searching the internet for clips. And yet, she's so much more stunning in person.

"Hi." She locks her phone and slips it into a small purse.

"Didn't expect to see you here."

A ghost of a smile touches her lips. "I didn't expect to see you here either." She glances around. "You usually don't come to these things."

"Neither do you."

She chuckles. "I only show up when I'm required to."

"And you were required to be here tonight?" I arch a brow. This is not what I should be talking to her about. I shouldn't be talking to her at all. I should be hauling her to my chest and kissing her until she's out of breath. But we're in public.

And because two years is a long time; anything could've happened.

"Yeah, Blake is nominated for an award tonight, and I'm sure she'll get it, so I wanted to support her."

"You're *sure* she'll get it?"

"I don't doubt it one bit." She tilts her head to the side, her hair veiling her shoulder. "What about you? Why are you here?"

"The Vipers won the Cup, so Ash is here, and I wouldn't miss a chance to support my friend."

Head thrown back, she laughs. "Look at us. So supportive of our friends."

"Yeah, we are." An open smile breaks over my lips, the first honest one tonight.

We're both silent, surveying one another. Despite the people surrounding us, despite the music and the sounds of the party, it feels like we're alone in a quiet room.

I clear my throat. "So…New York, huh?"

"Yeah, I'm here."

"For how long?"

She just shrugs. The little gesture punches a hole in my chest.

I clench my jaw, stepping a bit closer to her. "Why didn't you tell me you were in town?"

"I just got in, and I wanted to make tonight about Blake." She licks her bottom lip, her eyes downcast. "I was going to call you tomorrow. Invite you to have coffee with me, or lunch, or—" She snaps her mouth shut and shakes her head. "But life clearly had other plans."

I take another step forward, looming over her. With my thumb and index finger, I trap her chin and lift her face. When our eyes hook on each other, a zing of excitement rushes through me. The longing in her expression matches mine, and it makes my fucking heart sing.

"Life has the best plans." I bring my face close to hers. "I missed you so damn much."

"You're not alone here." Her words come out strained.

"The girl you saw me with is Emily. She's the Phantoms' new PR assistant, and she's also our GM's daughter," I explain. The tingling in my fingers where my skin touches hers grows stronger. "When he found out I'd be here and that I wasn't bringing a plus-one, he asked if I'd bring her with me. It's a great opportunity for her to network. I said yes. It benefits our team, and I wasn't planning to stay long. Keeping things professional is not a problem for me."

Pupils blown, she gawks at me. "But I…"

"You what? You thought she was my girlfriend?"

"Something like that." She swallows, the delicate column of her throat twitching.

"I started crushing on you before I knew what the word meant, and those feelings only became stronger after we reconnected in college." I tip my head. "You really think all that would go away just because we put our relationship on pause?"

"Two years is—"

“Is nothing when you’re in love with someone for as long as I’ve been in love with you. I will always choose you, Isla.” I take her in, my body temperature rising. She’s breathtaking. Her beauty sends my heart into overdrive. My need for her is stronger than anything I’ve ever felt. It’s not only about her body; it’s about her soul. I want her, all of her. Forever.

I take a step back and hold out my hand to her. “Come with me.”

Without hesitation, she accepts the gesture, and instantly, the warmth of her skin sends shivers down my spine. I pull her after me, navigating the main room, heading for the rooftop terrace. With any luck, it’ll be empty. If not, I don’t care.

Outside, the warm night air envelops us. The New York cityscape stretches out below us, lights twinkling and cars zipping by. A few groups of people linger out here, their backs turned to the doors, their conversations hushed.

Without slowing, I guide her past the first group, then the second. I nod once at someone I vaguely recognize, but that’s all. My sole focus is Isla, her small hand in mine, her very presence lighting up all my nerve endings.

The far end of the terrace is empty, and it’s darker here. It’s noisier because of the sounds of the city, but it’ll do. I tug Isla behind a tall planter and finally stop.

Here, there are no cameras. No prying eyes. Just us and the city I’ve called home for close to three years as a witness.

The dim light coming from the main room highlights Isla’s silhouette, illuminating every soft curve of her body. I’ve tried not to think about so many of these features for two years and still dreamed about her every night.

“I missed you too,” she says, stepping into me.

I circle my arms around her waist. “I saw every post on your socials, checking your accounts every night before I fall asleep. I watched every single one of your competitions. Recorded them, rewatched them when I couldn’t sleep. Hearing the commentators say your name felt like the only way I still had you in my life.”

She looks up at me, something fragile in her eyes. “I haven’t been with anyone since you.”

My grip on her tightens. “Me neither.” A thrill shoots through me as I duck my head. “I want you. Only ever you. It’s the same for you—true or not true?”

She cranes her neck, her lips twitching. “True.”

I slip a hand under her soft hair and cuff the back of her neck. Her blue eyes shimmer, full of desire, and I swear, it’s the best view I’ve ever seen.

Head lowered, I cover her lips with mine. The moment we make contact, it’s as if thousands of fireworks go off in my head, emptying my mind of all other thoughts. God, how I missed this. How I missed *her*.

She kisses me back with fervor, her tongue slipping into my mouth and curling around mine in a dance only the two of us know. With her hand clutching the fabric of my shirt, she hauls herself closer, leaving no space between us. Her body is glued to mine; the way her heat soaks into me only ratchets up my desire.

A burst of laughter nearby has us pulling apart abruptly, but with a deep breath in, I press my forehead against hers.

“I hope this doesn’t scare you,” I say quietly, “but for the first time in a long time, I feel like I can actually breathe again.”

She lets out a soft laugh. “Why would that scare me? I feel the same way.” She sniffs, her eyes fluttering closed. “Letting you go was the hardest decision I’ve ever made. It made sense. But while my head accepted the pause, my heart never did.” Her voice grows quieter. “My life felt empty without you. And now…now, it’s finally full again.”

“Everything is exactly how it should be.” I plant a kiss on her forehead and step back.

The sound of someone tapping on a microphone drifts out through the open doors.

“Looks like it’s time to get back to reality,” she sighs.

“This is our reality. It’s us.” I take her hand, threading our fingers together. “And just so we’re clear, there’s no way I’m keeping my distance after tonight.”

She rises onto her toes and presses a soft kiss to my lips. “Coffee tomorrow? I have practice, but I’ll be free around noon.”

“Send me the address to your rink. I’ll pick you up.”

“Deal.”

I let go of her hand and take a step back. I miss her warmth instantly, but with a deep breath, I head into the main room with her by my side.

Just before we reach the doors, I lean in. “Pack a bag. You’re staying with me tomorrow.” My mouth brushes her ear. “And don’t make any other

plans. I’m going to fuck you slowly and thoroughly. Two years can’t be made up for in an hour.”

“Michael.” With a swat to my chest, she giggles and then walks away.

Laughing under my breath, I head toward the bar, where Emily is chatting with a small group of people, my mood lighter than it’s been in years.

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CHAPTER FORTY-SIX

claiming you

MICHAEL

Twenty-two years old

SHIVERS RUN DOWN MY SPINE AS I APPROACH THE ICE. THE TEMPERATURE inside the arena is far colder than outside. My heart thrashes against my ribs, anticipation taking over.

If not for the years I've worked to be disciplined to play hockey, I wouldn't have survived last night's gala. All I wanted was to be with Isla. Thankfully, we weren't seated too far away from each other, so we spent most of the night stealing glances and texting back and forth. And since we each sent about eighty messages, we definitely had a lot to say.

At the unmistakable sound of blades carving the ice, a smile curves my lips. I've watched every competition over the last two years, and I've seen dozens of reels she posted after practices, but none of that could come close to seeing her skate in real life.

She is remarkable.

Always has been.

There's no music, no other people. Just her, the ice, and the sound of her blades echoing across the rink. Like always, it's clear she belongs on the ice. She reigns over the place, setting her own rules, making it look so easy. Her movements are precise, every jump perfect, every transition smooth and controlled, just like every landing is clean.

At the boards, I stop, and memory after memory resurfaces, starting with the day she first stepped onto the ice when she was five. She was so excited, and she didn't cry at all, no matter how many times she fell. Aunt Bella was terrified afterward when she discovered all the bruises on her daughter's legs, but Isla only shrugged and said she'd do better next time. And she did. She fucking did. With each year, with every practice, she honed her skills, becoming the best of the best.

The way she skates now is different. She's no longer trying to prove anything. She's refining what she already knows, perfecting every jump, every landing. No matter the outcome of the Olympic games in February, she will always be a winner in my eyes.

She builds speed down the long side of the rink, knees soft, arms loose. The long backward approach tells me she's preparing for a Lutz.

She uses a toe pick to lift off, holding the outside edge until the very last moment. Then, she launches herself upward. One, two, three, four rotations.

My breath gets stuck in my throat as I watch her. Holy shit.

She lands on the opposite outside edge. Then, without slowing, she continues her routine as if she hasn't done anything extraordinary.

My chest tightens. Isla nailed a Quadruple Lutz.

She's flawless.

Eventually, she slows, her breathing evening out—inhale, exhale, like she's counting in her head.

The arena no longer feels cold. My skin is warm, a hot and familiar fire reigniting in my gut. All it took was watching her in her element. In her world.

Understanding settles deep in my chest. I didn't just miss her. I missed this—watching her do what she was born to do, watching her chase her dreams while being unapologetically exceptional.

Hands on her knees, she bends at the waist, her breathing still rhythmic. When she straightens, our eyes meet, and the smile that breaks over her lips makes my heart flutter.

Fuck, I'm a lost cause when it comes to her, but I have zero regrets.

Her smile is worth all the pain I've endured over the last two and a half years.

"Hey," I say as she skates over to me.

"Hi. How long have you been here?" she asks, her words a little strained from exertion.

“Long enough to see you do a perfect quad lutz.” I reach over and tuck a few flyaways behind her ear, then cup her cheek. “You’re out of this world.”

“Thank you.” She covers my hand with hers and leans into my hold. “I’m happy you’re here.”

“There’s nowhere else I’d rather be.”

Fire flashes behind her irises as she leans forward. “I love being on the ice, but I know plenty of places I’d rather be with you.”

“I love how you think.” I wink and release her. “Go change, and then we can leave.”

“Sounds good.” She grasps my wrist and plants a kiss on my palm before she backs away. “Wait for me near the locker room.”

“What if I wait *with* you in the locker room?”

Head thrown back, she lets out a laugh. “It’s tempting, but there’s a group practice scheduled to start soon, and the girls are six years old.”

“Bummer.” I shrug as she skates away. “Come back to me quickly; I’m having withdrawals.”

“You’re impossible.”

I grin as she disappears. In a matter of minutes, she will be in my arms again.

And this time, I’m not letting her go.

I UNLOCK the door of my apartment, then step back and let her in first. She enters slowly, taking it in, and I follow with her duffel bag in my hand.

When I pull the door closed, cutting us off from the outside world with a soft click, the air charges, like it did in the car on the way here. Like it always does when we’re together.

Clearing my throat, I push away the desire to drag her to my bedroom immediately. “Welcome to my home. I really hope you like it.”

She slips her Chucks off and glances at me over her shoulder. “It’s yours. Of course I’m gonna like it.”

Barefoot, she moves to the threshold of the living room and pauses.

I try to see the place through her eyes, noting the high ceilings and the floor-to-ceiling windows with a perfect view of the city. The dark gray

sectional with throw pillows faces the windows, a black wooden coffee table in front of it. The TV on the wall is massive, of course, and the bookshelves are filled with books, trophies, and photo frames.

She takes a few steps forward and runs her fingers over the back of the couch. “This feels like you.”

I set her duffel bag on the floor and pad toward her. Cupping her cheek, I tilt her face up to me. “Do you like it?”

