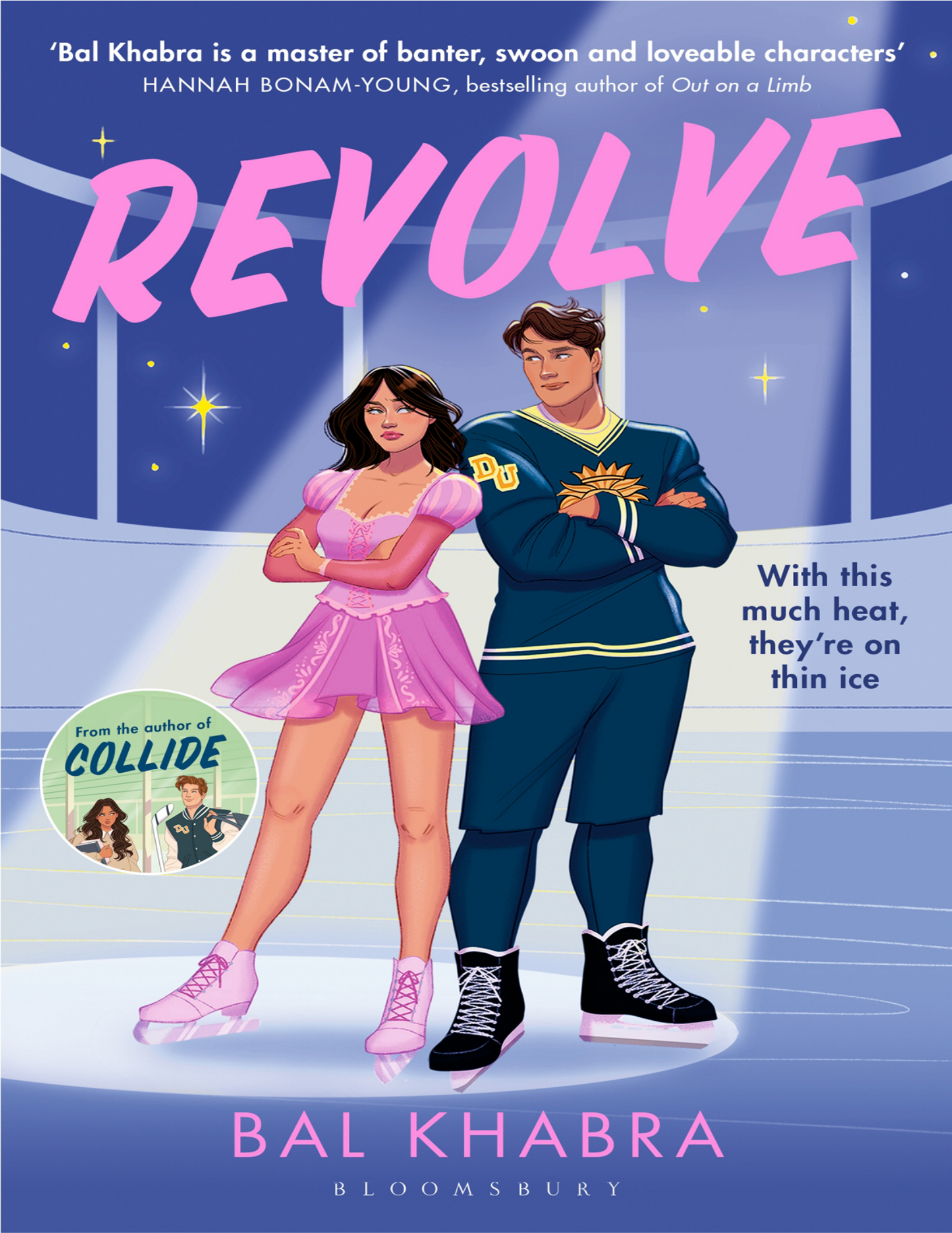
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NOTHING'S GONNA HURT YOU BABY | Cigarettes After Sex
THE SPINS | Mac Miller and Empire of the Sun
COMING DOWN | The Weeknd
SOMETHING THAT I WANT | Grace Potter
IMPERFECT FOR YOU | Ariana Grande
BLOOM | The Paper Kites

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ONE

DYLAN

"YOU FAILED YOUR drug test."

Fuck.

With my phone pressed to my ear, I drop my head against the steering wheel, feeling the cold leather imprint on my forehead as I fight the urge to bang it until I forget everything that's gone wrong since I set foot on campus yesterday.

Dalton University is officially back in session. Well, classes may begin in a few days, but hockey has definitely started. Unlike coaches at other schools, Coach Kilner insists on getting all the introductions out of the way early, determined not to waste any precious practice time. I imagine he wakes each morning in a cold sweat, obsessively checking if he still holds the record for the most consecutive Frozen Four wins.

So, hearing those life-altering words over the phone at six in the morning from Vik Chopra, a junior studying premed, jolts me enough to make my hangover fade. A hangover I shouldn't have in the first place.

Vik, who volunteers at Dalton University Hospital, is the first to know all things health-related in college sports. He was one of the pledges for Kappa Sigma Zeta last year, and I helped get him into our fraternity. So, this call is an IOU if I've ever seen one.

The party from a week ago right before our preseason drug tests was sweaty bodies, booze, and clouds of marijuana smoke. The typical college party—though the ragers I've thrown have been much wilder—but I remember nothing except two girls, a brunette and pink-haired one, who really wanted me to see their bedroom. It was great, I mean it always is if I'm involved, and we didn't get any sleep that night. It's why I woke up in

the middle of the afternoon, with the sun in my face and rope marks on my wrist.

My memory dips in and out, but I think it's better if I don't recall exactly how wasted I got, and if I indulged in way more than just whiskey and beer. Clearly, I fucking did.

What I do remember—*vividly*—is the conversation I had with my parents right before I left the house. I hung up on them mid-conversation, and that's when Tyler Sampson, our alternate captain, texted me about the party. If I hadn't been so irritated by the call, I would have had some fucking sense to turn down his invite. My first sign that this fall semester was off to a rough start should have been the fact that I willingly went to a *Yale* party.

"Is there anything you can do?" I ask.

In other words: *Bury it*.

It's a lot to ask of Vik, considering he's here on scholarship and is our frat's philanthropy chair. The guy organizes fundraisers and supervises frat parties from the good of his heart. He's the kind of guy you leave your drink with, and I'm the kind of guy that will drink your drink. He's a damn saint. His sister, on the other hand … well, let's just say she's the reason I'm in the parking lot of the Iona House dormitory at six in the morning. But I don't tell him that.

"You know I'd do anything for you, D," Vik says with a heavy sigh. "But even an inconclusive test would raise flags. Either way, the sports director and your coach would get an email about it." A series of keyboard clicks sounds. "I can keep your results private for now and see what I can do."

"Appreciate it, man. Text me with any updates." I drop my phone into the center console of my car. If this gets out, I'm screwed. Getting drafted to New York last month won't have meant shit since I haven't signed a contract. Nothing like a failed drug test to throttle you back to reality.

The sun is still rising when I pull away from Iona House. Last night, Mehar, Vik's sister who's on the diving team, invited me to her team's preseason party. She told me I reminded her of Nicolas Vasquez, a soccer player she's obsessed with. I didn't mind one bit when she asked me to come back to her dorm. Though, as it turned out, it wasn't Nicolas's name on her lips when her hands roamed over my body and her legs wrapped around my waist.

When I step inside the hockey house—my off-campus refuge because I refuse to stay at the frat house—I find Kian face down on the living room

floor. He’s got a textbook open on the coffee table and a bowl of soggy Shredded Wheat.

Kian Ishida and I have been friends since second grade. Back when I still thought he was the quiet new kid, fresh off a move from Japan to Connecticut to live with his aunt. Since then, we’ve gotten detention more times than I can count, and barely made it into Dalton.

Yesterday, we promised this was our last party and we wouldn’t fuck around this semester. Our last semester was brutal because Coach Kilner tortured us all season when Yale trashed our campus after we invited them to a party. So, even though Kian was belting out karaoke classics on the countertops of a party last night, he still dragged his hungover ass out of bed this morning to catch up on his reading for the upcoming semester.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“I’m having floor time.” His words are muffled into the Persian rug.

“That rug is filthy.” It was here *before* we moved into the house, and the parties we’ve had since then did not help whatever is living in that thing.

“So am I,” he responds. Then suddenly he jerks upright, fumbling to grab his phone. “Did I miss my study group?” He sighs loudly when he realizes it’s still early.

In the kitchen, I rummage through the fridge, already knowing it’s a graveyard of questionable leftovers. Half-finished bottles of condiments, milk, a stale loaf of bread, and some orange juice.

Kian walks into the kitchen. “Why are you up so early? Practice isn’t until this afternoon. But Sebastian and Cole are already at the rink; they’re not taking any chances to piss off Kilner.”

That explains why our other two housemates and newly turned seniors are nowhere to be found. It’s the first semester back where the house feels empty since Aiden Crawford, our previous captain, and Eli Westbrook, our defender, went off to the big show. If Kian and I hadn’t spent the last four years slacking off, expecting to get drafted early, we’d be with them. Instead, we’re stuck finishing this last semester because we delayed free agency just in case the draft didn’t go our way. Luckily, it did, but we’re still here completing our degrees before we’re called up next year.

“I just got home.” I drain a half-empty carton of orange juice. I’d be an idiot to give Kian an inkling that I might have just blown up my entire life and the team. The guy gets a little obsessive over fixing things for people, and that’s the last thing I need right now.

“Were you with Crystal? You two were pretty close last night.”

I don’t recall a single thing aside from waking up with someone who most definitely wasn’t named Crystal. Though, I am getting vivid flashes of Kian ripping off his shirt because it lit on fire, and then everyone jumping into the pool. That explains why I’m wearing a T-shirt that isn’t mine. I probably jumped in the pool too.

“You good?” he asks when I don’t answer.

He’s watching me like a hawk, waiting for me to say something that would explain the reason I came home so early. After Vik’s text that said to call him, I slipped out of Iona and into my car.

“Why wouldn’t I be?”

“Just checking.” He shrugs. “By the way, this came for you.” Kian hands me a white envelope, and the moment I see the pretentious Donovan family crest, I nearly crush it in my fist.

“Thanks,” I mutter.

“Looks super fancy. What is it?”

My jaw tightens as I think of the video call last week with both my parents smiling wide—my mom’s weak one and my dad’s plastic one—pressed together so tight on the screen like they were trying to fool themselves. They’d gone on about starting over, about making the family what it used to be, like nothing had happened. I hung up before they could finish.

How could my mom just sit there and forget all the sleepless nights, the days she wouldn’t eat, how I had to feed her and my little sister, Ada, on the days she couldn’t even look at her?

“Not important.” I head to my room before he asks a million more questions. I toss the envelope on my desk, and it lands behind the picture frame of Ada and me at our last pairs skating competition. We used to love that time together, until we realized our mom was the only one showing up to those competitions.

I head straight for the shower, eager to shed last night’s beer-stained and marijuana-scented clothes. My room isn’t anything special, but my shower is my sanctuary. When Aiden’s grandparents bought him this house freshman year, he didn’t hesitate to offer us all a place to stay, completely rent-free, even though I insisted on paying rent countless times. I’m grateful, especially since, technically, I’m an active member of Kappa Sigma Zeta.

It wasn’t my plan to get so hammered during rush week that I accidentally pledged and got accepted on the spot. Kian, on the other hand, tried to pledge, but didn’t get in. I didn’t hear the end of that for weeks.