Her lips tip up just a little. “I’ve only seen the living room, but yeah, I like it.”

I lead her to the window, shifting so I’m standing behind her with her back against my chest. Central Park stretches out below, the trees bathed in the late afternoon sunlight.

“The view is great, and I’m close to the rink, but I chose this place for the quiet more than anything else. The calm,” I tell her, holding her close. “The second I close the door, all the noise, real and figurative, stays outside.”

“I get it. I get the same kind of feeling when I step into my apartment in Boston, or when I stay in Santa Clara with my parents.”

“How long will you be in New York?” I hide my nose in her hair, breathing her in. The peach and vanilla scent is as familiar as it is comforting. “We talked so much during lunch, but I feel like we barely scratched the surface.”

“We have a lot to catch up on.” She snuggles into me. “I’ll be training here until the Olympics.”

I tense, my muscles turning stiff. “What do you mean?”

Slowly, she turns in my arms and tips her head back, wearing a smile that makes the heat coil low in my lower abdomen.

“I didn’t want to tell you until I knew for sure it was happening, and I only found out a few days ago.” She licks her bottom lip, brows knitting together. “I missed you so much. And the closer I got to the Olympics, the harder it was being away from you. I know we agreed to talk about us after, but I can’t do it without you anymore. So, I took a risk and came to you.”

“A risk? How is coming to me taking a risk?” I ask hoarsely.

“Because two years is a long time.”

“Isla, I love you.” I tighten my grip around her. “I’ve loved you my whole life. Honestly, I’d probably go on loving you forever, even if you stopped loving me.”

“Never,” she breathes. “I’ll always love you.”

Her words pierce my heart, urging me to cover her lips with mine. The kiss is feverish and fast, our tongues tangling and curling around each other, my hands everywhere—on her hips, cupping her taut ass. Fuck, she’s perfect.

I lift her, guiding her legs around my hips without breaking the kiss, then carry her to the dining table near the kitchen. I ease her onto it and stand between her legs. Eyes locked on hers, I catch my breath, my heart beating violently.

“What are you doing?” she asks, her eyebrow arched.

“Claiming you.” I slip my hand under her skirt and move it along her thigh until I reach her panties. My dick is already as hard as a rock, straining against my zipper. Just being in her proximity is enough to make me worry I’ll come in my pants. Her scent and her closeness drive me wild. “You’re mine, Isla.”

I push her panties to the side and press my fingers to her clit. A groan slips out of me. So fucking wet.

She gasps, clutching the edge of the table as I rub her clit and press my mouth to her throat. Leaving a trail of open-mouthed kisses, I suck and lick, pulling moans out of her parted lips, relishing in the power I have to make her feel good.

Slowly, I take a step back, and she huffs in disapproval. “Michael…”

“Patience, baby.” I peck her lips and then get on my knees.

With both hands beneath her skirt now, I slide her panties off. She lifts her hips, helping me, and once they land on the floor, I pull her toward me and bury my face in her pussy. I suck her clit into my mouth, and when I release it, she moans, the loud sound echoing off the walls.

“Fuck, you’re so good.”

I lap at her, tasting her, devouring her like a thirsty man who hasn’t had a drink in days. She’s fucking soaked, her juices covering my face. It only spurs me on, urging me to pull her to me more, her legs dangling over my shoulders.

“God, I’ve missed the taste of you,” I murmur against her clit. “You taste so fucking sweet, like you were made just for me.”

While my tongue circles and curls around her little nub, I slip a finger inside her, then add another. I fuck her slowly at first, but once I’m knuckles deep, I pick up the pace.

Her whimpers are the most beautiful sounds I've ever heard.

"I'm gonna…" She trails off, her pussy spasming around my fingers. Her body trembles, and she tries to close her knees, but I don't let her. I continue ravishing her clit, prolonging her orgasm, letting her ride it out.

Once she goes limp, I put my fingers in my mouth and lick them clean, refusing to waste a single drop of her arousal. Then, I get to my feet, place my hands flat on the table on either side of her hips, and lean over her.

She puts her hand on the back of my neck, pulling my face down until our lips collide.

The passion with which she kisses me makes my head spin.

"I want your dick inside me," she whispers against my lips.

Rearing back, I study her face. My cock is ready to explode, and there isn't a bit of hesitation in her expression. In the last two years, my desire to have her has only grown stronger.

"Are you still on the pill?"

She smiles, her eyes hooded with desire. "Yeah."

With a single step back, I unbuckle my belt and unzip my jeans. I push them down, revealing my throbbing cock. Her lips part, and her blue irises flare with heat as she watches me. Fuck, she's beautiful. She always has been, but now that she's mine for good, she's the closest thing to perfection I can imagine.

Cupping her ass, I move her closer to the edge of the table. Just as eager as I am, she wraps her legs around my hips, drawing me closer.

I press the tip of my cock to her clit, circling it slowly. "You're mine. True or not true?"

"True," she murmurs, already panting.

My mind is fogged with lust and need and hope and fear, but I still want to hear her say it. "You'll always be mine. True or not true?"

"True. Always true."

"That's what I wanted to hear." Positioning myself at her entrance, I push inside her. Then, I pull out slowly. I repeat the motion again and again, sliding deeper with each thrust. It's a miracle that I can hold on to my control because every time her warm pussy closes around my cock, I edge closer to my release.

When I'm finally balls deep inside her, I let out a growl. "Fuck, I've missed this…"

I fuck her faster, one of my arms wrapped around her waist, pressing her against my chest. The sweet sounds she makes every time I bury my cock to the hilt encourage me to move faster, sink deeper.

With her brows knitted, eyes closed, she's enjoying the pleasure I give her. Her moans and whimpers, along with the legs of the table scraping the floor and my own groans, mix, creating a melody I never want to stop listening to.

There's no me, no her; there's only us, and it's the most exquisite feeling in the world.

As her breathing grows shallow, my heart practically beats out of my chest, and my vision blurs. I worry I won't last, but then her pussy clenches around me, promising me she's close too.

She seeks my lips, her fingers clawing at my T-shirt, demanding more of me. So, I give her everything. When I swirl my tongue around hers, she lets go. Her pussy squeezes my dick, pulsating around me, her juices flowing over me. I don't hold back, and my release hits me hard as I spill inside her.

"You're perfect," I whisper. "And you were always worth waiting for."

I kiss her before she can respond.

I don't know what happens next, but I'm not done with her. Not even close. And every flat surface in my apartment feels like an invitation.

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CHAPTER FORTY-SEVEN

i don't want it any other way

ISLA

Twenty-two years old

THE WARM AUGUST AIR IS DRY, THE SKY CLEAR AS WE STEP OUT OF THE airport. Santa Clara's summers are so different from those on the East Coast. It's calmer here, much more familiar. It's home in every sense of the word.

Though that sensation may have more to do with the man cradling my hand in his. The man who was my constant even when we were apart, even more now that we're officially together.

It's only been two weeks, but those two weeks have brimmed with so much love, happiness, and passion that sometimes, I push my practices back simply because I don't want to leave his bed. Or *our* bed, because he insisted I move in with him, and I gladly obliged. I don't want to be away from him any more than necessary.

Once Michael loads our luggage, he slides into the back seat and pulls me to his side, wrapping his arm around my shoulders.

"How do you feel?" he asks, his nose in my hair.

"A little sleepy." I cuddle into him and close my eyes. "Six-hour flights are no fun when you can't sleep."

"Maybe if you hadn't watched *Stranger Things*, you would've fallen asleep." His chuckle reverberates through my body, making my skin hum.

“It’s my third rewatch. You really think something I know is going to happen will scare me?”

“Guess not.” He presses a kiss to the top of my head. “But it does mean you’re going to bed early.”

“Or I could take a nap.” I lean back, craning my neck to look him in the eye. “And you need to quit it with the patronizing tone. My dad won’t appreciate it.”

He runs his fingers through his hair and then adjusts his nose ring.

I pull away slightly and turn to face him. “What is it?”

“I just realized I have to meet your parents as your boyfriend.”

“And?” I tilt my head. “Are you telling me you’re suddenly afraid of my dad?”

“Please.” He scoffs lightly. “I’m not scared of anything. Especially not Uncle Xander.”

I study him for a second, note the way his eyes dart to one side. Then, I snort. “Yeah. I almost believed you.”

Expression pinched playfully, he cups my cheek. “Careful, or we’re going to make a quick detour and check in at a random hotel on the way to my parents’ house.”

My heart stumbles. “What do you mean your parents’ house? I thought we’d be staying with mine.”

“Mom’s birthday’s tomorrow, and everyone is coming for a barbecue. Including your folks.”

I worry my bottom lip. “I told mine I’d be with them. They’re waiting for me.”

“And mine are waiting for me.”

We fall silent, examining each other. My stomach twists, and I shift uncomfortably. Why didn’t I think about this sooner?

Sighing, Michael takes my hand. “Honestly, I don’t care where I’m staying, as long as I’m staying with you. So if you want to go to your parents’ house, let’s go. We can stay with mine next time.”

Warmth spreads through me, and a smile blooms on my lips. Fingers twining with his, I press our locked hands to my chest, right where my heart is beating wildly.

“We should stay with yours. It’s Aunt Ava’s birthday, after all. I’ll figure out what to say to my parents.” Leaning over, I press my mouth to his ear. “Plus, I’m one hundred percent sure my dad won’t be okay with us sharing

a room two seconds after we tell them we're together. And I don't want to sleep without you."

He laughs. "With arguments that strong, how could I refuse?"

"What can I say? I'm smart."

"You're not just smart—you're a genius." He pulls me into him and lowers his voice. "You deserve a reward for it, baby. What will it be?"

I place my hand on his knee and drag my fingers up his thigh until I reach his dick. "This. In my mouth."

"I think we can make that work, but only if you let me eat too." He tilts my face up and kisses me, and I stop caring about anything else.

"HI, DAD."

"Hi, sweetheart," he says, his voice tinny through the phone. "Are you already in Santa Clara?"

From my spot on the sunbed, I look around the Thompsons' backyard and cross my fingers. Saying hi to Aunt Ava and Uncle Colton was less nerve-racking than I expected, probably because I was too preoccupied with the call to my dad I'd yet to make. "Yeah, I'm here."

"Finally! Do you want me to come pick you up?"

"Um, no, actually." I take a deep breath and then say, "I'll be staying with the Thompsons while I'm in town."

When I'm met with nothing but silence, I pull my phone away from my ear and check to make sure my dad is still on the call.

"I know it's probably sudden," I go on, "and not what you expected, but…Michael and I—"

"You two are together again, aren't you?"

"Yeah." I lick my parched lips, my stomach roiling with discomfort.

He heaves a sigh. "I shouldn't be surprised. The moment you said you'd be training in New York, your mom was sure this would happen."

"I love him, Dad. I've always loved him."

"I know." He huffs. "Are you happy?"

"The happiest," I tell him truthfully, relishing the warmth of the sun shining down on me.

"Okay, then I'm happy too."

I drag my attention to the sky, and my body finally relaxes.

“But don’t think for a second I don’t have questions for Michael,” my dad says. “I need to make sure he treats you right.”

“Of course. He’ll be more than ready to talk to you tomorrow.”

Strong arms wrap around me from behind, and the familiar scent of mint and citrus slides under my skin as Michael settles onto the sunbed with me. I melt back into him, my eyes falling closed.

“Good.” My dad clears his throat. “Have you found an apartment, by the way? Your mom said you didn’t like any of the ones you saw.”

“I didn’t,” I say easily. “So I moved in with Michael.”

“You did *what*?” His voice jumps an octave, and I have to bite my lip to keep from laughing. “Isla, I’m not okay with that.”

“It’s already done, Dad,” I tell him gently. “And he’ll talk to you tomorrow, I promise.”

“If this is a joke, it’s not funny,” he grumbles.

“Love you, Dad.”

I end the call and peer back at Michael. The grin on his face is unapologetic, all confidence and zero regret.

Heat curls in my stomach, familiar and dangerous. I swear, the effect he has on me grows stronger with every day I get to spend with him, with every touch and kiss.

“Your dad’s gonna kill me, isn’t he?” he asks.

“Nah,” I say. “He knows I love you, and he wouldn’t want to make me sad. You’re safe.”

He snorts, tightening his hold on me. “For you? I’ll endure any interrogation your dad throws at me.”

“I’m sure you will.” I shift, my focus zeroed in on his lips. “Can you kiss me?”

“You don’t need to ask me that,” he murmurs, and then he covers my lips with his.

“So you’re living together?” Aunt Ava asks, her attention bouncing back and forth between Michael and me.

It surprised me when neither of Michael's parents asked many questions after we arrived yesterday. We stuck to talking about our plans for this visit and not much else. Michael thought they were just letting us be, letting us figure everything out for ourselves. I was skeptical, and rightfully so, because now, it's clear they did all that so we'd let our guards down.

When Mom and Dad showed up at the Thompsons' house an hour early, it hit me. Our parents wanted to do the interrogation part together.

"Yeah, we are." Michael drapes his arm over the back of my chair and draws patterns on my skin with his fingertips. "My place is big enough for both of us, and it's in a great neighborhood. There's no reason for Isla to rent something too."

"Don't you think it's too soon?" Dad is sitting with his elbows on the table, glaring at Michael.

"No. I've loved Isla since we were kids. The one thing I've known for certain for a long time is that she's it for me, always has been. And when the season begins and she's in the training trenches, we won't have much time outside work, but living together will give us at least some opportunity to spend time together." He turns to look at me, eyes emitting warmth. "Before she moved to New York, we hadn't seen or even spoken to each other in two years, and I can't do that again."

"Neither can I," I say and peer at my dad. "You're a parent; it's natural for you to worry, but believe me when I say I know what I'm doing. I want to build a life with Michael. Only him. Can you please trust me, Dad?"

He sighs, but then he breaks into a smile. "I trust you, sweetheart. Please, never doubt that." He fixes his focus on Michael. "I've known you your whole life, and with parents like yours, I'm not surprised you turned into such a good man." He straightens. "You're ambitious, and you're a hell of an athlete. It's been a joy watching you earn the recognition you deserve. But, more than that, you're respectful. You're kind. You care about your family." He examines me for a second, then homes in on Michael again. "And you love my daughter. That's the only thing that truly matters to me."

"We've had years to prepare for this talk," Mom says, her eyes tearful. "We always thought you two would end up together."

Heat radiates through my chest, and my hands tingle. Happiness fills me to the brim, making me feel weightless.

"Pretty sure I was the only one who never stopped believing that, even when you weren't talking to each other," Uncle Colton says smugly.

“Keep telling yourself that.” Aunt Ava elbows her husband and then focuses her attention on us, her expression going soft. “Just be happy. That’s what we all want for you.”

“Thank you,” I say, my voice cracking with emotion.

I’ve always thought of Michael’s parents as part of my family, and now, I see they feel the same way, just like mine think of Michael.

Michael clears his throat. “Do you mind if I steal Isla away? I want to show her something before everyone else gets here.”

Aunt Ava nods. “Sure.”

He stands, helps me to my feet, and we head into the house holding hands.

“Just no funny business, okay?” Dad calls out after us.

For a moment, everyone is silent, and then they burst into laughter.

BACK PRESSED against Michael’s chest, I sit between his legs on the rooftop. My heart races despite how much I love being up here. After our talk with our parents, I’m still buzzing with adrenaline.

This moment is both nostalgic and bittersweet. Memory after memory flits through my head. Nights when we’d sneak out here and talk for hours, snacking on the food he’d smuggle from the kitchen. Getting caught more than once and enduring lectures about how dangerous it was to be out here. Our first-kiss pact and how everything fell apart in the months before we turned sixteen.

“It feels like we’ve gone back in time,” he says quietly, his mouth close to my ear.

“This place holds so many memories.”

“Too many.” He tightens his arms around me. “I’m still mad at myself for not kissing you that night. It was warm like this. It was Mom’s birthday then too, wasn’t it? God, I wanted to. I wanted to so badly, but I got in my head, worried you wouldn’t want it, that I’d ruin our friendship.” A slow exhale leaves his mouth, his hot breath fanning over my skin. “If I had just done it…everything would’ve been different. All our firsts would’ve been with each other.”

“I know,” I say quietly. “But I can see now that it was for the best. I wouldn’t be where I am now if I hadn’t gone with Elena. And you may not have focused on honing your skills the way you did if I’d stayed.”

“Yeah,” he says, “you’re right. But that doesn’t mean I’m not still mad.”

I worry my bottom lip, my heart thudding heavily. “When did you first realize you were in love with me?”

He chuckles softly and answers without hesitation. “We were fourteen. You stayed after practice so we could race. You beat me, again, but barely.” He takes a deep breath. “You were standing there, breathing hard, hand pressed to your chest, hair falling into your eyes. And you were smiling like you’d just won the world.” He traps my chin between his fingers, forcing my face up. “All I wanted was to see that smile again. That’s when I knew.”

My stomach flutters, the butterflies flitting there losing their minds over the confession.

“What about you?” he asks quietly.

“I don’t know when exactly,” I admit. “Because I’ve loved you forever.”

He studies me for a second, his expression serious, inscrutable. Then, he brushes his lips over mine.

“I’ve never been happier than I am when I’m with you,” he confesses. “You were my first love. And you’re my last. My only. There’s only you for me.”

“And there’s only ever you for me,” I say. “I don’t want it any other way.”

He holds my gaze for a long moment, a mischievous smile tugging at his lips as if he’s already made up his mind about something. “Do you trust me?”

“With my life.”

“Good.” He slides his fingers into my hair, gently tugging at the roots. “Then we’re making one stop before we head back to New York.”

I arch an eyebrow. “Is there any chance I could get the ‘where’ out of you?”

“Not this time.”

“You’re making me nervous.” I narrow my eyes at him. “Is it something good?”

“There’s nothing to feel nervous about.” He inches closer to my lips. “I promise you’ll like this surprise. It’s really good. More than good actually.”

I smile, relaxing into his touch. “Then surprise me.”

When he kisses me this time, each small wound afflicting my heart heals. His mouth on mine like this, in this place, creates magic.

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CHAPTER FORTY-EIGHT

jersey stays

MICHAEL

Twenty-two years old

THE START OF THE SEASON IS AS OVERWHELMING AS IT IS EXCITING. BUT this year, the emotions are heightened. We had an amazing preseason, winning five out of six exhibition games. Our spirits are high, and while we're all full of superstitions and don't talk about our chances aloud, I can almost hear the word "hope" in the air when the team gathers in the locker room, on the ice, or during conditioning. Or maybe it's just me. Maybe it's because I finally have my girl by my side. In this kind of headspace, nothing could spoil the season for me.

I finally won Isla's heart for good, and that's the most important win I'll ever secure. Coming home to her, sharing meals, talking about anything and everything, and falling asleep holding her tight fuels me with an energy I've never before possessed. Suddenly, there's a voice in my head telling me I can do anything. She's my motivation, my inspiration, and the only person in the world who knows me inside and out.

I finally got the girl of my dreams, and I'll never take her for granted, especially after all the time we spent apart.

The regular season starts tonight, the Phantoms playing Pittsburgh, and these days, Isla all but lives on the ice or in the dance studio. I do what I can to support her in every way possible.

And because I’m a lucky asshole, one of the things she needs most is sex. When her stress level gets too high, the easiest way to get relief is by riding my dick. And, like before, every time with her is better than the last. Though secretly, I’d give it up if it meant she could be more relaxed, even if it meant I’d get to come less often.

This morning, she left for practice with Elena before I woke up, but she promised she’d try to make it to the game. I can’t imagine she’ll want to come. This close to the Olympics, her practices take all her energy.

Moments before warm-ups, I linger at the mouth of the tunnel, helmet tucked under my arm, stick in hand, watching the lower bowl fill up.

I find her almost immediately. Center ice, fourth row. She’s flanked by Blake and Elena, but I don’t pay them any attention. All I can think about is Isla and the jersey she’s wearing. The black and purple look incredible on her, but my number 17 is the star of the show. Until I peel it off her later, that is.

“Earth to Thompson.”

The familiar voice sends a shiver down my spine. I blink and turn, and when his identity registers, I stiffen a little. Cade Turner, Pittsburgh’s center. My first rival, not only in hockey, but for Isla’s attention. For years, we didn’t see eye to eye, but eventually, we became somewhat friendly. Mostly because we both missed Isla.

“Hey.” I lift my chin.

“Hi. I said your name four times before you finally heard me.” He tilts his head, studying me. His eyes are the same gray-blue color, but his hair is longer than I remember. “How are you doing?”

“Good.” I nod. “Ready for the season. You?”

“Same. Feels like this might be the year.” He smirks. “The year we’re the ones lifting the Cup.”

“Keep dreaming, bud.” I grin.

Scoffing, Turner shakes his head. “You haven’t changed a bit.”

“Maybe. Maybe not.” I can’t help but peer out into the crowd again.

Beside me, I feel him following my gaze. “You looking for someone?”

“Yeah.” I meet his eyes again. “That’s why I didn’t hear you. Isla’s here.”

He blinks. Once. Twice. “Wait…you and Isla?”

“Yeah,” I say simply, even though I’m celebrating on the inside. “We’re together.”

He lets out a slow breath, then chuckles. “Guess I never really stood a chance. She never had eyes for anyone but you.” He taps his helmet against his thigh, breaking into a genuine grin. “Just makes me want to kick your ass even more tonight.”

Head tipped back, I laugh. “Wouldn’t expect anything less.”

He holds out his fist, and when I bump it with mine, he steps back. “Good luck.”

“You too.”

The sound of heavy steps behind me signals it’s time for warm-ups, so I put my helmet on and head out onto the ice, even more motivated to win than I was minutes ago.

THE FIRST PERIOD was more like a foray. The Phantoms, as well as our opponents, spent most of our time on the ice testing the defenders, looking for weak spots and playing on our goalies’ nerves in turns. At the buzzer, the two zeros on the jumbotron felt less like a tie and more like two very talented teams had just completed a warm-up.

After a pep talk from Coach, we returned for the second period energized to score. Pittsburgh was as motivated, so we spent the first five minutes trying to create an opportunity while our defenders worked their asses off to keep our opponent from scoring.

We finally take the lead when our left wing shoots and I gather the rebound, flipping the puck into a near-open net for a power-play goal.

With just over two minutes left in the second, I bump my shoulder into Turner. He pushes back, battling me for the position in the slot. I grit my teeth, trying to steal the puck from him and fucking fail. He takes off, rushing to our net, and before I can catch up to him, he passes the puck to his teammate, who then directs a shot from above the right circle past Gunner, our goalie.

Fuck.

I suck in harsh breaths as Pittsburgh celebrates their first goal. The stakes are higher now, though that’s typically the case with hockey. Unless the game is over, either team has a chance to win.

When second period ends and we head into the locker room, we're still tied 1-1. *Dammit, I want to win this game!*

At the beginning of third period, I win face-off and send the puck to our right wing. Kennedy catches it with ease, heading toward the Pittsburgh net, and I rush after him, blood pumping in my veins, setting my skin on fire.

With another push, I skate past him, and when our eyes meet, he grins. He slides the puck right past Pittsburgh's defender.

"Come on," I mutter as it flies toward my stick. When it makes contact, I shout, "Gotcha!"

I skate toward Pittsburgh's net, and with a wrist shot from the left circle, I send the puck into the upper-right corner of the net, making the score 2–1.