As I duck under the shower, the water soaks my hair, and the soap suds slide down my body. The pounding in my head from Vik’s news, my parents’ invitation, and last night’s reckless drinking dissolves with each swirl of water down the drain. This is the one place I can breathe and pretend like I have my shit together; no one’s ever been in here with me, and that’s how I like it.

By the time I’m dressed, Kian’s knocking. “Practice got moved up!” he yells. “I’ll be in the car.”

THE SHARP SOUND of Coach’s whistle spears through my hangover. “Did that look like a Division I team to any of you? For fuck’s sake, the peewees played better than you today.”

“To be fair, the peewees are pretty damn good,” I say.

“You gotta cut us some slack, Coach. We just came back from summer break. You know how it is.” Kian winks and skates to Kilner to give his stomach a playful punch.

Coach might be slower on his feet these days, but he’d easily take any of us in a one-on-one game. He ignores the poke and thankfully doesn’t break our right-winger’s hand.

“You’ve got your work cut out for you, so next practice I want you to come in like you weren’t fucking around all summer. Your new captain will make sure of that, right, Dylan?”

Huh? “Don’t you mean Sampson?”

Tyler Sampson, our alternate captain now that Aiden’s gone, shakes his head. Despite spending nearly every day this summer with Sampson, our conversations rarely ventured beyond drunken exploits. It was simple. We got shit-faced, then did it all over again.

“I’m stepping down as captain,” he says, and everyone goes still. “With pre-law I don’t have much time, so I can’t be the captain this team needs. And our vote makes you captain.”

Vote? When the fuck did we vote?

“If you missed the vote, you forfeited your right to a democracy,” Coach says.

Kian skates backward, bumping into me. “Remember Aiden’s birthday party the other semester? You weren’t at practice the next day, and that’s when we had the vote.”

The reminder of that night tightens my gut. It was in February, when my mom called me crying about my dad. How he was never home, and how she was done with all of it.

I turn to see the guys staring at me like this is normal, and then it hits me that most of these idiots are in frats. In my attempt to be more involved with the team and my frat, I took a few of them under my wing. They practiced with me on my solo sessions, but I hadn’t meant for *this*. I’ve become their fucking messiah.

“Welcome your new captain, Dylan Donovan.”

The hoots and hollers echo across the rink, and I haven’t even processed this shit. *Captain?* Fuck no.

“Coach, you can’t be serious.”

“I don’t control the vote. It’s what your teammates wanted. And considering you’ll be off to New York next year, you’ll want to learn some leadership and discipline for once.”

Yeah, definitely going to be sick. His words are a pin to an already deflated balloon.

“Don’t I get a choice?”

“It’s time to step up, Donovan. No more messing around.”

I have to tell him about the drug test. I have to say *something*, but a part of me holds out hope that Vik will come through, and I’ll be clear of this mess.

“New lines will be posted by next practice. You’re dismissed,” Kilner finishes.

In the locker room, the guys chant, “Double D!” until I’m ready to lose it. I strip off my gear, my frustration bubbling over as I stare at my jersey. Once upon a time, I could see a *C* stitched on it. But that dream faded the moment I was labeled as *reckless* and *impulsively physical* by every commentator and referee.

Kian approaches me with a sheepish smile. “I voted for you as a joke.”

“Yeah, well, your fucking joke is my reality.”

He sinks onto the bench beside my locker. “It’s one semester. It can’t be that bad.”

When I can’t take it, I head to Kilner’s office, brushing past the guys who congratulate me on their way out. But just as I’m about to burst through the door, I pause.

Kilner’s disappointed face is worse than anything else I’ve endured. And I can’t tell him why this captain thing is a bad idea. Not until I can get a handle on this drug test thing.

I step back from his door just as Kian bumps into my shoulder, pulling me back to reality, where no one knows how much I’ve fucked up. Not yet.

Kian glances up from his phone. “I know we’re on our best behavior,” he whispers, “but Beta Phi is throwing a party tonight.”

I shouldn’t, not with everything on the line, but fuck it, that’s a problem for tomorrow.

“I’m in,” I say.

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TWO

SIERRA

MY HEAD HITS the ice, and I hear the crack of my skull before my vision darkens.

My mom's panicked scream pierces through the chaos, her voice blending with a cacophony of noise surrounding me. My skates feel like they're made of lead as I lie motionless on the ice, my entire body numb. The world blips in and out. I hear the relentless high-pitched wail of an ambulance.

"*Sierra*." I'm jerked out of the darkness of my nightmare, like I broke through the surface of a frozen pond. My breaths come in wheezy, shallow bursts, trapped under the weight of the red-splattered memories.

"Sierra." The familiar lilt of a voice pulls me back, followed by a cool touch on my neck, pushing me into a sitting position. "You're okay, it's over now. You're safe."

You're safe.

Those words echo, muffled by the ringing in my ears that's louder than the sirens that were just there. I pry my eyes open, sit up in bed, and find my desk lamp casting a soft yellow glow in my room.

Scarlett sits beside me, cherry-red hair pulled into two loose braids as she presses an ice pack to the back of my neck. The dampness sends an icy drop of water down my spine and draws me out of my head. I hug my knees to my chest, my comforter rising with the movement until I rest my head on my knees.

"Sorry," I whisper, trying to focus on my breathing.

Breathing. It's something so automatic, yet I need a reminder to do it. It's pathetic.

I've woken up like this every night since we moved to campus three days ago. I usually snap out of it alone, but tonight Scarlett probably heard me through the crappy dorm walls.

She hands me a glass of water, and with a shaky hand, I take it and gulp it down. It travels through me like a cold shock, loosening my rigid posture.

Her charm bracelet jingles as she rubs my back. "Stressed for today?"

Hartford, Connecticut, is home to Dalton University, and I've lived in this town my whole life. My first skate was in the university's arena. And when Dalton's figure skating program became eligible with the International Skating Union, I knew I'd attend.

Today is my first official day back on the ice since the accident. After six weeks at Hartford General last year, it feels like a lifetime ago, and it is in the skating world. Crash mats, the gym, Pilates, ballet, swimming—you name it, I've been doing it. A part of me knows that all the preparation for returning to the ice is a distraction, but I can't run anymore. Before the rink became cruel and unforgiving, it was home, and I've been away for too long.

"Probably just my body preparing me to get yelled at by Lidia for two hours," I say.

"If anyone can do it, it's you, Si. But I'd hate for you to put that much pressure on your body after everything. You should have some fun too. This can't be good for your recovery."

"It's been over a year. I'm recovered."

Scarlett raises her brows, and I fall back onto my bed. My knitting needles, which I stuck into a ball of yellow yarn earlier, roll by my feet.

"Seriously, I feel great. I just want to go back to how things were." When I could do what I wanted without my brain stopping me. When I wasn't scared.

"Good, because the girls across the hall asked if we wanted to carpool to the party."

I almost groan. There's the notorious welcome week party at Beta Phi sorority. Scarlett's ex-sorority. My best friend is the last person you'd expect to join the Dalton Panhellenic community with her tattoos and bright-colored hair, but she made a damn good sister. I know that because when she withdrew, her sisters sent me messages begging me to get her to rejoin.

Scarlett took some online classes that semester, sitting with me while I mindlessly watched The Weather Channel in the hospital room. Some days, I'd beg her to leave, to stop letting me drag her down, but she never listened. Not even when I said things to her out of anger that I regret to this day. Scarlett never left me. She was there, parked outside each therapy session. It was on those drives home that we talked about returning to campus and living in a dorm together for our senior year. So far, that means water-stained ceilings and contracting athlete's foot in the communal showers.

"It's a neon party and they always have great drinks," she says, really selling it now.

"Only if I get to borrow your white skirt," I concede.

She lights up instantly, and it's contagious. It's the first time she's looked at me with real excitement since the gloomy overcoat that blanketed last year. I have to do this for her.

"Of course, but for the record, you could wear that sweats and old T-shirt combo and still look hot." She clicks off the lamp but pauses at the door to wink.

I laugh, but it does nothing to temper the sliver of anxiety that crawls up my throat.

"THIS RINK IS your bitch," I tell myself, staring into my car's rearview mirror.

My breathing exercise doesn't loosen my white-knuckle grip on the steering wheel. I've been in my car for thirty minutes, watching the hockey team exit the arena like a creep. The music playing in my car fuels my momentum, and before I can change my mind, I sling my gym bag over my shoulder and hop out.

In and out, Sierra. Dark nostalgia coats me like tar at the sight of the arena. I swallow around the thick lump in my throat, taking a hesitant step forward, then retreating two steps back. If someone were watching, they'd think I've lost my mind. Sometimes it feels like I have.

My feet stay rooted as I try to fight the flood of memories pulling me back to last year. But the effort is useless; they always claw their way back.

Then the doors screech open. The guy who steps out is so large he crowds the whole entrance. He seems like he's lost in his own world, but

when he spots me, he holds the door open. He's big, broad-shouldered, probably a hockey player, judging from his massive gear bag. His brown wavy hair is disheveled like he's run his hands through it a hundred times. He's the type of NCAA hockey player you'd see all over social media, with countless fan accounts and a shiny NHL contract cushioning him.

Nerves aside, I waited in my car to avoid this exact interaction, but it's a blessing because now I have to go inside. After a few whispered affirmations, I realize he's still watching me, brown eyes tracing my lips. He looks at me like I'm casting spells.

"Are you going inside?" he asks in a deep, rumbly voice. He holds the door wider as if I'm having issues hearing. The sight of the blue hallway makes my heart pound like a ticking time bomb, threatening to curl me into the fetal position. God, that would be embarrassing.

"If I let go, the door's going to lock," he says, softer now.

I blink.

"I don't bite, if that's what you're worried about." His lips slant into a lazy smirk. "*Promise*."

He says it like he wants me to find out whether that's true. The old Sierra would've had a snarky retort for the cocky hockey player, but I haven't been her for a long time. I slide past him and step inside the rink.

"Have fun," he remarks casually, leaving his words to linger like an echo.

I head to the locker room, lace up my skates, and lean against the locker, murmuring affirmations. It's not long before I start drifting.

The blood-soaked memories hold me hostage again. My mom's tear-streaked face and her desperate calls for me over and over—

"Devushka."

I jolt awake, and my head bangs against the locker. The rush of cold air and the smell of chlorine surround me all at once, and I look up to find Coach Lidia Orlov. Dark brown hair, arched brows, and lips pressed into a thin line of worry.

Crap. It's happening again. After this morning, I tried all my calming techniques. Breathing, counting, EFT tapping, and knitting. But the latter's overkill now that I've knit enough scarves to keep a small family warm.

"If this is too much for today, we can try again next week," Lidia says.

Her pity is a sharp knife to my gut. It's that same damn look everyone's been giving me since the accident. Like I've become some fragile thing. Too *weak* to be what I once was. Apparently, you can't crack your head

open on the ice and fall on your partner's skate to suffer a collapsed lung without people treating you differently.

"I'm ready. I just didn't get much sleep last night." Or any night, but I don't tell her that. I can't have another person give up on me.

"How's this?" Lidia taps her forehead, still scrutinizing me.

My brain? Oh, just a complete fucking mess. "Sharper than a computer," I say instead. If that computer was dropped and smashed into tiny bits. Then scattered across Connecticut waiting for me to find them and piece it back together.

With that, I slap on my skate guards and fling myself off the bench, tugging at my tights and feeling the familiar weight of my anklet. I don't know why I still wear it, because my ex-partner got it for me. But it's a good luck charm, and the one time I forgot it on his hotel bedside table, it was the day I fell. Go figure.

The ice should fear you. My aggressive outlook on today's skating session is thanks to propranolol. That pink pill I swallowed this morning is the only reason my legs haven't buckled. My chest is barely in a vise, and I haven't spiraled. I won't. Not today.