As my teammates skate toward me for a short celebration, Turner heads for his team's bench, shaking his head.

For the rest of third period, our team plays defense. Time and time again, our defenders cut Pittsburgh's attempts short. With determination like we've got tonight, Pittsburgh seems to be getting desperate. Can't blame them. No one wants to lose their first game of the regular season.

As the last minute of the game counts down, I watch my teammates from the bench, my knees bouncing. With twenty seconds left, the buzz of the arena grows louder, and then Virtanen, our left wing, beelines toward the Pittsburgh net. With a powerful slap shot, he secures our win.

We're all on our feet, and when the buzzer signals the end of the game, we rush onto the ice. The fans shout and cheer, and I can't stop smiling. Beating an opponent like Pittsburgh 3–1 is no small feat.

Before I join my teammates, I find Isla. Smiling, she sends a kiss my way. I pretend to catch it with my gloved hand, pressing it to my chest.

Her kisses belong to my heart. These days, they are my life-force.

WHEN I STEP into the apartment two hours later, the TV is on. I take off my shoes and my bomber, drop my duffel bag on the floor, and head toward the sound.

The living room is dim. The only source of light is the huge TV on the wall. It looks like Isla is watching *Solo Leveling*. She sits on the couch, her legs tucked under her butt, and—

My heart stutters. Because the woman is still wearing my jersey.

“Hey,” I say, my voice hoarse.

She pauses the show and turns to look at me. “Hi. Congratulations on your win. You guys were incredible.”

“Thanks.” I slowly step into the room, heading toward her. “How about Turner? Was he incredible too?”

She shrugs. “He played a good game, but not as good as you did. Every person around me was praising you. Especially the girls.”

I stop in front of her and take her chin between my fingers. “And how did that make you feel?”

“Smug.” She grins. “They can cheer for you, but I get you all to myself.”

“You own me, baby.” I wink at her, then let my eyes travel down her form. “You’re still in my jersey.”

“Yeah,” she breathes. “*Only* in your jersey.”

Fuck. All my blood rushes south, and I’m already hard.

She licks her bottom lip. “I thought you liked this look.”

“Like?” I hold out my hand to her, and she lets me pull her to her feet. “I love it.”

Slowly, I wander to the window, and she follows me, her small hand in mine. When I stop, I haul her back to my chest and band an arm around her shoulders.

“What do you feel when you look at the city?” she asks quietly.

“Power.”

“It’s probably a lot like the way you felt when you scored tonight. You radiate power and confidence. There’s no doubt the ice is where you belong.” She turns around and fists my shirt. “I love watching you play. I love watching you dominate the ice and make everybody else play by your rules. That bossy side of you turns me on so damn much.”

“Wanna know a secret?”

She nods, her eyes glimmering in the lights that shine over the cityscape.

“My one and only turn-on is you.” I lower my face to hers. “But you in my jersey? With my last name and number on your back? It might be my favorite sight in the world. It makes me so fucking hard. I’m barely holding myself back from coming in my pants.”

She wiggles her index finger in front of me. “Nuh-uh. We can’t have that. I want your dick inside me. Now.”

Heat spreads through my veins and settles in my lower abdomen. I’ll never get tired of hearing words like that from her.

Head bent, I capture her lips with mine, kissing her hard and fast. She moans, giving me access. Our tongues tangle, caressing each other with force, making it hard to breathe. I move toward her, forcing her back, pressing her to the window. With her lip caught between her teeth, she unbuttons my shirt, helping me out of it. The moment it lands on the floor, our lips are fused together again.

Isla sucks my bottom lip into her mouth, her teeth digging into my flesh and pulling a whimper from me. I grip her tighter, and she moves to my jaw and then to my throat, nibbling, sucking, licking. Driving me wild.

This hunger between us, this desire to consume each other, is impossible to sate. I swear, the more we fuck, the more addicted we become.

Two days ago, she told me to tie her up, and I ended up fucking her for hours, only stopping when she begged me to. Though once I untied her, she rode my dick so fucking hard, I lost all sense of time and place. I lost count of the orgasms we had after we hit seven.

She moves lower, kissing my chest, and when she takes my nipple into her mouth, an arc of electricity shoots through me. “Fuck…”

Lips curved into a smile, she kneels in front of me. With her focus on my face, she unbuckles my belt. Then, she pushes down my pants, along with my boxer briefs. When she closes her hand around my hard dick, that electricity is back, vibrating beneath my skin and at the base of my spine. It’s so disorienting, I have to press my hand to the glass for balance.

She moves her hand up and down my shaft, jerking me slowly while cupping my balls and massaging them.

“Please,” I whisper, my vision blurring. “Baby, I want your mouth.”

The smile that spreads across her lips is fucking sinful.

“When you ask so nicely, how can I say no?” she murmurs, moving close enough that her lips brush my crown as she speaks. With a long breath in, she finally takes me into her warm mouth. She swirls her tongue around my head, and then she curves her lips around it and sucks…hard, all while working my shaft with one hand, edging me out of my mind.

She licks and sucks, all her movements aligned, each one adding an extra layer of ecstasy. Her teeth graze my sensitive skin, and I hiss, pleasure sparking brightly inside me. She squeezes my ass, encouraging me to move my hips, and because I'll give her anything she wants, I fuck her mouth.

All the while, she continues twirling her tongue around my shaft, with little sucks and bites to my head.

"You feel so good," I breathe out, my hand on top of her head.

As if she can read my mind, she takes my cock deeper, only stopping when she gags. Then, she does it again and again. Her slurping sounds mix with my moans as I barrel dangerously close to my release. This woman's hands and mouth will be the death of me. But, more than that, the scenery, the moment, adds to the need coursing through me. She's on her knees in front of the window, with Central Park right below us, along with the busy streets of New York.

"Fuck…" I groan, spilling myself inside her mouth.

She swallows everything, licking me clean before she stands and grasps the hem of my jersey like she's going to take it off.

"Jersey stays." I pull her into me and twirl her around. Pushing her hair aside, I kiss her neck, trailing my lips down her throat. She tilts her head, giving me better access.

"Press your hands to the window," I whisper in her ear.

She does as I tell her, her ass against my cock, her tits heavy in my hands as I palm them beneath the jersey. When I roll her nipples between my fingers, she moans, her breath fogging the glass. The more I touch her, the more she rubs that beautiful ass against me, the harder my dick becomes. In a matter of minutes, I'm hard as a rock again.

I lower one hand and tease her clit, eliciting a gasp.

"Michael, please…" she begs.

I back away. With her palms pressed to the window and her back arched, her wet pussy is on full display. I place my hand on her hip, pulling her closer, and guide my cock inside her. Then, with one, hard thrust, I seat myself completely.

My vision darkens, and when the desire washing over me levels out, I thrust, using long, deep strokes. Her warmth and tightness are perfect. She makes me dizzy.

"I want more…please…more."

I increase my tempo, let my movements get a little rougher. The heat of our bodies moving together and the sounds of flesh meeting flesh only drive my need higher. Hunched over her, I cup her tits. The sound she makes, low and throaty, sends a zing of excitement down my spine. When I switch up and roll her nipples between my fingers, pulling and squeezing, the sounds turn to whimpers, mixing with my own groans and filling the room with the most beautiful music.

I collect her long hair, wrap it around my fist, and tug.

When her head snaps back, her breath stutters. “Oh God, yes…”

I pick up my pace, ramming into her. But when stars dance in my vision, I release her hair and sneak my hand around to her chest, pulling her up. With that hand cuffing her throat, I use the other to play with her clit.

In her reflection against the dark window, a smile breaks over her face. Taking that as a good sign, I add more pressure, both to her neck and her little nub.

“I should’ve tattooed a necklace on my hand,” I say lowly. “Just so you’d always remember how good you look like this.”

“God,” she gasps. “It feels so good.”

When her insides pulsate, strangling me, I clench my muscles, trying to hold back and tease her clit while cutting off her air supply. She responds, her body trembling violently, and I let go too. She comes and comes, her moans and pants filtering through the air around us. I continue moving my hips, prolonging her release and letting her ride out her orgasm until she’s empty.

As her body grows soft, I pull out and hold her up as she turns to face me.

With my palm pressed to her cheek, I angle her face to mine. “I love you, Isla.”

“I love you more,” she whispers, eyes hooded. “Take me to our bedroom. Please.”

“Sure.” I peck her lips and then drop to my knees. “But only after I do this.”

As I bury my face in her sweet pussy, tasting her and myself on my tongue, the only thought I still have on my mind is her. Her body, her heat, her mind, her heart. They’re the only things I’ll always crave, the only place I’ll ever come back to.

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CHAPTER FORTY-NINE

so romantic

ISLA

Twenty-two years old

THE APARTMENT FEELS DIFFERENT TONIGHT. MOST DAYS, IT'S JUST Michael and me, or me on my own when he has away games. Tonight, though, it's full. It's Michael's birthday, and I did my best to organize a surprise party for him.

Considering I don't keep any secrets from him and he reads me like an open book, it's damn near a miracle he hasn't found out.

Aunt Ava stands at the kitchen island, pretending not to fuss while she absolutely does, rearranging the snacks we prepared. Uncle Colton sits on the couch in the living room, Asher beside him as they watch the California Thunders play Florida.

I check the time on my phone and then hustle to our bathroom so I can quickly put on a little makeup and brush my hair. The last thing I need is him figuring out I've gotten almost no sleep since he left two days ago. I want so desperately for tonight to be perfect, my attention kept drifting to all the tasks that needed to be done and all the supplies I needed to buy, even when I was on the ice. Needless to say, the distraction made yesterday's practice brutal. I landed on the ice after one of my toe loops and ended up with a nasty bruise on my right side. Even Elena got scared, and since that woman isn't afraid of anything, when she demanded I take a few

days off, I agreed. It's not going to ruin my preparations for the Olympics, but it will definitely help me recharge.

A burst of feminine laughter coming from our bedroom makes me pause. Brows knitted together, I push the door open. I find Meg curled up on our bed, her phone in hand above her head. Her grin is wide, and she's full of giddy joy. It only takes a moment to recognize the voice on the other end. My brother.

"Hey," I say, leaning against the doorframe.

Meg sits up straight, her eyes wild. "I'll call you later." Without waiting for Ian to respond, she ends the call. "Sorry. I thought it was okay for me to be in here."

"Of course it's okay." I sit on the bed beside her with a sigh. "We haven't had a second to talk since you got here."

"You've been busy, and I didn't want to be in the way." She gives me a small smile, her deep brown eyes warm. "I thought I'd help you and Mom in the kitchen, but she said the two of you had it, so I wandered around and ended up here. This room has always been my favorite place in the apartment."

"Yeah, I love it too." I tip my head to the side. "How are you?"

"I'm good. Still waiting to hear back from colleges, though, and it's making me nervous." She shrugs, her attention drifting off to the side. "Especially since Ian already got into GBU. I'm happy for him, I really am, but he's gotten so smug, and honestly, he's turned into kind of a pain in the ass."

"He can be insufferable," I say honestly.

Head thrown back, she laughs. "You have no idea."

"Have you figured out what you want to do?"

She bows her head and clasps her hands. "I know what I *don't* want to do. I love hockey. I always will. But I've seen all the sacrifices Michael has had to make for the sport, and I can't imagine ever doing it professionally. I think I'll stick to amateur level. Have fun with it." She exhales, then looks up. "So I'm really, really hoping I get into NYU. They've got a great sports science program."

"You want to coach?"

A wide smile spreads across her face. "Yeah. Kids."

Matching her expression, I squeeze her hand. "You'll be great at it. And I believe in you. Everything's going to work out exactly the way it's

supposed to."