I even called the campus sport clinic pharmacy to get a refill since mine is on an as-needed basis. And clearly, it's needed. But as much as I need the pill, I can't stop seeing it as a crutch. Something the old me never would have taken.

"Just do what you're comfortable with," Lidia says once I'm on the ice. The woman is known to be as cold as a Russian winter, but now she's *babying* me. *The ice won't bite, Sierra.* Lidia's old voice is still loud in my head. *With this pace, the Zamboni will run you over.*

My first lap is confident, or at least I pretend it is. But the moment I attempt a toe loop, everything crumbles. My landing is shaky and novice, nothing like a former Olympian's. My next jump barely gets any air, a shitty attempt that tightens that knot in my stomach and makes the back of my eyelids sting. *Don't cry.*

An hour or so slips by in a haze of amateur footwork and personifying Bambi on ice all while I force myself not to let the frustrated tears fall. My first practice back, and all the promises I've made to Lidia have already begun to rip at the seams.

To my surprise, she doesn't look angry. Not even a little. "It's a good start. Nothing a few practices won't fix. Since your hiatus"—calling it that

sounds better than *near-death experience*, I suppose—"I've been working on some solo per—"

"I'm doing pairs." I've been doing pairs since I left singles at sixteen. Four years ago. I am not going back.

Lidia cocks her head. "I didn't know you had a new partner."

Yeah, so, the thing about nearly career-ending freak accidents is that nobody wants to pair with you. After my ex-partner, Justin Petrov, dropped me like a hot potato—literally and figuratively—I've become damaged goods to the skating community.

When I switched to pairs, I chose Justin because he was good, and only associated with people who could cater to that. I've never changed myself for anyone, but for him I had.

"I don't," I say, and her face contorts. "But I've been looking!"

Though my online search has only yielded creepy men trying to lure me into their basements and skaters down to hook up but not partner with me. I knew skaters were superstitious, but I'm a damn curse now.

"Remember Champs Camp? So many of those skaters were interested in pairing with me. Can't you contact their coaches?" Champs Camp is for the top-ranked senior-level skaters in the country.

Lidia blinks rapidly. She only does that when she has bad news. "Sierra, finding a new partner this late is near impossible. We can't rely on a couple of skaters from six years ago. Dalton requires skaters to be registered well before their first performance to qualify for any USFS events."

"Trust me, I know. I've been looking on my own too, but I need your help," I plead. "I can't give up. Besides, we don't need someone permanent. If I can just score high enough to qualify for the Grand Prix, then we can find someone new for next year."

"The Grand Prix? How on earth do you expect to do that?" Her eyes widen. "You'd barely have time to train. The routines, the lifts, the chemistry. It takes months, sometimes years, to perfect. Your partner needs to have the same schedule to train. It's not just about you. It's about trust and understanding each other's movements. Building that kind of partnership in such a short time is already difficult."

"I've thought about this for months, Lidia. In the hospital, during PT, EMDR therapy, at the gym. I wouldn't even be here if it weren't for this dream." My therapist, Dr. Toor, said the best way to overcome this hurdle is to jump over it. I'm determined to do that.

“This won’t be like your past training. Are you sure you’re ready for this?”

“I have to be,” I say, my voice cracking. “I need to prove that I can still do this. *Please*, Lidia.” I sound desperate, but it gets her to nod. A ribbon of victory unfurls in my chest. I’ll do it this time; I’ll finally be enough.

“Anyone else and I wouldn’t even consider this.” She shakes her head when I beam. “And you can’t be picky—”

“I won’t. Promise!” I rush out. “You won’t regret it.”

“I know,” she says. “Now do that routine again. This time with power.”

The tiny victory must have put a pep in my step, because this time the ice feels a smidge less daunting. My moves are still shit, and my heart still hammers like it’s going to give out, but the possibility of getting to that final and showing everyone I’m not a curse dangles in front of me like a carrot on a string.

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THREE

DYLAN

THE MOMENT WE cross the threshold into Beta Phi, we're squirted with toy guns filled with paint. The black lights inside the house make the colors glow against my white shirt and stain my jeans. I toss an irritated look at Kian, who forgot to mention this was a neon party. To no one's surprise, Kian pulls his T-shirt over his head and motions for the girls to cover him with more paint. His tattoos are on full display, and he's loving the attention they get him. He's glowing in hot pink and green by the time they're finished, and when they come to me, I have no choice but to take my shirt off too. The splatter of paint is instant.

The girls are dressed in tiny white skirts and tops, their exposed skin stroked with paint. I vaguely recognize one of them from a party where we found ourselves in a bathroom, and now she paints my hands and places them right on her chest. My two large handprints stamp her bikini top, and she plants her hands on the back of my jeans.

In the kitchen, there's a line of Jell-O shots, also glowing. A heat of recklessness follows me like a swarm of bees. And I know why it's there tonight, and it's not only because of the captaincy news or the drug test; it's because I opened the envelope from my parents.

Turns out, it was an invitation to their vow renewal in a few months, which means it's been planned for a while. My dad knew I would have talked my mom out of it. I would have had a chance to question her and remove whatever veil he's put over her eyes again. So the same people who I was sure were finally getting divorced a few months ago are getting married. Again. Fucking unbelievable.

Someone yells, "*Shotgun!*" and hands me a drink, but the instinct to pierce, crack, and chug doesn't kick in, because I spot Vik Chopra across the room. When our eyes meet, he gives me a look that twists something in my gut.

"I'll be back," I tell Kian, who's barely paying attention because he's trading friendship bracelets with the Beta Phi girls.

"Any news?" I whisper, pulling Vik back into the dark of the party. Neon green hearts are painted on his cheeks, and he's got a pink glow stick around his neck.

He shakes his head. "No luck, man. That shit's secure. I was hoping you'd be here so I could warn you."

His words act as a poison to my stomach.

"The results are going out tomorrow. I'm sorry, D."

The physical weight of my life falling apart comes down on me. "Don't worry about it. I appreciate you for trying."

Never in my life have I feared consequences. Why would I? When you're the guy everyone on campus wants to either be with or be like, the rules don't apply. People look the other way, make excuses, smooth things over for you. But I have a feeling this won't go away easily. Not without taking everything it can from me.

I need some fucking air.

Someone calls my name, but I don't turn. Instead, I move into the hallway. My tendency to disappear during parties is far from out of the ordinary. I often get pulled into a bedroom or a bathroom, only to reappear disheveled hours later. I take the stairs two at a time and yank open the first door. The pink bedroom has a *Twilight* tapestry hanging over the bed and a phallic-shaped lava lamp plugged into the wall. I'm about to close the door, when I hear my name.

"Dylan! Baby!" The girl who painted me barrels past the half-shut door. She pushes me up against a foreign wall, and her lips find my neck. It's the only spot she manages to reach in heels. "I was hoping you'd be here."

"Yeah?" I try to get *that* part of me to kick in. The one that can whisper dirty things, lift her with one arm, and pin her against the wall until she's begging. But I need out, and that's not what the Dylan she wants would say. I don't know if I'm willing to part with him just yet. "Let's get a drink."

"Or …" She pops open a pink tin with freshly rolled joints. "You liked it last time."

“Last time?”

She giggles. “Yeah, at Yale. You don’t remember?”

“Right,” I mutter. Clearly it all went downhill after I met her there. The open tin she waves in my face is the last thing I need right now. I pull her off and back away slowly.

I descend the steps, rushing through the house without a second of hesitation. When I’m finally in the hallway leading to the front door, Tyler Sampson stops me with a hand on my chest.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa. Where are you headed, Captain?” he says.

I knew that damn title would haunt me.

Sampson puts a beer in my hand. “Drink up, man. Some of the girls are doing body art.”

Any other night, I’d be all over that. Hell, *yesterday* I’d have been all over that, but tonight it feels like I’m being tortured by shit I can’t remember.

“I’m gonna head out,” I say, placing the beer on a table.

Sampson checks his watch. “It’s barely midnight. What’s up with you?”

Before I can give him a half-assed excuse, the front door opens, and it feels like everything stops. The music—Pink Floyd’s “In the Flesh?”—muffles in my ears, and my eagerness to leave dissipates momentarily.

Every head in my vicinity turns when she crosses the threshold into the party and the light above the door illuminates her. The guys from the basketball team who were playing Ping-Pong let the ball fall aimlessly to where it rolls across the hardwood to land by her white shoes.

Silky black hair, fair skin, and red lips make everything about her face stand out. Her white skirt hugs her curves, drawing my gaze to trail the smooth skin of her toned legs. When I look up, her emerald eyes pierce mine. Fucking smoke show.

That’s when I recognize her as the girl from outside the rink earlier today, the one whispering to herself as I held open the door. She seemed so … lost then. Now she’s all fucking fire.

I think I had said something to her, something about biting. She must be thinking the same thing, because her eyes flicker, until her red-haired friend pulls her into the next room.

Trouble.

The warning in my head is usually my sign to follow her right to where she disappeared, but tonight, I’m on my best behavior.

“Oh, come on. You are not leaving. I know that look,” says Sampson, blocking my exit.

Ignoring him, I walk away but not before I hear him shout, “*Booo!*” in my direction. I signal Kian that I’m leaving, because if I ditched him, I’d hear about it for days.

“Nooooo,” Kian whines. “Don’t leave. We’re going to play drunk Jenga.”

“You play. I’ll see you at home.” He hugs me then, his sticky abdomen rubbing against mine. If I was hammered, I wouldn’t give a shit, but right now I’m desperate for a shower.

Just when I think I can sneak out the back without bumping into anyone else, the stoner girl from upstairs stops me. Being known is all good and well until people can’t leave you alone. She blows smoke in my face, then places the joint between my lips. The warnings in my head are blaring, ones I’ve never bothered to listen to until right now.

It’s new and fucking annoying.

Without taking a puff, I slip it from my lips and hand it back to her. She watches me, surprised I didn’t indulge. Not even when I suddenly remember exactly who she is—blindfold, gag, and a whole lot of rope. Great, even the good memories are starting to sour.

I push past the people blocking the stairs of the porch and charge down, my eyes locked on the side gate. In my haste, I bump into someone, not slowing down as I rush by. The late August air is still warm, so my messily painted, shirtless state doesn’t bother me.

“Hey, asshole!” someone shouts behind me. I don’t turn to see which poor fucker is getting chewed out.

Is there a lock on the gate? Do I have to hop over the rotting fence to get this night over with? I’m halfway across the Solo cup–littered lawn, when a small hand grips my biceps and yanks me back.

“Hey! I’m talking to you.” The voice is slightly raspy, and much too confident for the weak attempt at stopping me.

I turn to see dark hair, green eyes, and red lips. *Trouble*. “Me?”

The girl glares at me with her hands planted on her hips, like she could take me. Like *she’s* the one who’s six foot four.

“You just knocked into my friend and spilled her drink all over her,” she accuses.

“Friend?” I make a show of looking around her. “Are you one of those people who have imaginary friends? Sorry, I’m not drunk enough to pretend

they’re real tonight.”

I’m enjoying this too much for someone who should be leaving this party. Green, angry eyes dart to the porch to find nothing but people drinking and a couple making out dangerously close to the firepit.

“Fine,” I sigh and look to the empty spot beside her. “Hello, my name is __”

She slaps my extended hand out of the way before I can introduce myself to her *friend*. “I’m not crazy. You bumped into my real-life friend back there.”

“As opposed to the fake one standing beside you? I think she’s thirsty; you should get her a drink.”

She deadpans, “I assume they don’t teach manners at frat school.”

I tilt my head. “If you wanted to talk to me, you didn’t need to make up an excuse. You’re hot enough.” *Enough* doesn’t even cut it, but *fuck* do I like the way the comment makes her eyes blaze.