"I hope so." She sighs, her body slumping. "Do you think you could talk some sense into your idiot brother for me?"

I raise a brow.

"The girl he's dating is bad news." Her voice is soft, almost hard to hear, but I swear, it wavers. "Like…really bad news. But he refuses to see it."

I frown, searching her expression for insight into what's going on in her head. Ian and Meg's friendship has always been just that—friendship. They love each other like siblings. Not the way Michael and I did, even when we were kids.

"Bad news how?" I ask.

Meg chews on her bottom lip, fingers drawing lines on her jeans. "She's a bully. Not to me," she clarifies. "She knows I can stand up for myself, but she's terrible to other girls at school." A sharp exhale leaves her mouth. "Ian thinks she's just intense because she's captain of the cheer squad. But he's wrong. Jennifer is the fucking worst."

I take a slow breath, considering her words. "I'll try to talk to him. I promise." Then, I meet her eyes. "But honestly, it's probably best for him to make his own mistakes. That's the best way to make sure he learns from them. Okay?"

"Okay." She nods and then glances over my shoulder out the open bedroom door. She moves closer to me and ducks, her mouth at my ear. "Has Asher always been this hot?"

The laugh that bursts out of me comes as a surprise to both of us. That's the last thing I expected to hear.

She frowns, lips pursing. "Forget I said anything."

"No, sorry, sorry." I press a hand to my chest, taking a breath. "It's totally fine. I just…didn't see that one coming."

She rolls her eyes. "I guess. He's just so different from what I remember."

"Yes, Ash has always been good-looking," I say easily. "Girls have always noticed."

"Even you?"

"No." I shake my head. "He's always been just a friend to me."

A smug little smile curves her lips. "Of course. You only ever had eyes for my brother. And he only ever noticed you."

“Something like that,” I say, grinning.

“Don’t get any ideas,” she adds quickly. “I don’t want to date Asher or anything. It caught me off guard, that’s all.”

The buzz of my phone tears my attention away from Meg. It’s a text from our doorman, who promised to let me know when Michael stepped into the building.

JAKE:

He’s getting into the elevator now

Eyes wide, I jump to my feet. “Michael is here.”

Meg and I rush out of the bedroom and warn the crowd to hide, and then Ash flips off the lights.

Aunt Ava, Uncle Colton, and Asher hide behind the kitchen counter while Meg and I crouch behind the couch. She shoots me a look, eyes as bright as her smile. Heart hammering, I smooth my hands down my skirt. I really hope he enjoys this little surprise party.

Keys rattle on the other side of the door, and then the lock clicks. I bite my bottom lip, waiting for him to step inside.

“Isla?” he calls out from the hallway. “Baby? Ugh, she’s probably still at the rink.”

The disappointment in his voice sends a shiver down my spine. What if he thinks I forgot his birthday?

“Baby?” Meg mouths, raising a brow.

I lift a shoulder in a shrug. *I like it.*

Michael moves farther into the apartment, his footsteps quieter as he steps into the living room. From his hiding spot, Uncle Colton holds up three fingers.

Nodding, I elbow Meg to make sure she’s paying attention.

Uncle Colton puts one finger down, then another, and then we all jump out of our hiding places and Ash turns on the lights. Cheers and applause fill the room as we shout, “Happy birthday, Michael!”

Eyes wide, lips parted, he stares at us from the middle of the room. His shock doesn’t take away from how incredible he looks in his white shirt and black pants.

When his attention lands on me, my hands get clammy, and my knees go weak.

Slowly, I make my way to him. “Happy birthday,” I tell him when we’re eye to eye.

Smiling wide, he presses his palm to my cheek, his fingers gently caressing my skin. “Thank you.” He bends and pecks my lips.

Then, he makes his rounds, greeting his family.

“Your girlfriend wanted to organize a surprise party for you, and we all thought it was a great idea.” Uncle Colton comes closer and hugs his son. “Happy birthday, kid.”

“Thanks, Dad.”

I take a tiny step back, letting his family wish him a happy birthday. Then, it’s Ash’s turn. The grins that play on his and Michael’s faces are priceless. They’re opponents these days, and living in different states makes it hard for them to spend time together. It’s been months since they’ve seen one another, and the last time they did, they were probably on the ice.

The happiness radiating from Michael is why I wanted all of them here tonight.

A big hand wraps around mine, halting my thoughts, and when I blink back to the present, I discover everyone is staring at me. Eyebrows drawn together, Michael studies me. Then, he scans the rest of the small group.

“I need a moment with Isla alone.”

Asher barks out a laugh. “So romantic.”

“But just a moment!” Meg yells as we head down the hallway. “I’m hungry.”

“Meghan!” Aunt Ava scolds. “Let them be. They haven’t seen each other in two days.”

“Oh, I still remember the withdrawals I’d go through when I was away from you for more than a day,” Uncle Colton says as Michael closes the door of our bedroom, cutting off the sounds.

I try to suppress my laughter, but a snort escapes my lips before I can stop it. “I see it runs in the family.”

Michael shrugs, backing me against the closed door. “My dad has always been my role model.”

He places his hands on my waist, and a hiss breaks free before I can tamp down the reaction. He frowns, and as his fingers slide to the hem of my shirt, I trap my bottom lip between my teeth, knowing damn well he’s not going to like what he’s about to see.

With a gentle tug, he pulls my tee up. “What the hell is this?” he mutters when my bruised side comes into view.

“I fell.”

“What the fuck, Isla? Why didn’t you tell me?”

I soften my voice. “Because it’s nothing. It’ll heal.”

“When did it happen? It looks fresh.”

“Yesterday.”

He ducks his head so our eyes are level. “And you went to practice today?”

“No.” I shake my head. “Elena insisted I take a break.”

His brows jump to his hairline. “*Elena* insisted you take a break? I’m fucking scared to ask how bad the fall was.”

“It was bad, but it’ll heal. I’ll be back on the ice in two days.”

“Oh?” He drops his head a little, still zeroed in on me. “Does that mean I get you all to myself for two whole days? And I’ll be able to take care of you?”

I nod.

“I hate the reason,” he says, voice softer now, “but I’m not mad about getting some time alone with…” He tilts his head, pretending to think. “What did my dad call you again? My girlfriend?”

“Stop,” I say, swatting his chest.

Laughter rumbles out of him as he leans in and steals a quick kiss. When he steps back, fingers threading through mine, he says, “Okay, okay. I’m being unfair.” His grip tightens a little. “Come on. We should go back. Meg gets fucking scary when she’s hungry.”

I let him pull me out of the room, happy and light. With him, all my days are perfect.

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CHAPTER FIFTY

she won

MICHAEL

Twenty-three years old

WARM-UPS DON'T START FOR A FEW MORE MINUTES, BUT I WAS TOO DAMN anxious to sit around the locker room any longer. I needed to move, to find a way to take my mind off Isla and what she's about to do halfway across the world. While I'm in the US, she's in Sweden, and today, she'll compete in the Olympics.

I rest my stick against my thigh, helmet tucked under my arm, and stare at the rink, but my mind isn't here. I'm too busy picturing her lacing up her skates and putting on a brave face to compete in the most prolific competition in the world. For the second time in her career. And I'm a fucking mess, terrified I'll miss her free skate because I'll be on the ice.

Before I started therapy, I played plenty of games in a shitty headspace. But that was back when I still read all the negative comments and agonized over every one of my flaws. I played through pressure in high school, in college, and it's only grown now that I play for the Phantoms. I've done it all—elimination games, overtimes when my lungs burned and my hands shook so hard, I was surprised I didn't lose the stick somewhere in the middle of the ice.

But none of that compares to how I feel right now. Because tonight, winning isn't the hardest part. It's not my primary focus. My primary focus is supporting Isla and cheering her on while we're miles and miles apart.

Fuck, not being able to watch her achieve her dreams will haunt me forever.

"Hey." Asher approaches, his green eyes as bright as ever, his Vipers jersey tight across his pads, and a shit-eating grin on his face.

The one that never fails to make me smile in return.

My best friend.

And today, also my opponent.

I nearly shat myself when I realized Isla's free skate program would be happening during our game against the Vipers.

"You good?" he asks, nodding toward the ice.

"Yeah." I huff out a breath, glancing at the small Olympic rings pin on my chest—a sign of support for my girl. "Just…got a lot on my mind today."

Smirking, he moves closer, only stopping when his shoulder brushes mine. "Same. And don't think I don't know why you're so worked up."

I arch a brow.

"You really think I would forget Isla skates today?" He frowns, and his voice drops, all teasing gone from his tone. "I'd be a pretty shitty friend if I didn't remember that one of the people I love most in the world is competing in the fucking Olympics."

I wince. "Sorry, Ash. I'm all over the place."

"I get it." He rolls his shoulders, standing straighter. "She can handle it. She'll get out on that ice and prove to the world she's a true winner. A gold medalist. I believe in her."

The tight knots in my stomach loosen a little, and my breaths come a little easier. "She's gonna kick all their asses and show the world who the real Ice Queen is."

"That's the spirit." He winks. "And if anyone can handle playing against me," he adds, grinning now, "it's you."

I shake my head, a smile tugging at my mouth. "Are you getting soft on me, Vaughn?"

"Never." He punches my shoulder, though there's not much force to it. "Do your thing, I'll do mine, and we'll see how it all shakes out."

"Good luck," I tell him as our teammates filter out of the locker rooms and the horde moves toward us.

THE BUZZ SIGNALS the end of the game, and the arena erupts. Just seconds ago, I scored the final goal, securing a win for the Phantoms and adding another hat trick to my record. A hat trick against the current Cup holder.

Hats rain down from the stands, covering the ice as my teammates crash into me from every direction. My chest is on fire, my lungs burning, adrenaline still surging through my veins.

I'm fucking ecstatic about the win and the hat trick, but right now, the ice is the last place on Earth I want to be.

God, I hope she hasn't skated yet. I send up a silent prayer I'll get to see her be her most wonderful self *live*. That I'll get to witness the moment she wins gold, achieving her lifelong dream, in real time.

I've made it into the tunnel before a hand grasps my arm.

"Hold up," Emily says, already half in PR mode. "Media's waiting. You can't skip this one."

"I'm not doing interviews," I say, shaking free of her grip.

She blinks, her eyebrows knitted together. "Michael, you just scored a hat trick. The Phantoms just beat *the Vipers*. You're the star of the night. You have to talk to the press." She leans in closer, lowering her voice. "Do you really have something more important to do than this?"

The words are out before I can stop them. "My wife is about to skate for Olympic gold."

Jaw dropping, she rears back. Only then do I realize the tunnel has gone silent, and several sets of eyes are on me. Kennedy and Wright are both close by, helmets off, and the equipment manager blinks, his focus fixed firmly on me.

Dammit, I'm an idiot. We've kept it a secret for months, and now I rumbled it out for everyone to hear?

I clear my throat and force myself to look only at Emily. "If you think there's anything more important to me than my wife, you're wrong."

I skirt around her and immediately find myself under Coach's calm scrutiny.

He stands a few feet away, arms crossed. Then, he jerks his chin down the hall. "Broadcast lounge. On the left. They've got the Olympics on."

Nodding, I hurry the rest of the way down the tunnel.

The screen on the wall in the broadcast lounge is massive, but the sound is turned low enough to keep the room from buzzing.

Panting, I fall into a seat and home in on the images flashing before me.

Another skater has just finished, and, according to the commentary, Isla is next. Thank fuck.

I drop my forearms to my knees, chest heaving, sweat still clinging to me beneath my pads. I've never been more anxious in my life. Never in my life have I wanted something the way I want her to win gold tonight.

The door opens once, then again. As the seconds tick down, more people file in and sit near me or stand against the wall. I look around, discovering my team is here, supporting me, supporting her as she follows her dreams.

Isla skates to center ice, her light blue dress fucking magnificent, hugging every line and curve of her body. The front of her hair is collected into a braid that wraps around her head like a halo, and the rest is in a high ponytail. The bright pink tips she had dyed specifically for the Olympics look amazing against her dress.

She's the most stunning girl in the world, and I can't get enough of her.

When the music starts—"Euclid" by Sleep Token—the room disappears.

It's our song, the one we chose together, listening to it on repeat as we waited for our turn at the chapel in Vegas.

I rake my hair, tugging at the roots, never looking away. Sweden feels impossibly far away, and yet I swear I feel her presence. It's like, rather than being on the screen, she's skating right in front of me.

At just the right moment, she pushes off, carving into the ice with speed that would look reckless if you didn't know her. I do. I know exactly what that speed means. What it costs.

The first jump comes fast. When she launches herself into the air, the room goes dead silent.

When she lands the quadruple toe loop, someone behind me sucks in a harsh breath. I tug at my hair harder, focus glued to the screen. From that first jump, her program doesn't slow.

A Triple Lutz follows. She jumps into the air, hands pressed to her chest, then lands, every move clean and precise. Each jump feels like a punch to my gut. My stomach twists so violently, I worry I'll throw up. But I refuse to. Not until her performance is over, at least.

"Holy shit," someone mutters beside me.

By the time she hits the step sequence, her breathing is fast, her shoulders rising and falling, but she stays locked in, her eyes glimmering

with determination. Tonight, she's not skating for applause or recognition. She's skating because this is who she is at her core, when everything else falls away. She owns the ice, and she never gives up. And while there are other figure skaters who are just as dedicated, in my eyes, she's the only possible winner.

By the time she makes her final jump, my heart is pounding against my rib cage. And when she drops into her ending pose, her arms wrapped around herself, head bowed, the room falls silent. The arena on the screen explodes, and a second later, Asher drops onto the stool beside me, still dressed in his Vipers' jersey. His blond hair is damp and sticking out in every direction as he leans into me, forcing me to look at him.

"Why is everyone saying Isla's your wife?"

"Because she is," I reply. "We got married in Vegas. In August."

"You did *what*?" He rears back, his expression going dark. "Thompson, are you fucking insane?"

"Hush," one of my teammates whispers sharply.

Thankful for the interruption, I fix my focus on the screen, the camera now on Isla. When she smiles at Elena, the tension drains from my muscles.

Her short program score comes up first, at 76.85. Then, her free skate, coming in at 162.40. I try to do the math, but my head is too much of a mess, so I haven't worked it out before the total score appears, and when it does, my breath hitches. Her score is 239.25.

That means gold.

For a second, the room is silent, like we're all digesting the news, but then, the people around me break into applause.

I don't even realize I'm crying until my vision blurs. My chest caves in, making it hard to breathe. With a hand pressed to it, searching for reprieve, I cry and laugh at the same time, my happiness overwhelming me.

She did it.

Isla Walker just made her dreams come true.

My best friend. My first and forever love just won the fucking Olympics.

My wife won gold.

After years and years spent honing her craft. After countless falls and getting up, skating through pain and bruises. After all the sacrifices she's made. All the times she skipped parties and school events, choosing to skate instead.

She did it. She earned this win.
And she’s everything.
She’s my entire world.
My universe.

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CHAPTER FIFTY-ONE

oops

ISLA

Twenty-three years old

THE MEDAL IS HEAVIER THAN I EXPECTED, OR MAYBE IT'S THE WEIGHT OF the moment still settled on my shoulders. I don't know. My mind is all over the place. Minutes ago, I was standing on a pedestal while the national anthem played, surrounded by the skaters I've looked up to for years. Ogawa took silver, and Sokolova won bronze.

Both were amazing. As I watched them skate, I was certain one of them would win. But then, I remembered the words Michael spoke to me while we waited for my flight to Stockholm, and I adjusted my frame of mind.

Don't forget who you are, he told me. *You've put in the work, Isla. Years and years of hard work and dedication. You have everything you need to win gold*. His thumb brushed my cheek, and I closed my eyes, soaking in the feel of his skin on mine. *Just believe in yourself the way I believe in you. And trust me, baby—you're unstoppable.*

Michael gave me the strength to push all my doubts and worries aside, to step onto the ice as if I'd already won. There was no way I could watch his game today, but Elena checked the score for me, and when she told me he'd scored a hat trick and the Phantoms won, it only gave me more motivation to give this my all.

I won Olympic gold while "Euclid" played through the speakers of the arena. The song he helped me choose. The song whose every word reminds

me of us.

Voices grow louder as I round the corner. Then, cameras flash, blinding me, and several people call my name. Before I can make sense of what anyone is saying, I'm being ushered into the press area.

"How does it feel to finally stand on the top step?" one journalist asks.

"Was this the skate of your life?" another one asks, holding the microphone out to me.

"What's changed for you since the Olympics four years ago? You placed fifth at nineteen, and here you are at twenty-three, earning gold."

Wow, talk about being bombarded with questions.

With a smile on my face, I answer one journalist at a time. Then, I thank my team and Elena for always believing in me and helping me achieve my wildest dreams. I thank my parents for their unyielding love and support next, my heart galloping, my body humming with the energy flowing through my veins.

A journalist with microphone labeled as an American broadcast television network leans forward, his voice loud enough to cut through the noise.

"There's a rumor that congratulations are in order for more than just your Olympic gold," he says with a grin. "Is it true you recently got married?"

My ears ring, the silence in the room eerie. For two heartbeats, no one speaks, and no one moves. Then, an explosion of sound reverberates off the walls. Voices rise. Heads snap in my direction. Someone actually gasps.

I blink once. "What?"

"Michael Thompson scored a hat trick against the current Cup holder and led his team to a win," the journalist says. "Then, he refused to speak to the press because he wanted to watch his wife skate. That's a level of dedication we don't often see from athletes in any sport."

Heat rushes to my face as his words register. They really know about our marriage. Michael skipped the interviews. For me.

For half a second, I consider denying it, just to buy myself some time. Instead, I smile and nod.

"Thank you," I say calmly. "My husband is an incredibly dedicated athlete. He lives and breathes hockey." Straightening, I lift my chin. "I'm proud of everything he's accomplished so far, and I'll always support him in everything he does, just like he supports me."

The group breaks into more questions, but I'm done for today. I have two very important people waiting for me, and there's a call I'm dying to make.

"That's all for today," I say firmly, stepping back. "Thank you all so much."

Before anyone can stop me, I'm gone.

My parents are waiting just beyond the barrier. I throw my arms around my dad's shoulders, hugging him tightly. But instead of hugging me, he grasps my arms and holds me out in front of him. Eyebrows drawn together, he stares at me like he's rethinking his entire life.

"Married?" he demands. "You're married? Did I hear that right?"

Oops.

Stomach sinking, I step back, but I keep my head high. My mom laughs, snagging my attention, her dark blue eyes shining as she hauls me to her chest.

"I'm so happy for you. Not only because you won gold, but because you and Michael finally figured things out." She leans back, beaming. "I knew there was something different about you."

"Bella, stop," Dad mutters. "I can't wrap my head around this. My baby girl won Olympic gold, and now we find out she eloped? Please tell me this is a joke."

"It's not a joke, Dad." I take a breath. "In August, after Aunt Ava's birthday, Michael and I flew to Vegas. We got married."

He drops his head and slaps a hand to his face. "I need a minute."

Mom kisses my cheek. "I'm excited," she says brightly. "You look happy. That's all that matters."

"It matters, sure." Dad pulls himself together, eyeing me. "But this happiness won't last long because I'm going to kill Michael the moment our plane lands in New York."

My heart sinks. "Dad."

"He should've asked for my blessing," he goes on, ignoring me.

"Dad," I repeat, firmer now.

"I watched that boy grow up," he says, voice rising. "I drove him home from practice more times than I can count. He was always welcome in our house. I've always considered him family." He gestures wildly. "I rooted for him. I've been watching the Phantoms for three years even though I

couldn’t care less. And this is how he repays me?” He looks straight at me. “By eloping with my only daughter? With my little girl?”

Mom squeezes my hand and whispers, “Go. I’m sure you wanna talk to Michael.”

I study my dad, a sharp pang piercing my heart. I never thought he would be this unhappy with the news.

“I will talk to your dad. Everything will be fine, I promise.”

I kiss her cheek and then head to the locker room, trying to push down my worries.

As I click the FaceTime button on my phone, I shift, getting comfortable on my bed. It’s almost nighttime for me, while it’s only around 5 p.m. in New York. I should have put my pjs on, yet I’m still in my bathrobe, my hair wet. I’m too tired to do more. The shower alone drained the last remnants of my energy.

Michael’s face appears on my screen, a huge smile playing on his lips. “Hi, baby.”

“Hey.” I fall onto my back, holding my phone above me. “Congratulations on your win. I watched the highlights on my way to the hotel. You were unstoppable.”

“*I* was unstoppable?” He threads his fingers through his hair. The sight of our bedroom behind him makes my chest ache. I miss him so damn much. “Have you looked at yourself in the mirror? You were unreal. I watched every second of your free skate. You nailed it, baby. That gold is yours. No one else even came close.”

Tears prick at the backs of my eyes. “I wasn’t sure you’d get a chance to watch.”

“I would’ve lost my mind if I missed it.” A crooked smile tugs at his mouth, his eyes softening. “But I got lucky. The game ended ten minutes before you skated. The guys watched with me. Even Ash joined us.”

“You sure got a lot done in the ten minutes between the game and my program, or so I’ve heard?” I raise a brow.

“What do you…” His jaw unhinges, his eyes going wide. “I didn’t have time to watch the interviews or read the news yet. Wait…does *everyone*

know? In Sweden too?”

I nod.

Even through the phone screen, it’s obvious how drastically his face has paled. “Even your parents?”

I nod again, biting the inside of my cheek. “Dad lost it.”

He throws his head back. “Fuck.”

“Mom said she’d talk to him.” I sigh. “But he was so upset. I feel awful we didn’t tell them, but it really did feel like the right call back then, with the Olympics coming up and your season starting.”

“You think when he understands literally no one knew, it will help?” He drops onto his back, lifting his phone over his face.

“Hope so.” I tilt my head. “How did you even let it slip?”

He groans. “Emily was trying to make me talk to the press, and when I said no, she made a comment insinuating nothing could be more important than that. I snapped and said my wife was about to win in the Olympics, and there was no chance I was going to miss it.”

Warmth spreads through me, the butterflies in my stomach dancing. “Your wife, huh?”

“Yeah. Felt so fucking good to finally say it out loud.”

I smile at him, though the expression is interrupted when a yawn breaks over my lips.

“I love you so much,” I tell him, eyes watering.

“I love you too,” he says. “Miss you, baby.”

“I’ll be home soon,” I promise softly. “I can’t wait to just breathe. To focus on us. On you and me.”

“I love the sound of that.”

We talk a little longer. Shortly after I end the call, it hits me—for the first time in years, I don’t have a plan for what comes next. No schedule. No next goal.

All I want is him. Us.

And honestly, that feels like more than enough.

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CHAPTER FIFTY-TWO

an olympic gold medalist, and a stanley cup champion

ISLA

Twenty-three years old

Game Seven of the Stanley Cup is coming close to an end. The Phantoms are leading 2-1, but that doesn't stop my anxiety from rising. It feels like those minutes before I stepped on the ice at the Olympics. Both teams are exceptionally good, so this could change in a matter of seconds.

Their opponents scored first, during a power-play in the first period, and they outshot the Phantoms 8-5. It put me on the edge of my seat. Even when Bergqvist tied the score in the last two minutes of the first period, I couldn't relax.