Focus. I need to get out of here.

She scoffs. “I’m not here to *talk* to you. I could find at least ten of your kind inside.”

“My *kind*? You’re the one who ran across the lawn just to get my attention.”

“So you could apologize.” She tucks her hair behind her ear. “But clearly your ego’s too big for that.”

When she turns to leave, I can’t help myself. “I’m sorry.”

She nails me with a skeptical gaze, running from head to toe, lingering on my paint-covered abs and the waistband of my boxers that peeks out of my jeans. For some reason, the space between us feels impossible to resist, so I step closer until my shoes are touching the tips of hers. She smells sweet, like cherries.

“How can I make it up to her?” I ask.

She tilts her head. “You wanna make it up to her?”

“Dying to.”

She runs her tongue along the inside of her cheek. “I think she’d rather hold on to this.”

I furrow my brows. “Hold on to what?”

“You owe her now,” she says. “Can’t hurt to have an IOU from a jock. I think it’ll come in handy for me.”

“You?”

“*Her*,” she corrects.

“Right.” My smirk grows to immeasurable levels. I don’t even mind that she called me a jock. “Let me know when *she* wants to cash that in.”

“I will.” She stands firmly with her arms crossed.

“Shouldn’t I know your name? You’re in possession of a very powerful IOU after all,” I call after her when she’s already halfway across the lawn to the porch.

She doesn’t turn around, but she says, “If you’re lucky.”

“Don’t you want to know mine?”

She looks over her shoulder this time. “I think *asshole* fits.”

She disappears past the sliding glass doors. There’s a smile on my face when I finally get past the unlocked gate, but it drops the moment I spot my car boxed in the driveway.

Rookie mistake.

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FOUR

SIERRA

ONE THING'S FOR sure, I did not miss Dalton parties.

If I wanted drunk and horny college students bumping into me, I'd go to a frat party. Aren't sororities supposed to be primmer and more proper? Beta Phi hasn't received that memo, because marijuana smoke sponges the air, and the floors are sticky with alcohol. From the number of sweaty bodies in here, I'd say the entire Dalton population is present.

On top of that, I can't find my best friend. Scarlett insisted that this party would be a good idea after I'd flopped at the rink with Lidia and felt the shame burning through me. I was moping and knitting on our dorm couch while listening to the voice of The Weather Channel host, Dale Thunderman, until Scarlett threw her white skirt at me and told me to get ready.

For some deluded reason, I tried to fit in. Tiny skirt, equally small top, a red lip. It felt like a chance to rediscover myself after the sport I've loved my whole life chewed me up and spit me out. Sometimes I think I'm still lying unconscious and bloodied on that ice rink.

What I didn't expect tonight was for *that* side of me to come out. The confrontational, opinionated, *bitchy* side that I buried long ago. But the hockey player pulled it out of me like a loose thread.

It wasn't just the sight of his jeans slung low, white Calvin Klein waistband bold against his golden skin, or how the dim moonlight caught the sheen of sweat on his chest. It was the handprints—colorful, smudged, pressed like memories on his skin, as if everyone wanted to leave their mark on him. As if they already had.

But all those thoughts puffed away the second he opened his mouth. Or when he smirked and the tiniest dimple appeared. I've seen his type—the tall, popular kind of guy who's too good-looking not to know it and juggles hookups like an extracurricular. Scarlett's dad had warned us away from enough of them. But even as I'm consciously aware that that's the last guy I'd end up with, I couldn't help but feel my heart racing when his amber brown gaze slithered down my body.

"Si!" I turn to find Scarlett at the kitchen sink wearing a new top.

"Where'd you get laundry detergent and a new shirt?" It's a cropped tank top, revealing the intricate tattoos that cover her arms and lower back.

"I used to live here once upon a time, remember?" she says. "Where'd you go? I thought you were behind me when I came inside."

"Oh, um. I was …" Scarlett hates when I confront people on her behalf, but she's a textbook people pleaser, and I'd never let anyone walk all over her. In second grade when a boy stole her favorite pen and lied about it, I threatened to give him cooties until he fessed up.

"You went to yell at the guy who bumped into me, didn't you?"

"Maybe," I say, and she raises her brows. "Okay, yes. But he was rude, arrogant, and totally deserved it. Besides, we are now in possession of an IOU."

"Of course we are." Scarlett wrings out her top and stuffs it in her purse. When she takes my arm in hers and pulls me along, I feel the weight of gazes again. *They know who you are.*

The thing about falling at a world-renowned event? Your accident is on video, plastered on every social media and news outlet for anyone to see. **US FIGURE SKATER'S NEAR-FATAL FALL ON OLYMPIC STAGE FUCKS UP EVERYTHING.** Okay, that wasn't the headline, but it was the one running its own print shop in my mind. Tonight though, the stares are more perusing, but that's expected at these parties. You hook up and avoid attachments. I've never done that, but sometimes I wish I could.

A blond guy with his arm around a girl winks at me.

"I think that guy is trying to recruit you as their third," Scarlett whispers.

I recoil. "Lucky me."

Scarlett pulls a drink from a case underneath a table and hands one to me. A loud crash snaps my attention to where Jenga pieces scatter and a guy throws up his hands in drunken defeat. His upset doesn't last, because he leans over to whispers in a girl's ear. Her expression sharpens, and when

she saunters toward the stairs, his eyes lock hungrily on the curves of her body.

An unexpected wave of envy surfaces. Even though I've performed for most of my life, I could never be confident enough off the ice that someone would look at me like *that*.

Maybe it's because I've never cared about what boys thought. In high school, guys would approach me, but later Scarlett found out it was because they bet on who could bag the hottest girls in our grade. It was disgusting. So I skipped the teenage sex phase. I had my first kiss at nineteen and lost my virginity at twenty. Neither were memorable. I got it over with so no one could say I'd given up my whole life for skating, even though, deep down, I knew I had.

And maybe that's what's always made me feel different, like I didn't live up to the experiences everyone else seemed to treasure. Like I wasn't something desirable or wanted.

To this day when someone's gaze drifts down my body, I become almost desperate to know what they're thinking.

"Save me!" Scarlett grips my arm but is pulled into a game of beer pong. The loss is brutal. It's only ten minutes later that a buzzed Scarlett shuffles back to me. "That game sucks."

She shoves a cup in my hand. I drain the Solo cup before she pulls me to the makeshift dancefloor. When our favorite song plays, I stay with her and out of my head. And for a moment, I let loose. I don't even mind the drunk guy invading my space. But when his hand touches my waist and travels beneath my shirt, I jolt and quickly pull it back down.

The thing about a near-fatal injury? It leaves you with scars. I expected the one on my head from the depressed skull fracture, but I didn't expect the one on my abdomen. The collapsed lung, courtesy of the broken rib after I fell onto the exposed skate of my partner, Justin, left marks. When I took my first shower alone in the hospital, I caught my reflection in the mirror. A jagged red line carved into my abdomen from his skate, and the hole from the chest tube insertion. It hit me all at once what I had just been through. It was the first time I'd seen something so permanent, so far from my faded bruises, so *undesirable*. I crumpled on the bathroom floor with a sob, trembling and broken, until my mom came in and pulled me into her arms.

A soft hand pulls me back, and I turn to find Scarlett glaring at him. Even her glare is polite. I laugh, but when she spins me, all those feelings burst like a bubble.

Because my ex-partner, Justin Petrov, is dancing on the opposite side of the living room.

The Justin I knew didn't drink and would never be in the vicinity of marijuana smoke. He's adamant about keeping his body at peak performance, but now he dances freely with his new partner, Julia Romero. He never would have done that with me.

I've known Julia for years, not personally, but from the rink. She's talented, just never quite enough to win. When I took first, she'd land in second. She's always seen me as a rival, always trying to one-up me. It's like she's spent her career mirroring mine. When I left singles after years of misery, I figured she'd be happy. But apparently not, because now, with Justin, she has a real shot at winning in pairs.

My throat is clogged with memories of betrayal and a yearning for a part I miss so badly. Then, like shards of ice, his blue gaze catches mine, and I forget how to breathe.

"Hey, what's wrong—*oh*," Scarlett says. "Want me to throw my drink in his face?"

"Not before I throw my fist," I mutter, following her past the sweaty bodies.

"Sierra," he says when he catches up to us. "Scarlett. It's been a long time." I've seen this smile on his face before. It's the one he'd give our competition before he turned right around and talked shit about them. If we're talking about the toxic skating culture, Justin is full of it.

"Yeah? Whose fault is that?" Scarlett retorts, taking my arm to pull me along.

"Wait. Si, we should talk." Justin stops me with a tight grip on my shoulder, and I glare at his hand until he pulls it away like I've burned him. I wish I could.

"No, you shouldn't," says Scarlett.

"But—"

"I don't have anything to say to you." My words push him back, and I follow Scarlett. My throat is raw from swallowing the words I feel like I've been waiting to say to him for months.

In the kitchen, Scarlett starts mixing drinks. "You gonna be okay?"

The look she gives me makes me feel fragile, and I hate that she sees me that way. Even more, I hate that I feel it too. It's been over a year; I was prepared for this.

I was sixteen when Justin and I partnered. It was right after I won gold as a singles skater. Everyone around me—my parents, my coaches, Team USA—was ecstatic with that win, but the medal felt like a noose. I'd hit the pinnacle of my solo career, and it didn't make me enough. Instead, it felt like I'd come up against a concrete ceiling. That's when Justin swooped in, and I reawakened. I would be enough for him because I was never enough for myself.

"I'll be fine," I say, trying to smile, but I'm not sure it's convincing. Luckily, some girls from Iona House wave at us, and we're pulled into a conversation. The music is loud, but it doesn't drown out the flashbacks. Not when the cause of them is in the same room.

I can't handle the burn spreading in my chest. "Scar, I'm the worst and I'm sorry but—"

"Let's go," she interrupts. "The music sucks and the drinks aren't even good."

When I'm about to tell her she can stay and that I hate to ruin the one night she has time to go out, she doesn't let me. Scarlett requests an Uber, and we wait on the curb in silence. She never lets me apologize, doesn't let me pay for the Uber, and not once does she release my hand from her unshakable grip.

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FIVE

DYLAN

MORNING AFTERS ARE hell. They're even worse when I haven't drunk at all and the backs of my eyes still pulse with a headache. Why am I being punished? I've given too many people the best night of their life to be treated like this. I lift my head to see the morning sun stamp a window-shaped shadow on my closet doors.

My memories of last night are scattered, but one hits me hard. Maybe it was her piercing green eyes, the red lips, or the tiny skirt that showed off the kind of thighs I'd happily let her suffocate me with, but the girl wasn't what I expected. You spill a drink on someone at a party and you get a *fuck you* and a middle finger. *Not* an irritated figure skater who takes your IOU without even giving you her name.

I check the time on my phone. It's still earlier than I'd ever willingly wake up, but the warmth emanating from the other side of my bed kills the lingering haze.

What the fuck?

I rake my spotty memory for someone I might've brought home last night. *Is it her?* A fire flares in my stomach, but it dies quickly, because I remember after I found my car blocked in the driveway, I walked home. The rest of my lame night was spent watching anything other than hockey, and when I ordered a pizza, I vaguely remember asking the delivery guy if he wanted to watch a movie with me. He did.

Damn it, is it the pizza delivery guy?

My heart stills as I turn toward the body curled under the comforter. I cautiously lift one side, but when I catch sight of the idiot dead asleep beside me, I blow out a breath of relief.

“Why are you in my bed?” I rip the comforter off Kian, who’s still covered in paint. When he doesn’t stir, I push him hard enough that he rolls off the mattress to the floor with a heavy thud and a high-pitched scream.

He blinks at me from his place on the floor with disbelief, sprawling flat in defeat. At least he’s got boxers on, even if they are his Ken-themed ones.

“Good morning to you too,” Kian mutters. “Do you treat all your guests like this?”

“My *guests* are usually hotter than you and wake me up with a thank-you for the night before.”

He slaps a hand over his chest to feign offense. “I won’t whore myself out just because I needed a place to sleep last night.”

“Keep your whoring to yourself, Ishida,” I say. “What’s wrong with your room anyway?”

I imagine he’d have had to find someone having sex in there or something equally off-putting to deem my room an alternate safe space. We still have two free rooms in the house that belong to Aiden and Eli, but we haven’t bothered to give them to anyone else since the guys say they’ll visit. Or we’d like to believe they will.

I sit up against the headboard just as Kian sighs dramatically. “It was too far.”

He catches the pillow I throw at him and hugs it to his chest. He’s lucky I don’t have the energy for anything worse.

It’s hours later, and I’m tossing out the empty pizza box I left in the living room last night as Kian stumbles into the kitchen, rubbing the sleep from his eyes.

“What’s to eat?” he asks.

I hold up a bag of moldy bread, and Kian grimaces before grabbing a box of cereal. He cranks up the small antique radio he picked up at a garage sale last week, then sits on the counter, bowl in hand, watching me clean. Then my phone lights up.

Vik: Heads up. Results went out an hour ago.

Oh *shit*. Now, that’s one memory that hits me hard. The goddamn *test*. I thought I’d have more time. The clatter of my phone slipping from my hands and falling to the floor doesn’t register past the sharp ringing in my ears. “*Fuck, fuck, fuck.*” I pace the kitchen and pick my phone back up. I haven’t received a text or email from Kilner yet, and that terrifies me.

“What’s wrong?” Kian asks through a mouthful of cereal.

I could say it was an edible mix-up, and I ate one by accident. That’s believable.

“D, what’s going on? What happened?”

Or maybe claim it was a rare result of secondhand smoking.

“Dylan.”

“What?” I snap.

Kian’s head rears back at my reaction. This whole thing is one massive fuckup, and it’s completely my fault.

“My drug test came back positive for THC,” I tell him.

Kian jumps off the counter, his mouth agape. With one sentence, I’ve made two deeply regrettable mistakes. One, letting my personal shit out in the open, and two, telling Kian about a problem he can’t fix for me. His savior complex is probably kicking in right now.

“That can’t be right. We’ll ask for a redo,” he says simply.

I thought I’d been smart, at least with timing when I would let loose at a party, but with everything going on last semester and this summer, I miscalculated. It didn’t occur to me that our preseason testing would be so soon after. There was so much going on the week we tested that I hadn’t thought twice before taking the test. The only thing on my mind was my parents’ phone call and their goddamn vow renewal.

“You’ll be kicked off the team,” he hisses. “We have to get a retest. It’s wrong.”

“It’s not.”

The silence stretches unbearably, and I can’t bring myself to look at his face.

“But you would never do that.” His voice wavers, shaky with emotion, and his words almost shatter my facade. But what could I even tell him? That I’ve been dealing with my parents’ shit for so long that this was the phone call that sent me over the edge? That I was so desperate for an escape, I didn’t think twice before letting a few puffs cost me my career?

My phone rings in my hand, and our eyes meet, fear flashing between us. Then I see the caller ID. Coach Kilner.

I swallow. This is it. “Hello.”

“Rink. Now,” he says, and the line goes dead. Just like any hope I had.

“I’M HOPING THAT’S your good news glare,” I say when I join Coach Kilner on the bleachers.

“Sometimes, I think I chose the wrong career,” Kilner says, staring out at the empty rink. “Should’ve been a preschool teacher. At least those kids would listen to me.”

“Can’t argue with that.”

Coach glares at me. “When were you going to tell me?”

“Does it matter? You found out anyway.”

His hands curl into fists, and I realize he really does need the stress ball he’s always strangling. “I would have liked to hear about the drug test from you. With an explanation.”

I shrug, keeping my eyes on my hands.

“You can sit here and act like you don’t care, but I see right through you.” Kilner exhales heavily. “I won’t pull it out of you, Donovan. But we both know you’ve been out of control this year.”

“Trust me, Coach. The test slipped my mind. I always know what I’m doing.”

“Of course you fucking do. All you kids think you do,” he says. “You’ll be suspended from the team, and the NCAA has been notified. You’ll be put on a conditional hold by the NHL. The director of athletics could ban you. Dean Hutchins could take even more severe action, given how hard he’s been cracking down on parties. You’ll be a free agent with zero league consideration once you graduate. What the hell were you thinking, boy?”

I have nothing to say to him.

“Do you know the seriousness of all this?” he presses. “All I wanted for you was to realize your potential. But you wasted it away at parties. Is this the legacy you want to leave behind?”

“I’ve left quite the legacy on Greek row,” I joke. I mean, it’s the truth. No one shows up to a Dalton party without asking if I’m going to be there. Hell, half the time, I am the party. But his words still sting way more than I’d ever let him see. I can’t bring myself to apologize when everything I’ve done at Dalton was going to amount to this anyway. It was only a matter of time.

“Believe it or not, there are people who want you to succeed, Dylan.”

I scoff. “Right. Like my dad, who will be over the moon that I can’t play hockey and finally do something worthwhile like he’s always wanted. The same guy who’s threatened to cut me off despite all the shit he’s put us

through," I say bitterly. "This is the only thing I had, and I fucked it up just like he said I would. That's all I'll ever be good for—fucking up a good thing."

Kilner puts a hand on my shoulder. "It doesn't have to be that way. You can forge your own path, as long as you do it with a little self-respect."

I drop my face in my hands. "Did you read that off a motivational bumper sticker today?" I mutter.

"Read it in some 'be a better coach' garbage. Did it work?"

I finally look at him. "Coach, the sports director won't like me when my file drops onto his desk. You know my record on the ice, it's not exactly that of a saint. As much as everyone wants me to stop partying, it's the only thing making life bearable."

"Because you haven't tried anything else." He sighs. "I'll speak to the dean."

My head rears. I don't get why he still wants to help me.

"But." He stands to descend the bleachers. "You have to clean up your act. Join a debate club or a knitting club for all I care. Just something to show them that this isn't all you are."

What if it is.

When he's gone, I'm left staring at the empty ice. My phone buzzes in my pocket, like it has the entire time I've been here. Thirty notifications light up my screen, all about the same topic I've been trying to avoid.

Aiden: What the fuck am I hearing about you failing your drug test? Call me.
Sampson: Fucking hell, you got caught? We can't afford to lose our best left winger, man.
Kian: I might've let it slip that you failed your drug test. I DIDN'T MEAN TO.

I stop reading after that because none of them are getting an answer. Except for Kian, whose ass I'm going to kick for blabbing to everyone about this. I'm about to go do just that when music fills the arena and the sound of blades hitting the ice steals my attention.

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SIX

SIERRA

DRUGS ARE GREAT. Well, prescription drugs are. It's Wednesday afternoon, which means the rink is blissfully free of the peewees and hockey practice. Lidia's out trying to find me a partner, so I'm practicing on my own. After all the dreams I shattered last year—Coach's, mine, everyone's—I need to be ready.

Though I've popped the same jumps six times. My Salchow is even worse. I feel off axis. I slam down, scraping the ice. Then I try again, and again, and ag—

"You're doing it wrong." A voice echoes somewhere behind me.

I freeze. I hate that I recognize that voice—deep, rumbly, and cocky as hell. I glance over my shoulder, and yup, it's the jock from the party. He's leaning on the boards, forearms braced, his amber brown gaze locked on me.

I turn back. *No distractions*. Especially not him. With a deep exhale, I launch into something I've always been good at—a triple toe loop. But a sharp tutting sound cuts through the air of my jump and throws me off-balance. My landing is graceless, and with that thread pulled loose, a fire brews under my skin. I glide to where he leans forward, coming face-to-face, the rink gate the only thing between us. He's still so much taller than me even when I'm in skates, but I refuse to let his height diminish my confidence.

"Shouldn't you be tapping a keg somewhere?" I ask.

"Just giving you some friendly advice, princess."

"I think that would require us to be friends. Besides, I don't take skating advice from hockey players," I say. "Or frat boys who spend their nights

with their chest covered in paint."

"Seems to me like you had a great time *staring* at my paint-covered chest." He leans closer with an infuriating smirk. "You can look, but you're going to have to be a little nicer if you want to touch."

"Why? Am I too much to handle? Never had a girl that could put a skate to your throat?"

His dimple appears. A fucking dimple. "Never, but I think I'd enjoy anything you'd do to me."

When his gaze crawls over me, the desperation to know what he's thinking almost kicks in. He's like a roller coaster you know you shouldn't get on, but you do it anyway.

"I'll be sure to surprise you, then." I plaster on a saccharine grin.

He chuckles; it's low and rumbly like his voice. "I'll leave my door unlocked."

"I'm sure it always is."

If I wasn't watching so closely, I wouldn't have noticed his smile waver. "Maybe it's best if you keep those skates on. Looks like you need the practice."

He's not wrong, but I'd never admit it. Telling a man he's right? Yeah, hell no. "You wouldn't even know the first thing about figure skating."

"Your Salchow was under-rotated, and your landing was weak. And that triple toe loop? Way off axis."

I'm left blinking like an idiot. His words scorch any retort I could have given. Because it's exactly what I was scolding myself for.

"You lack confidence," he adds, twisting the knife of his critique.

"Clearly you don't lack balls. I didn't ask for your opinion. You wouldn't even be able to replicate any of my moves."

His eyes narrow, and for a moment, it's like he's considering proving me wrong. I worry that he'll actually do it, and I'll have to live with the fact that a *hockey player* can skate better than me. Instead, he takes a step back from the boards. Our heated stare down disintegrates into the cold ice.

"Thought so." I smirk. "Maybe if I toss a puck on the ice, you can chase after it like a good boy."

A glint returns to his eyes. "Is that what you want? For me to be a good boy?"

I clench my fists. "I want you to get out of my arena."

"Your arena?"

“My *slot*,” I say through gritted teeth. “You can crash headfirst into the baseboards all you want after that.”

“Not anymore,” he mutters, then pushes off the gate and turns away. “Dalton has a learn-to-skate program, by the way. It might do you some good.”

I flip him off.

“ASSHOLE!” I TOSS my bag on the table of the after-hours study room. All the buildings on campus close at ten on Wednesdays, but there’s a private study room that Scarlett found freshman year that she sneaks into. Like at midnight on a weekday when she needs to use the whiteboard to teach herself. Tonight, the bold heading she’s written on the chaotic board is *Proctology.*

“Close! It’s actually the inside of a colon.” Scarlett points at the image on her textbook, staring at me over the rims of her glasses. She’s braided her hair into uneven pigtails. She stress braids when she studies.

“Did you run into Justin again or something?” she asks.

“Worse.”

“There’s worse than Justin?”

“Fine, not worse but equally as irritating,” I say. “That hockey player from the party.”

“The one whose head you ripped off?” She laughs when I give her a look. “Sorry, that’s what everyone’s saying. You went against *the* hockey stud at the first party of the semester. It was bound to circulate.”

“Oh please, people can’t care that much.”

“They do when it’s Dylan Donovan, Dalton’s beloved left-winger. Or I should say the *captain*. Well, for like a day, before his failed drug test thing.” Scarlett pauses. “Sorry, my dad’s been bringing work home, so a day in the life of Coach Kilner is all I heard about this morning.”