The second period wasn't any better. My heart raced and my knee bounced the entire time. Dallas called for back-to-back penalties midway through the period because of roughing on Dwayne, and then because of cross checking on Korhonen ten minutes later.

Michael made them pay after the second call, scoring a power-play goal with a shot from the top of the left circle. I jumped and yelled my head off, elated my husband had just put his team ahead.

When the third period started, the air was thick with tension. The athletes were probably feeling the same way I was, filled with careful optimism, because in such a dynamic sport as hockey, anything is possible.

Dad is here, sitting beside me with his arms crossed, his eyes glued to the ice, but the frown he's wearing would be more appropriate for watching

some slaughter.

His mood has dampened mine a bit tonight. I hate feeling like I disappointed him, that I continue to do so again and again…simply because I chose to elope.

I never imagined he would hold a grudge for so long. If he were upset for a week or two, I could understand. Even a month. But it's been four months, and he's exceptionally good at keeping us all on our toes.

To my right, Uncle Colton sighs. "You know, for someone whose daughter married the love of her life, you're incredibly moody."

Dad doesn't look at him as he says, "I'm not moody."

I glance at my mom, who sits with Aunt Ava on my dad's other side. They're actually watching the game. Why didn't I sit with them?

"You've been a mood killer since February, and it's June," Uncle Colton retorts.

"I'm not a mood killer."

"You refuse to talk to Michael, and you called him a culprit."

Dad glares at his friend. "Because he is. He stole something precious from me."

I pinch the bridge of my nose. If I wasn't so invested in the game, I'd get up and walk out. I'm over the topic. This isn't the first conversation they've had about our marriage.

Uncle Colton snickers. "By something precious, you mean Isla?"

"Your son stole my chance to walk my only daughter down the aisle."

The arena erupts around us, startling me. On the Jumbotron, they replay the incredible save our goalie just made. And I missed it live. Dammit.

"Dad—"

Ignoring me, he sets his elbows on his knees, leans forward, and squints at Uncle Colton. "You wanna know what the worst part is?"

Michael's dad smiles. "How it makes you act like a big baby?"

Dad rolls his eyes and then shakes his head. "I've spent years imagining that day. Imagining every detail of how I'd bring my baby girl to the altar so she could marry a man who would love her immensely and treat her right." He glances at me and then focuses on Uncle Colton again. "If it were Meg instead of Isla, you'd be upset too."

The amusement fades from Uncle Colton's face. He narrows his eyes, chewing on his cheek. "That's fair."

"Finally."

Uncle Colton tilts his head. “But you’re forgetting something.”

“There you go again.” Dad groans, throwing his head back.

“Xander, you spent years announcing how Michael would be the next big thing in the NHL. You’ve watched every game since the Phantoms brought him up. And you’ve been rooting for them, even though it’s not your home team.”

“Of course I have. He’s your son, and I’m very supportive of my friends’ kids.”

“Ooookay.” Uncle Colton fixes his focus on my dad, turning away from the ice completely. “Should I remind you how many times over the years you said you hoped our kids would end up together?”

Dad opens his mouth and then closes it, his jaw working.

Uncle Colton straightens, a triumphant smile on his face. “That’s what I thought.”

“It’s not relevant in this situation,” Dad mutters, folding his arms once again.

“It is. They’re together. Married. And most importantly, they’re happy. This is the happiest I’ve seen my kid in a long, long time, and I’m sure it’s the same for Isla.”

“That’s not the fucking point of this conversation.”

Uncle Colton throws his hands in the air.

People around us glance in our direction, making me wish I could disappear into my seat. This is getting out of hand, but they are both dead set on ignoring me, so I can’t stop them.

“Then what is the point?” Uncle Colton asks.

Dad focuses on the ice, the corners of his mouth dropping. He’s silent for a few moments, then sighs. “My baby girl got married to the love of her life, yeah, but I wasn’t there. Hell, they didn’t even tell me. I found out about it along with the rest of the world six months later.” He glances at me and then quickly looks away. “It hurt like motherfucker.”

My heart squeezes, and guilt swamps me. I don’t really have a leg to stand on. We could’ve easily told our families about our elopement, but we didn’t. I was so focused on my Olympic dream, everything else faded into the background, and I was the one who suggested we keep it private. Michael didn’t love the idea, but he always supports me.

I hurt my dad’s feelings…and his reaction is absolutely valid.

Uncle Colton clears his throat. “How about we fix it?”

Dad blinks. “What do you mean?”

“What if we plan a wedding?”

My jaw unhinges as I turn to look at Uncle Colton. What is he talking about?

“A wedding?” Dad asks.

A crooked smile tips up Uncle Colton’s lips. “Yeah. One where you’d get to walk Isla down the aisle. Get to have a father-daughter dance.”

Michael’s line jumps over the boards, and the crowd roars, but our dads are completely locked in on each other.

A novel for your next quiet moment.

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“If we do this, would you stop pouting? And stop giving my son the silent treatment?”

Dad bristles. “I’m not fucking pouting.”

“You are.” Uncle Colton snorts.

“I’m allowed to feel sad.”

“Of course you are.” His friend nods. “But if we throw a wedding for them, would you stop being sad?”

Brows pinched, I look from one man to the other. Don’t they think they should ask Michael and me first?

Dad shrugs. “Yes.”

With a diabolical grin, Uncle Colton holds out his hand. “Then we have a deal.”

Without hesitation, Dad accepts the gesture. “Deal.”

Utter bafflement shrouds me. “Excuse me?” I practically cough out. “Shouldn’t you ask what Michael and I want?”

Both men stare at me, not bothered in the slightest by my glaring.

“Dad?” I ask. He only holds my gaze, so I turn to my left. “Uncle Colton?”

He shrugs, wearing a shit-eating grin.

Hackles rising, I sit ramrod straight. “Don’t you think you should ask us first? It was our decision to elope. We didn’t want a big wedding.”

Dad squints at me and then peers around me to Uncle Colton. The smile that blooms on his face could only mean one thing—trouble. And Michael’s dad’s expression matches.

“No one is talking about a big wedding,” Dad states. “A small gathering will suffice.”

I blink. “A small gathering?”

Uncle Colton nods.

I look at my dad, then at Michael’s, my stomach plummeting. “Oh my God. You did this on purpose!”

The timing of this conversation. Me sitting between them. Their argument. The guilt-trip Dad laid on me. The handshake. None of it was a coincidence.

Dad pats my knee. “Don’t worry, baby girl. We’ll help you plan.”

Uncle Colton pats my shoulder. “It’ll be great.”

I stare at them, then at the ice, then back at them, sputtering. They played me.

The crowd around us roars, pulling my attention back to the ice. Michael takes a pass from Diaz and heads to the Dallas net. My heart thunders in my chest. He lifts his stick and then sends the puck to the back of the net over the goalie’s blocker into the far side.

“Yes, yes, yes,” I yell, jumping to my feet.

The jumbotron flashes with the updated score. With only three minutes left, I’ve practically forgotten all the anguish my dad and Uncle Colton put me through. I wrap my arms around Dad’s neck and hug him tight. Then, I do the same to Uncle Colton. At the end of the day, I married the man I love, and that man just sent his team skyrocketing toward a win in Game Seven.

The goal might be my favorite of the season. It’s symbolic. It’s his seventh goal in the series. In Game Seven. And there’s a good chance it’s what the Phantoms need to win the Stanley Cup.

I spend the next three minutes on my feet, zeroed in on every pass, every block, my heart in my throat. When the buzzer sounds, signaling the end of the game, the cheering in the arena is deafening.

Michael throws his arms into the air, his stick landing on the ice.

Tears stream down my face, my skin warm and buzzing. Accomplishing my lifelong dream was incredible, but seeing the guy I've loved since I was ten achieve his dreams is possibly even more exciting.

I need to get down there. I cannot wait to join him on the ice and congratulate him properly.

I want to be there for him, because by his side is where I belong.

"ISLA," Michael calls my name the moment I step onto the ice, our parents in tow.

The ice is covered in confetti, and families and friends are gathered around the players. Yet, my husband is all I can focus on.

I jump in his arms, and he catches me with ease. Arms wrapped around his neck, I pepper his face with light kisses. Cameras flash nearby, but I don't care. Let the media make a spectacle of us. I'm usually more of a 'happiness loves silence' person, but tonight, I want to scream from the rooftops and tell the world how proud I am of Michael.

"You were absolutely unreal," I tell him as I rear back.

Eyes glimmering, he tightens his hold on me. "Did you enjoy the game?"

"One hundred percent." As I'm nodding, I catch sight of our parents a few feet away. "Though I'm afraid our dads have plans to organize a wedding, and they won't take no for an answer."

"If it means I'll finally be on your dad's good side, then I'm down for it." He grins. "Besides, I'd never say no to seeing you in a white dress."

I search his face for any trace of pretense, but I find none. Then, I press my forehead to his. "I love you, Michael. You're the best husband in the world."

"I love you too, and it's easy to be the best when my wife is so incredible." He kisses me on the lips. "An Olympic gold medalist and a Stanley Cup champion. We make quite the team, don't you think?"

I laugh. "We do."

He sets me on my feet but keeps me close. "When I was sixteen, I would've given anything for this."

"For the Stanley Cup?" I ask.

With a shake of his head, he bends so our eyes are level. “For you.”

My chest constricts, and a flood of emotions nearly knocks me over. The biggest of them is love, overwhelming and fulfilling. The one that makes me feel like everything is possible, even winning the Olympic gold and the Stanley Cup.

So, I put my hand on the back of his neck and pull him in for a kiss.

Because I can’t get enough of him.

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epilogue

ISLA

Twenty-four years old

"Hurry up, we're going to be late." I check the time on my phone and sigh. "Correction: we *are* late."

The door of the guest room opens, and Meg rushes out. Dressed in dark blue jeans and an oversized hoodie, pulling her hair up, she screeches to a stop in front of me. "We still have twenty minutes."

I wiggle my finger, motioning for her to turn around. She does, but only after she lets out an annoyed huff. I stand on my tiptoes and quickly braid her hair the way she likes it since she can't seem to do it on her own. Or maybe she just likes it when I do her hair. I always loved it when Mom or Elena would braid mine.

She pulls out her phone and checks the time, groaning. "I'm sorry, really. I was sure I had more time. I don't know how it got away from me." She faces me, her deep brown eyes, the same color as my husband's, pleading. "Don't be mad."

"I'm not mad." I turn on my heel and head to the front door. "Did you at least finish your essay?"

"Yes! Thank God."

"Then it's all good." I step out into the hall. "If we're lucky, Michael will be there on time. Otherwise, the landlord might think you're an

irresponsible tenant. Don’t let them think you won’t pay your rent on time, you know?”

The groan she lets out makes me smile. Michael is already on his way, so that part is covered, but this girl needs to be more responsible. She got kicked out of the dorms two months ago after she and her roommate were caught throwing parties—twice. The alcohol was the biggest issue, since neither is old enough to drink legally, and the administration didn’t play around. Meg took the blame, saying it was her fault, because her roommate is there on scholarship. She’s been living with us ever since.

We don’t mind having her at all. It’s actually fun to have her around, and her presence means I’m not lonely when Michael is on the road. But we know how important it is for college students to have independence. It wasn’t long ago that we were her age. So when Meg mentioned she was looking for her own place and wanted to ask her parents for permission, we supported her.

Though finding something near us suitable for an eighteen-year-old has been an adventure. Aunt Ava and Uncle Colton demanded she be close to us before they’d agree, and honestly, we want that too.

Meg follows me down the hallway to the elevator. “Your brother is so annoying sometimes,” she grouses behind me. “He thought he’d have more free time now that the season is over, but since they’re gearing up for spring ball, he’s busy with conditioning. When I talked to him earlier, he spent the whole time whining about how important studying finally is for him. Apparently, if he’s caught missing classes or falling behind, the coach will bench him.”