Failed drug test? Who the hell is this guy? “That would explain all the free time he has to irritate me. He’s the cockiest man on the planet.”

Scarlett snorts. “Match made in heaven.”

When I glare, she laughs loudly, standing to erase something on the whiteboard.

“It’s just that you’re the cockiest woman I know. I mean, not as of late, but you know you’re good and you aren’t afraid to show it. It’s a

commendable characteristic.”

“I am not *cocky*.” Only Scarlett would see it as a positive. I submerged all those parts of me with Justin, but that didn’t stop his *ice queen* comments. *Smile for once. You’ll make it hard for the judges to like us. Just don’t be you, Sierra.* Those words had lodged themselves deep, buried under every forced expression, every effort to be palatable.

“It’s not a bad thing to know you’re good at something.”

I purse my lips. “Okay, fine, a little cocky. But he exudes it.”

“That I believe,” she says. “But at least you won’t bump into him on the ice anymore. I’m pretty sure he’s getting suspended.”

She might be right, but I have a feeling Dylan Donovan doesn’t follow the rules.

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SEVEN

DYLAN

I'M OFFICIALLY KICKED off the hockey team.

I knew it was coming, but this morning, I received an email from the board of discipline detailing my new restrictions: no practices, no ice time unless it's approved by Director Alan Reed, no attending games. The reality of that is even more clear when I walk into the DU Sports Clinic to see the headline staring right at me.

ROYALLY BUSTED: DALTON'S HOCKEY STUD KICKED OFF THE ICE FOLLOWING FAILED DRUG TEST

Summer Preston, Aiden's girlfriend and my only friend who's not an athlete or in a frat, stands behind reception, frowning at the latest *Dalton Royal Press* before crumpling it and tossing it in the trash. She texted earlier, asking me to meet her here before our library study session. It was just after I got the suspension email.

"They're calling me a stud? I think someone at the paper has a crush on me," I say.

Summer shakes her head. "I wish you'd told me, D. My dad knows the dean, he could've helped."

Yeah, I highly doubt that. Lukas Preston hates me. More than he hates Aiden, and that's saying something, because he's the one fucking his daughter. But last month when we visited Toronto, I wasn't prepared for how hot—*beautiful*—Summer's mom is. A few drinks in, and I couldn't stop flirting. Aiden kicked me under the table a bunch, but making her laugh felt like earning those tiny gold stars that my kindergarten teacher

used to hand out. So asking NHL legend Lukas Preston for help was out of the question.

"Can't do much now," I say, pointing to the paper she just tossed.

"Don't worry, I stole every copy." Summer hikes a thumb to the mountain of newspapers teetering on the ledge.

A smile tugs at my lips at the gesture. "Thanks, but I'm sure Kian's big mouth spread the news already."

Someone groans. It's Kian carrying another batch of papers. "I just had a two-hour philosophy lecture and then scoured campus for these newspapers. Please don't yell at me." He drops them with a thud by the recycling.

Summer laughs, then turns to me. "Well, good luck talking to Aiden when he comes home tomorrow."

Crap. When Aiden was still at Dalton, he didn't just lecture me as captain—he worried as a friend, his clear disappointment hitting harder than his words ever could. Now with his preseason calf-strain injury sidelining him, he's coming back to rest and be with Summer.

Kian's eyes light up. "Oh shit, Cap's coming! We've got to clean his room and the house."

"His room is clean. I've been sleeping in there," Summer says.

"Right, I love overhearing your *conversations* with Aiden from across the hall. They're my favorite bedtime stories," Kian deadpans. "But it'll be like old times. Especially if he's staying for your birthdays."

The reminder of my birthday creates a pit in my stomach. This year, Summer and I are celebrating together since both our birthdays fall on Halloween. Everyone's excited.

Everyone except me.

After welcome week, parties are just loud reminders of my failed drug test. And with Kilner's insistence that I find something worthwhile to prove I'm not just some stoner, I plan on being on my best behavior. Because I've given everything to hockey, convinced it would lead somewhere real, only to watch it all disappear as quickly as the smoke blew past my lips.

"Can we go now?" Kian says, already at the door. "I need to study."

The guy sitting in the waiting area looks deathly ill, and he mutters something to Kian about closing the door because he's cold.

"One sec, I gotta talk to Dr. Müller first." Summer rushes off, and Kian says he's going to the bathroom. It's right then my phone rings. The drug

test news has spread like wildfire. My parents probably know and are trying to reach me. But this time Ada's name flashes on the screen.

"Suddenly, I'm the most popular girl in school," my sister says.

"You heard?" *Way to set a good example, Dylan.* Though it's not a worry, because Ada Donovan is a genius. She's sixteen and studying biology at a Boston STEM academy.

Ada laughs, and she sounds so much like my mom, it cuts like barbed wire. "You mean my brother being labeled a pothead? Yup. Mom even called, and I tried to assure her everything was okay. But I haven't seen you in forever, Dyl. What's going on with you?"

"I'm fine. It was a stupid mistake that's not going to happen again."

"Did it have anything to do with Dad's latest display of fabricated affection?" she asks.

See? She's too smart. "Mom seems to be on board with it. But it doesn't matter. I'm not going." If my mom wants to stay with him, I won't stand in the way anymore. "But I'll see you during break, Ada, I promise. I just need to figure out this mess."

"Fine," she says sadly. "You know, sometimes I miss skating with you because we got to spend so much time together while practicing and for competitions. Though I'd rather forget when that scout asked if *you* wanted to ditch me and go solo."

I wince. "You were good; he was an idiot." Ada and I did pair skating growing up. We weren't half bad, but when I found hockey and she found her textbooks, skating drifted.

"Liar. I was awful, and you were so good it was annoying. I *hated* skating, and I only did it because of Mom." She laughs. "Do you still do it? I know you live and breathe hockey or whatever, but do you?"

"Haven't really had the time," I say. Skating always came easy to me, and I don't think I ever really left it behind. I get enough glares from Kilner when I mess around on the ice and do a little show for the home crowd.

"Well, you have all the time now," she says. "Maybe even enough to call every now and again. I'm always here if you need to talk or fill me in on all your college parties."

"Nice try."

"Worth a shot," she mutters. "Oh, and tell Kian I haven't forgotten about him. He texted me that I was picking favorites between my brothers."

"He's just sensitive."

“You mean like always?”

I laugh. “Exactly.”

Just as Ada hangs up, an arm brushes mine when someone stands beside me.

“Pickup for Sierra,” she says, and the pharmacy technician in the back smiles and waves. But I wouldn’t have noticed any of that if not for the dark-haired figure skater scribbling her name onto the sign-in sheet.

The beginnings of a smirk form on my lips. “Sierra, huh?”

She freezes, and her eyes widen. But then that tiny fire sparks when she looks at me. “*Dylan*, huh?”

I didn’t expect to like the sound of my name on her lips this much. “Been doing your homework, I see. Did you go home and look me up?” I ask, leaning against the reception desk. “Find any good pictures?”

“Yeah, I have the perfect one taped to a dartboard.”

Is it bad that that turns me on? Ever since her skate blade comment, I think I’ve dreamed of it more times than I care to admit. But that might be because of my current dry spell. “You know, I’d bet you’d land your jumps if you spent a little less time checking me out.”

Her jaw tightens as she glances impatiently toward the technician. “Great talk, Coach. Let’s never do it again.”

“I kind of like it when you call me Coach.”

She deadpans, “Yeah? Is that what gets you going? Being referred to as a forty-five-year-old man?”

“Kilner is not forty-five.”

“I never said Kilner. But good to know that’s who you fantasize about.” She raises a perfect brow.

“You haven’t seen him in the weight room, then.”

“Stop.” She shudders. “He’s like a dad to me.”

“I think you mean DILF.”

Sierra gags. “He’s my best friend’s dad. So, no, I do not mean DILF.”

I pause for minute. I had no idea Kilner had a daughter at Dalton. But I shake off the thought, focusing instead on the way Sierra grimaces. “That hasn’t stopped anyone. Pretty sure it adds to the fun.”

“Are you speaking from personal experience? Slept with a lot of your best friends’ dads, have you?” She smiles like she finds herself funny.

I stare at her mouth for an indecent amount of time. Too indecent even for me. “You’re smiling, Sierra. Are you enjoying my company?”

“It’s either this or I sit next to the guy spreading the plague all over the waiting room.” The sick guy groans loudly when I glance over at him.

“I’m flattered.”

“Don’t be,” she says. “I’ll bruise your fragile ego.”

“You’d do a lot more damage than just a bruise, baby.”

She raises a brow. “Are you flirting with me?”

“Yes.” I grin. “Is it working?”

“Ms. Romanova, your prescription is ready.” The receptionist’s voice cuts through Sierra’s heated green gaze. Sierra takes the prescription, avoiding eye contact as she tucks it in her bag.

“See you around, *Romanova*.”

“Walk into traffic, *Donovan*,” she says in a singsong voice, tossing a razor-edged grin over her shoulder.

I’m still laughing when the door closes behind her. Summer strides back in, her arms loaded with textbooks, which she unceremoniously dumps into mine.

She watches me curiously. “What’s got you smiling so much?”

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EIGHT

SIERRA

"YOU SHOULDN'T BE skating alone, *dochen'ka*," my dad says as soon as I make it back from the rink a few blocks away from my parents' house. In the winter, I would skate on the frozen pond in our backyard, but after my accident, they never froze it again. It was their way of dealing with my accident, but sometimes I miss it. The quiet, the late-night skates, the feeling of stepping out of my house and onto something that felt like home.

I slept like a caged bird in my old room last night, and I couldn't help but wonder why I even bother coming home. But it's because I'm forced to. A few months ago, when I broached the subject of returning to campus with Scarlett, my parents were hesitant. It took lots of convincing and a promise to visit them every week. Promises I'm regretting right now.

My dad pulls away from our hug, only for my mom to squeeze me. I've had to become used to this new violation of my personal space since the accident. I don't resist them anymore, not since they told me how hard it was not getting to hug me. My mom said she'd take walks to the opposite wing of the hospital while I was in surgery, not realizing it was labor and delivery. Every time a baby was born, music played; she counted sixteen chimes. Sixteen lives entered the world while she thought she was losing hers.

"Lidia's not always available," I explain. "I have to practice, Papa. You two know that better than anyone."

You'd think having skaters for parents would make this whole comeback easier, but they've gone soft. My parents coach young skaters, so they're off on random days of the school week. I've been to only a few of their performances, one being in Aspen when I was four. That's the trip where I

became obsessed with skating. It wasn't the performers who caused that reaction, it was seeing my parents skate together on the empty post-competition ice. The passion between them was palpable and nearly suffocating.

When I was born, I messed up my mom's pelvis to the point of no return. Skating became painful, so she retired, and my dad didn't hesitate to follow. So I promised myself that if they had to give up figure skating for me, I would make it all worthwhile. I'd be worth it to them.

"You shouldn't be on the ice without her, Sierra. At least not without a helmet," my mom says. I haven't worn a helmet in ages, so doing it now would just prove their point.

I move into the breakfast nook of the kitchen, letting my dad ladle me soup. The temperature drops a degree, and my mom goes full cold-prevention mode.

She takes my hand. "As much as we want to put you in Bubble Wrap, I know you. You're my daughter, and just like me, you want to prove everyone wrong." I feel a stab of guilt. "But you have to be safe. Don't put this pressure on yourself."

"I'm not." I only wake up screaming some days. No pressure at all.

"Then we are looking forward to seeing you back out there," my dad says.

My stomach churns. Expectations rising, and my body not being able to perform, or my brain not letting me, makes me worry. I have to trust my body when I can't even look at it. PTSD and anxiety trail after me—label after label. I can't just be myself without these words following, as if it'll help the next person understand whether I'm too much or palatable enough.

Suddenly, my mom perks up. "Oh! I forgot to tell you that I ran into Justin yesterday."

My spoon stops halfway to my mouth. A rock-hard ball of anxiety drops straight into my stomach. There are so many ways to ruin a visit, but this decimates my mood.

Justin Petrov has some voodoo-level hold over my mom. But it isn't her fault, because I never told them about how quickly he left me. I was still recovering from surgery when he was already training with Julia's coach. That's how Lidia found out, and then she told me she knew people who could make him disappear. I told her I'd rather stick to reading about the

Bratva than get into business with them. So I never told my parents how Justin blindsided me. I couldn't break their hearts too.

"He heard you're back on the ice and wants to help. I know it's been hard on you with his switch, but we all know how cutthroat skating is. I think you should hear him out."

"I'm fine, Mom. I don't need any help," I say.

My dad shoots my mom a look. Clearly, they've talked about this. He probably tried to stop her. Our story reminded her of how she met my dad: He switched to pairs and needed a partner, and she'd just moved to Connecticut. It was fate, and I thought Justin was mine too.

"She needs a partner. Poor Lidia's been searching day and night," she says to my dad. "He knows her better than anyone. It would be so easy."

"Mila. Enough. She doesn't need a reminder of that night through him. Leave the past in the past." I want to agree, but it's embarrassing that I can't even hear Justin's name without my brain thinking it's a bullet.

"I gotta go," I cut in, slipping out of the breakfast nook. "I have an assignment due, and I didn't bring my laptop."

They don't stop me as I head for the door, their hushed voices fading. Even as I drive back to campus, I can't shake the feeling that no matter how many steps I take away from Justin, he will always be somewhere I can't quite reach but just close enough to haunt me.

THE NEXT MORNING, I wake to Lidia's text that orders me to do off-ice training since she's flooded with meetings to find me a partner to qualify. So naturally, I go to the rink, but it turns out I've got a knack for unwanted encounters, because Justin and Julia are here.

What do you do when you see the person you despise gliding effortlessly on the ice, when they should be buried beneath it?

It's the first time I've seen them skate, and it rips at something in my chest. I hate that I notice the little things. Like the fact that he's very particular about his ice, but now he's skating on the uneven scarred rink with her. Or how he's removed the initials we penned on the ankles of our skates. I painted over mine with nail polish.

I'm still watching them when a body crowds mine in the space between the hallway and the bleachers.

"Who do we hate?"

My skin prickles with awareness. “No one,” I mutter.

Dylan’s low rumble sounds too close to me “Good. I don’t like someone else stealing your attention.”

I hold back an eye roll and glance at him. He’s dressed casually in sweats and a track jacket that molds to the contours of his body. “Aren’t you banned from the rink?”

Dylan shrugs. “It’s always more fun when it’s forbidden.”

I nearly roll my eyes again. “There are at least thirty people here. You don’t think someone will snitch?” The second the words are out of my mouth, a group of girls exiting the arena wave at him. No one seems to care that he’s breaking the rules.

His gaze drops to my lips. “Why? You want something in exchange for your secrecy?”

“Yeah, a restraining order.”

“You’re the one showing up everywhere I am, Romanova. If you want me, just say the word. We can cut the whole cat-and-mouse thing.”

“Am I supposed to be the mouse in that analogy?”

“Definitely the cat. But that’s how I like it. Claws and all.” He winks. He actually fucking winks at me.

“You—”

“You’re doing great, Jules. Trust me, we’ll get there.” Justin’s voice travels down the hallway. I don’t think, I just grab the front of Dylan’s jacket and yank him under the bleachers. He stumbles in behind me, coming chest to chest in the cramped space.

“I don’t know if I’m in the mood anymore. You were kind of mean.”

“Shh!” I cover his mouth with my palm.

“Can’t. I like it loud.” His words are muffled but I can feel his damn smirk. This close to him, surrounded by the heady scent of his clean clothes, I’m a little dizzy. He’s so big and unapologetic as he takes up space, crowding me entirely, forcing my chest to brush his with each shaky inhale. My heart hammers as his remains steady, probably because being pressed up against a girl in a tight, dark space is nothing new to him.

“Don’t worry. We got this. You’ve been taking what I gave you, right?” Justin’s voice trails off, and I catch a glimpse of him rubbing Julia’s back. He never spoke so softly with me. It only manages to drag me back to the night in his hotel room. When I thought I was finally enough.

I startle when Dylan brushes his thumb by the corner of my eye, and he comes away with a tear. I drop my palm from his mouth, feeling mortification seize my bones. His brows pinch, and when he glances over to where Justin's just exited, it's like he's putting together a puzzle. I wait for it, pity or sympathy, but Dylan doesn't look at me like that. He looks curious.

I nearly trip over his feet in my rush to get out. "You should leave before someone catches you," I say.

He seems to recognize my deflection for what it is. "Can't keep a secret, princess?"

My tightening chest isn't deflating. "Call me *princess* again and you'll find out." I spin on my skates, heading straight for the bathroom as my skate guards click against the floor. It only takes a few mumbled affirmations, a breathing exercise, and the propranolol I took earlier to ward off a panic attack.

But when I finally get back outside, someone's already skating. On *my* ice.

Upon seeing the perfect landing, the swish of a spin, and another series of advanced moves, I gawk. For the entire three minutes of his routine, I can't believe my eyes.

Dylan Donovan is *figure skating*. Like, really, really well. *What the hell?*

"What can't he do?" one of the stragglers from public skate says as they pass by.

"I don't know, but I hope I'm next." Her friends giggle on their way out of the arena.

Okay, plenty of people can get on the ice and do a few spins, but he's not just spinning. He's done a Lutz and an axel. That too, effortlessly. It makes me kind of sick.

Dylan Donovan is a phenomenal skater.

I'd never say that out loud. There's no way I'd inflate his ego. He's focused as he prepares to jump into another spin. The immediate response from my body feels dangerous and entirely unwelcome. My ears thrum with a pulse that sends my blood low in my body. *Nope*.

"Your footwork is sloppy," I taunt from the sidelines when I can't swallow the bitterness on my tongue. "And that triple looked a lot like a double."

Okay, now I sound jealous.

You are.

When he turns, I shuffle onto the ice and slip on the gloves I finished knitting last night.

"You're still here." He blinks at me, staring awfully hard at my reddened eyes.

"You really think I'd give up free ice so you could taint it with your show pony tricks?" They were not just any tricks. I know that. He knows that I know that.

When he glides forward, I keep my focus on picking a song on my phone. But then Dylan comes so close, he's towering over me. He unzips his jacket, and the slow metallic rasp splits the silence.

"Jealousy looks good on you, Sierra. But maybe you should channel some of that anger into landing a jump." He leans in. "Or, you know, I could give you a private lesson."

He's still too close when he pulls off his jacket and tosses it on the boards. *Hartford Whalers* is written on his too-short threadbare T-shirt that clings to his chest and reveals the smooth V-shaped muscle disappearing into his track pants.

I swallow. "Don't think I'll benefit from lessons from a guy who still wears his high school hockey team merch. Is that where you learned to skate like that?"

He looks at me like I've lost a few brain cells. "Well, there's this sport called hockey that I've been playing since I was a kid."

"You were figure skating. Hockey doesn't teach that."

"Impressed?"

"Indifferent."

"*Jealous,*" he decides with a satisfied grin.

There's only so much patience in the world, and I don't possess it. I glide past him, trying not to focus on the scratch of a skate that follows me.

"I competed in pairs with my sister for a few years," he reveals. "But then I switched back to hockey."

That makes me stop. "Why?"

"It got me more girls." He watches each of my reactions like he's studying them. "What about you? Or do you just say you're a skater so you can creep inside the arena and watch people from behind the bleachers?"

I realize then this might be the first real conversation we've had. Even if he just made me out to be a stalker. "My parents were professional figure

skaters. I was practically born to do it."

"Did you want to?"

The question feels oddly invasive, and I grapple with the fact that no one has ever asked me that. I don't think anyone has ever cared to know if I wanted to dedicate my life to the ice. There's a wave of something that makes my stomach tighten, but I nod, because I've yearned to skate. It's only now that I question whether I can.

I glide away from him to warm up with some walleys. But it's hard to focus when he's flaunting his abilities like a fucking peacock.

It must be the bitter competitor in me, because watching him easily do moves I once did pushes me harder. By some miracle, I land my first double and yelp in surprise. *Holy shit.*

In skating it's good to end on a high note. But I always push myself until I can't. "Back to Black" by Amy Winehouse plays from my phone. I start the routine I did for a Fire & Ice invitational back when I was in singles. "'Dark, moody, and art on ice'" they called it, and even now I transform into someone else. A sloppier version, but *someone else*.

I push into a spin at center ice, dropping into a sit spin as the burn from three back-to-back—not-too-bad—axels lingers in my legs. My breath is ragged, but there's a glow in my chest. Pride, maybe. I press my lips together, refusing to let it out. *That wasn't impressive.*

"Impressive," Dylan calls then lands another Lutz. *Damn show-off.*

"You should probably work on that. Still sloppy," I needle.

When he smiles this time, it's cocky as hell. "Think you can keep up with me, firefly?"

I raise a brow at the nickname. "Are you trying to goad me into skating with you? I'm not that easy."

"Oh, I know, but I've always had a thing for a challenge."

"I'm not giving in to whatever kink you're trying to satisfy."

He smirks, leaning in slightly. "You in those tights is doing a lot for me already."

When I push away, he follows me. We're face-to-face as he glides forward while I glide backward. "Does this puppy dog thing work for you, or are you trying something new?"

"Trying something new," he replies.

"Donovan!" someone barks before I can get another word out.

I glance to the sidelines, where our sports director wears an angry expression. Dylan curses under his breath.

"No after-hours skating, Ms. Romanova. But I'll let it slide this time since it's a new rule," he warns.

"Sorry," I call sheepishly, gliding off the ice while Dylan reluctantly heads to Alan Reed.

I can't hear what they're saying, but the tension is high. They argue, and then Dylan's expression goes entirely blank before he steps through the gate. With a satisfied look, our sports director follows him out.

For the first time, I actually feel bad for him. I know what it's like not to be on the ice. It's pure torture when you've grown up loving it, and having your body stop you, or being told you can't, is even worse.

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NINE

DYLAN

HOW MUCH MORE shit would I get in if I egged the sports director's car?

The hard-ass was patrolling the rink, so when he saw me on it, he was standing by the boards with that stick up his ass. Usually Kilner's the one enforcing the rules, but when he saw me walk past his office, he didn't say anything. I'm not sure whether he was letting me off the hook or he's pissed because I've got him working overtime to figure out the suspension.

The other thing I can't seem to get off my mind is Sierra. Any other scenario, and we'd be in the back seat of my car in five seconds flat. But she looks at me like she wants me dead. It's kind of fucked up how much that turns me on. She's damn stubborn, and so full of attitude, but then underneath the bleachers her emerald eyes cracked, and there it was, a single tear. She was looking at a couple, skaters too, and the look on her face nearly made me go chase the guy down to see why this seemingly ice-cold girl was crying over him.

I saw her skate. It was different from the first time I saw her on the ice. Her hair was slicked back, her clothes tight except for the fluttery skirt, and she was faster than ever. Sierra's blade dug into the ice, sharp, vicious. She didn't land the triple Lutz she attempted, but she managed a shallow axel. That pain still seemed to linger in her red-rimmed eyes, but she was determined, vengeful, and a little scary. It was fucking hot.