The elevator dings and the doors open. Once we’re inside, I peer at her, one brow raised. “And when did you talk to Ian?”

Her jaw drops as she pushes the button for the lobby. The way she looks everywhere but at me tells me my suspicions are right. I knew I heard her talking to someone in a hushed voice when I walked past her door.

“Fine.” She hangs her head. “He called, and I…I couldn’t not reply. I miss my best friend. I’m sure you understand how it is.”

The way she and my little brother always pull the best friend card with me and Michael is actually astonishing.

“I do, and you can tell my brother I said hi.” I narrow my eyes. “But please stop lying to me. I do not appreciate it, and neither does Michael.”

She lowers her gaze to her feet. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done it.”

The elevator stops, and while we wait for the door to open, I turn to face her. “You shouldn’t have. Michael and I are always on your side. Don’t forget that.”

God, sometimes, I feel like I’m her mom, and I don’t know how I feel about that.

“DID I sense some tension between you and Meg?” Michael asks as we walk down the street hand in hand.

After we toured the apartment, the three of us had lunch, and then Meg went back to our place, saying she still had homework to do. Whether that’s true or not, I couldn’t say, but I think it had more to do with her desire to keep her distance after our little talk in the elevator.

She’s been very secretive lately, about a lot of stuff. Despite her declaration she doesn’t want to play hockey because she’s focusing on her studies, I don’t think the change has been easy for her. She misses it a lot.

“Just a little. We’re fine.”

“Okay.” He lets go of my hand and drapes his arm over my shoulder, pulling me to his side. “She can be a handful.”

“Nothing we can’t handle.” I snuggle into him. “And I think working with kids has helped me understand her better.”

He lets out a booming laugh. “Babe, you’re working with four-year-olds. Meg is eighteen.”

“Almost nineteen.”

“Exactly, and you’re comparing her to your four-year-olds.”

“Fine. You’re right.” I giggle. “I think I understand her because just like Meg misses hockey, I miss figure skating. Even a year after the Olympics, it’s still bittersweet not doing the one thing I dedicated my life to for so long. In my case, helping Elena with her school and having you by my side helps a ton. Meg needs to find an outlet too.” I worry my bottom lip, considering ways I could help her.

Michael plants a kiss on the top of my head. “Talk to me. Tell me what’s going on in that pretty head of yours.”

“I know she wants to live on her own, but…what if she really needs us? Needs our company? I hate the idea of her being lonely.”

“She will always be welcome at our place, and we’ll find something close to us, I promise.” He stops, halting me in my tracks, and releases me.

I turn to him, and he circles his arms around my waist, head tipped back.

He gives me a soft smile. “The care you have for Meg means more than you know.”

“Of course. She’s like my little sister.” I smile at my husband, admiring how handsome he is. His hair is a bit shorter than he’s worn it for the last decade or so, and his cheeks are covered in stubble. He’s bulkier than he was even a year ago, thanks to his dedication to hockey. The man is hella hot, and he’s mine.

“Or like a daughter.” He wiggles his brows.

I swat him in the chest and step back. “Have you forgotten we’re only six years older than Ian and Meg?”

He yanks me back into him and hugs me tighter. “Of course not. That’s not what I meant.”

“What did you mean then?” Brow furrowed, I examine his face, looking for clues.

“I want kids,” he admits, his voice getting lower. “I want a little Isla, or a little Michael. It doesn’t really matter. I just want kids with you.”

My heart leaps and my breath stutters. I never would’ve imagined having this conversation on a sidewalk on the Upper West Side, but it feels kind of fitting for us.

“I want kids too,” I whisper.

Eyes glimmering, he presses his forehead against mine. “You just made me the happiest guy in the world.” When his lips are an inch from mine, he says, “I can’t wait to start trying. Filling you up until you’re pregnant will be my favorite pastime, I’m sure.”

“You’re impossible, Pretty Boy,” I tell him. “You’re—”

He shuts me up with a kiss, holding me hard against his chest, and honestly? I’m not mad about it at all.

I can’t wait to start trying too.

MICHAEL

Twenty-five years old

Sitting on the roof outside the window of my childhood bedroom is nostalgic, but my companion today isn't the one I'm used to.

"When my agent called two weeks ago, I thought he was joking. I had a fucking amazing season. In my mind, there was no way the Vipers would want to get rid of me." Asher lifts the beer bottle to his lips, but instead of taking a sip, he lowers it and focuses on me. "Three guys for a rookie."

"Green was the first draft pick." I bring my own beer to my lips.

He roughs a hand down his clean-shaven face. "You're not helping, Thompson."

"Sorry, sorry." I sigh and put the bottle down. "I know you loved playing for the Vipers. And I get it. You won the Stanley Cup with them. But it's hockey, man. We can be traded at any time. None of us are safe."

"I know." The words come out rough.

"You won the Cup with the Vipers, I won the Cup with the Phantoms, and now, since the two of us will be playing together, we can win the Cup as a team. Together. That's gotta mean something."

"I was wondering when you were gonna bring that up." He chuckles and shakes his head. "It's the only reason I didn't completely lose it when I found out. Though I always imagined it would be you joining me, not the other way around. Apparently, life had other plans." He lets out a long breath and rakes his fingers into his hair. "And now, I'm a Phantom. *Lovely*."

"So many exciting things are coming. We'll find you a place near ours." I put a hand on his shoulder. "Man, you're gonna love it."

"I already hate it." He groans. "It's like we've been the victims of a body swap or something. Because why the fuck am I so gloomy and you're so cheerful? It used to be the opposite."

"Things change. People change too."

Ash tips his head to his shoulder, assessing me in silence. Then, a smile curves his lips. "Or love really is magic. It really can turn even the grumpiest of grumps like you into sunshiny golden retrievers."

Head thrown back, I laugh. "I'm not going to argue with you about the love part, but I'm not a fucking golden retriever."

"You definitely aren't," Isla says, appearing on the other side of the window. "Hi, Ash."

“Sweet Isla,” he murmurs. “I was wondering where you were.”

I get to my feet and hold out my hand to my wife. She takes it, letting me pull her onto the roof.

“I was with my parents,” she tells him, her eyes locked on mine. “Hey.”

I angle closer and press a quick kiss to her lips. “I missed you.”

A silvery laugh springs out of her mouth as I guide her to the blanket spread out on the roof. “I’ve been gone for three hours.”

“Entirely too long.”

I sit down first, and then she lowers herself, settling between my legs the way we’ve always done. Arms wrapped around her waist, I pull her in until her back is against my chest.

“Ugh, guys, you’re going to make me all sappy if you keep acting so lovey-dovey.” Ash may act like he’s annoyed, but the trembling corners of his mouth give him away.

“It’s actually contagious,” Isla tells him. “Who knows—now that you’re coming to New York, you might find yourself a girlfriend.”

“You’re too sweet, Isla. I haven’t had a girlfriend since high school. Long-term commitment isn’t for me. Yeah, I love going out with girls, and I love sex, but that’s about it. I’ve never met a woman who could change my mind.”

“Not yet, you haven’t,” Isla says. “But one day, I guarantee, you will meet a girl like that.”

“Don’t jinx it,” he grumbles, pushing to his feet. Looming above us, he stretches, rolling his shoulders back.

“Where are you going?” I ask as he stalks to the window.

“I got my dose of sweetness, and now, I need a break.” He climbs back into my room. “I need a break from you two, if I wasn’t clear.”

“We got it.” Isla lets out a laugh. “See you later, Ash.”

Without a word, he disappears, and a second later, the door to the room closes with a soft thump.

“He’s more bummed about the trade than I thought,” I sigh, my shoulders drooping. “I hoped he’d be excited to play together again.”

“Give him time,” she murmurs as I tighten my grip on her. “His life has been turned totally upside down. I’m sure if the situation were reversed, you’d feel the same way.”

“Nah. I could be traded to literally any team, and as long as you were with me, I’d be fine.”

“And now we’re circling back to what I said—he hasn’t met the one yet. Maybe New York will be the place where everything changes for him.”

“Hopefully. I don’t like seeing him so out of his element.” I rest my mouth at her ear. “How are your parents?”

“Waiting for us to come to dinner. My uncles are here, and so is my cousin. They can’t wait to finally meet you in person.”

“We met.”

“Yeah, when we were ten.” She snorts. “You’ve changed a little since then, don’t you think?”

“Fine, fine, you have a point.” I kiss the top of her head, burying my nose in her hair. She still smells like peaches and vanilla, the scent I love more than almost anything in this world. “Though if they’d come to our wedding, they would’ve met me then.”

“My Uncle Tom’s appendix had other plans.”

“Touché.” I laugh. “Why do I even bother arguing with you? You always beat me.”

“Babe, I work with kids. I know all the tricks.”

“Coaching kids is definitely your forte. I’m not even a little surprised Elena says everyone requests to work with you.”

My heart squeezes lightly, and I instinctively stiffen. We’ve been trying for a baby for over a year, but we haven’t been successful yet. Sometimes, talking about the kids she coaches is fun, but sometimes, her mood plummets, and the last thing I want is to make her sad.

“Michael?”

“Yeah?” I ask hoarsely, trying to tamp down the pain in my chest.

“There’s something I need to tell you.”

My stomach hardens, and anxiety floods me. Gently, I help her turn around so she’s facing me.

Her deep blue eyes shine brightly, the sunlight bringing out the specks of green in her irises.

“I’m pregnant,” she whispers.

My lungs seize up. “What?” I cough out.

She smiles, her eyes filling with tears. “I’m pregnant. I took a test two days ago.” She ducks. “Okay, I took several tests. But they were all positive. I have an appointment next week to confirm.”

Heat pricks at the backs of my eyes. “Can I…can I go with you?”

“I’d love that. I don’t want to do it without you.”

I haul her to my chest and hold her close. “I’m so happy… I’m hyperventilating, dammit.”

“Michael.” She drapes her arms over my shoulders. “I really, really hope it’s true. I want it to happen so badly.”

“Me too.”

Gingerly, I lower her onto her back. Hovering over her, I drink in every detail. Eyes wide, she looks at me with so much hope, it sends my heartbeat racing. It’s like we’re fifteen again, sneaking away from our parents so we can talk.

I wanted to kiss her that day. I wanted it more than anything. And for a long time, I lived with the regret of not doing it. Of not kissing my best friend.

I don’t have regrets anymore.

Every dream I have and every plan I make involve this woman.

Because *with* her, I can handle anything.

And *for her*, I’ll do it all.

She’s my best friend.

She’s the love of my life.

She’s my wife, the only woman for me. The person I want to continue building a life with.

“You love me,” I whisper, my mouth an inch from hers. “True or not true?”

She smiles. “True.”

I kiss her, letting the world around us fall away.

We missed some of our firsts. Because we were young and stupid. Because of miscommunication, because we let people come between us, and because of our careers and ambitions. But firsts eventually fade into memories.

It’s the *lasts* that matter.

Isla was my first love.

And she’s my last.

She’s my forever.

And I don’t want it any other way.

The End

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afterword

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acknowledgments

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about the author

Anastasija is an indie author who spends her days creating swoon-worthy and steamy stories that will make your heart race. Her writing is filled with flawed and relatable characters that you'll find yourself rooting for. Whether you're in the mood for angsty drama or steamy romance, her stories take you on a rollercoaster ride of emotions with guaranteed happy endings.

When she’s not writing, she loves to lose herself in reading books, rewatching her favorite tv-shows and spending time with her son. She loves traveling and exploring the world, and then including places she visited in her novels.

If you’re a fan of romance that leaves you breathless and begging for more, Anastasija is the author for you. Connect with her on Instagram and TikTok, where she loves to hear from her readers and share sneak peeks of her books and upcoming projects.

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