Suddenly, a hard metal from a chunk of keys hits me square in the abdomen. I'm still sore from the gym, because getting kicked off the rink only twenty minutes in wasn't enough cardio. Kian comes to stand in front of the TV after assaulting me with his car keys.

I was watching a show Summer recommended. It's not a Turkish drama, thankfully, or she'd make me translate everything. Apparently, I'm a bad friend for not telling her that my mom's Turkish, or that I speak it too. Now, whenever I walk by while it's on, I'm roped into checking whether the subtitles are accurate. Aiden being on video call doesn't help, because he expects me to translate every word for Summer. One episode is three *hours* long.

I toss the keys right back at Kian.

"Fine, I'll drive, but get ready, we're picking up Cap," he says.

Crap. I nearly forgot that Aiden is coming home to rest until his calf strain is all healed up to play in the regular season. "I thought Summer was going with you."

It's not that Aiden's arrival isn't exciting, but I know he's going to watch me like a fucking hawk. I'm hoping he's distracted enough to forget about my reckless partying streak last semester. And this summer. And last week.

"She is, but I don't want to third wheel a couple who hasn't seen each other in over a month."

"If you're lucky, they'll probably just bicker the whole way home."

Kian groans. "That's worse; it's like foreplay for them. You're coming." He walks out to the porch to drape our surprise for Aiden with a white sheet. We had forgotten all about it, but then it showed up on in a delivery truck last week.

Outside, the sound of the horn blaring fills the empty street. Summer's sitting in the passenger seat, reaching over to press the horn like a lunatic.

"Jesus, I was being thoughtful and getting *your* boyfriend a snack." Kian climbs into the driver's side and tosses the box on Summer's lap.

"I don't think a box of …" She holds the bag between her fingers to inspect it. "Double Cream Twinkies is something he's craving right now."

Kian snatches it out of her hand and mumbles something about knowing his best friend. When he finally pulls out and we're headed to the highway, I can't help but glance over at the arena as we drive by. Dread settles somewhere low in my stomach, and it almost feels like I won't ever play hockey in that rink again.

"You okay back there?" Summer lowers the volume of the radio.

I nod, but that doesn't do anything to clear the crease between her brows. My gaze drifts out the window, but I don't miss the look Kian's giving me through the rearview mirror.

Suddenly, I'm desperate to get out of this headspace. I pull out my phone and text Sampson before I think better of it.

Dylan: Party tonight?
Sampson: Yale. But you know how those go. It's never a good idea.
Sampson: Besides, isn't Aiden back tonight?
Dylan: Doesn't matter. When are we leaving?
Sampson: Pick you up in an hour.

Normally, I'd never step foot on Yale's campus, but this week Dalton's going through a dry spell with parties. It might be because every NCAA team at Dalton underwent surprise drug tests.

Ten minutes later, Kian pulls into the airport arrivals. I slide my phone in my pocket as Summer and Kian argue about where to park. I follow their line of sight to Aiden Crawford walking toward the car. Kian is first to react. He parks where we're definitely not supposed to park and runs out of the car. He wraps his arms around Aiden and squeezes the shit out of him. I follow Summer, who doesn't remember that anything else exists but her boyfriend. She's slow to approach him, so I nudge Kian away and give Aiden a quick hug.

"Don't know why he's acting like that. We saw you a few months ago," I say.

"Two months ago, asshole. That's eight whole weeks," Kian responds.

Summer's still standing there, and it makes Aiden smile. "What are you waiting for, Preston?" he says, dropping his bag on the floor next to him.

That's all it takes for her to jump straight into his arms. Kian watches them in awe, and I roll my eyes as I take Aiden's bag to toss it in the trunk. Relationships have never been my thing, but seeing my best friend look at her like that, with soft affection in his eyes, stabs me in the chest like a dart on a bull's-eye. But I don't let it linger. Instead, I crush the feeling just as quickly.

This time I take the front seat, and when we're driving off again, Kian tosses the box of Twinkies to Aiden, who groans in appreciation and tears into it immediately.

Kian's smirking at Summer through the rearview.

The rest of the drive home, I'm awaiting the tongue-lashing that I'm sure is coming my way. But if I'm lucky, I'll be halfway to Yale before Aiden gets the chance to corner me.

Sebastian and Cole come out of their rooms to greet Aiden when we get home.

“We have a surprise for you,” Kian blurts.

Aiden shoots us a suspicious glance, then looks at Summer for an explanation. She only shrugs. It was hard enough getting Kian not to spill it, considering how much he calls Aiden.

“Follow us,” Kian says, practically bouncing on the spot as he leads us through the living room straight to the sliding door that opens onto the back porch. “Close your eyes.”

“Fuck no,” Aiden says.

“C’mon, just do it. It’ll be fun, trust me.”

“I would never trust you when you have that creepy grin on your face, Ishida.”

Summer elbows Aiden. “The sooner you do it, the sooner you can punch him for what he’s about to show you.” Now it’s Summer’s turn to grin, and Kian rolls his eyes.

Aiden obliges with a groan. “If it’s something gross, I swear I’ll—”

“Open!”

Aiden’s face goes blank as he stares at the giant hot tub in front of him on the porch. It’s huge, probably big enough for eight people to sit comfortably. We had to make a detailed spreadsheet of whether the benefit would outweigh the costs. Our attempt to be responsible only lasted a few minutes before we decided we needed it.

Aiden blinks rapidly, and I hold back a laugh as Cole records his reaction from a safe distance.

“What am I staring at?” he asks slowly.

“A hot tub. We won it through the Slink drink competition. Got all the sororities and Dylan’s frat to enter and help us win with the promise that they could use it. Pretty sweet, right?”

“Okay, but why the fuck is my face on it?”

The hot tub is even better in person than it looked on the website. It’s massive, black, and adorned with Aiden’s old Slink ad. His plastic sophomore smile and the sugary energy drink casually held in his hand is plastered all around the circumference.

“A communal hot tub?” Summer says with disgust. “I thought it was for the house.”

“Kian promised people they could use it. He’s going to disinfect it himself,” I say.

“Aye, aye, Captain,” Kian quips, his tone playful—but the joke falls flat as all eyes shift to me. “I mean—not anymore. Never mind, I—”

“Babe, let’s go upstairs. You need to rest,” Summer deflects smoothly, cutting Kian off.

Aiden watches us as Summer tugs him along. “We need to talk,” he says to me.

“Can’t wait,” I mutter. My phone buzzes in my hand, but before I can glance at the screen, a honk echoes from outside. Sampson’s here. Thank God.

The second we get to Yale, I realize I’ve overestimated my penchant for a party. The guys at Yale bring drinks and offer weed like I hadn’t just failed my drug test. I spend the rest of the night on the couch nursing a single Modelo that I don’t finish. That’s what makes me the unlucky designated driver. I drop off irritatingly drunk college students, and I wonder why the hell I thought coming here was a good idea.

When I finally make it home, I take a quick shower. When I’m out I accidentally play the voicemail that pops up on my phone as a notification.

“Your father wants to apologize for his behavior. I want to apologize too, kuzum. I never should have told you about the party over the phone. Please come home this weekend, I’ll make your favorites—”

Suddenly, the door to my room swings open, and I end the voicemail, my mom’s voice still echoing in my ears. I grab the towel from the edge of the bed and wrap it around my waist.

You would think after living with each other for four years, the guys would learn to knock before they enter my room. However, when Aiden steps inside, I don’t expect anything less. He’s walked into much worse than me in a towel, but when he finds me alone, he exhales.

Why is he even awake? I thought I could delay this until tomorrow at least. The last time we had a talk, he asked me if everything was okay, and to tell him if it wasn’t. I couldn’t tell him then; I didn’t want to add to everything he already had going on.

Aiden leans against my desk, tapping his fingers along the wood like he’s holding back from chewing me out. He hasn’t even spoken a word, and he’s already made me question everything.

“I talked to Kilner.”

I sit on the edge of my bed, looking at anything but my best friend. “About what?”

“I know you haven’t told me why you smoked that night,” he says. “And I don’t know if you ever will, but I still believe that you wouldn’t do this on purpose. Especially with everything on the line.”

Tell him. The words claw at my throat to get out and free my chest of the weight that’s been dragging me down for years. How my parents can’t accept that our family won’t ever be the same, how my dad ruined their marriage, and their vow renewal is a farce. Smoking helped ease all that shit. For about ten seconds.

When I can’t bring myself to speak, Aiden nods to himself. “Kilner’s talking to Reed to get you reinstated. It’s not going to be easy, but I’ve talked to Dean Hutchins too.”

“You did?”

Aiden’s expression tells me he’s over my shit but for some reason he’s still willing to put up with me. “You don’t deserve to be cast aside because of a first-time offense. I’m not going to stop letting the dean know how many people believe in you.”

His words do something strange to my chest. “You’d do that for me?”

“No,” says Aiden. “I’ll do it for the other version of you. Because he’s my best friend.”

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TEN

SIERRA

"HEY, ICE QUEEN," Justin says.

I should have known this day was going to shit when I accidentally tugged on my Team USA windbreaker this morning. My pace quickens, but Justin catches up to me. His hair is styled, and he's dressed in jeans and a hoodie. Standing like this, with his rosy cheeks and boy-next-door smile, feels oddly nostalgic. Like the times he would catch up to me outside the rink before practice.

"You were at the party the other night." His mouth quirks into a smile. "I'm glad you're getting out there again, Si. You deserve it."

Be the bigger person, Sierra. "Thanks, Justin."

The silence isn't just the absence of sound. It's a living thing, swollen with the weight of quiet sobs muffled into tear-soaked pillows and words that have echoed in my mind for months.

"I've been rehearsing what I'd say if I ever saw you again," he says. "But now that you're here, nothing I've practiced feels like it's good enough."

Just say you're sorry.

I had convinced myself I didn't need those words. Because how could I be angry at him for choosing himself? Why did I expect him to mess up his life just because mine was ruined? I had no right to think he'd stay and believe I could heal, when I didn't.

Justin watches me with eyes that once grounded me, but now they surface my anger like a lighthouse.

"Sierra, I didn't have a choice." Those words are carried away with the wind because of how useless they are. As if *I* had a choice—like the unforgiving ice, solid beneath my body as my bones liquefied under my

skin, had asked my permission. Nothing has been in my control since that fall, not this fractured life, not the anger, not even the way my chest tightens whenever I catch sight of my skates.

"I don't need an explanation from you, Justin. We were just partners," I say, my voice void of emotion as the lie floats between us.

He looks at me like I've hit him, and I know then he remembers that day. Hours before our final skate, he came into my hotel room and said he needed to confess his feelings for me. He kissed me then, and although I didn't immediately kiss him back, I relaxed. *Finally*, after four years, I'd done it, I'd made him happy. He told me there was only me for him, that after we won this thing, he wanted to celebrate with me.

"Just partners?" he repeats, sounding wounded, like he hadn't imagined I'd become this version of myself, so cold and *mean*. "How could you say that? You were never like this, Sierra. I thought you would be over this by now."

I halt so abruptly, he doesn't realize I've stopped until he's a few steps ahead of me. "Over what?"

His brows pinch together. "Huh?"

"Over. What?" I repeat. "What should I be over, Justin?"

I've never spoken to him like this. In all the years we were partners, he called the shots, and I blindly followed. But after the accident, something harsh ripped open my chest and made a home there. I let it take over, because I'd choose anger over my tears any day.

"You know what I mean. It's been a year, Sierra. Having you act like we were nothing hurts." His voice cracks, and his brows curve upward in sad little apostrophes, and maybe a year ago that would have worked on me. But now it makes me want to rip his eyebrows off his face.

After all this time he hasn't once considered that I was hurt ten times worse than he would be from my silence. It was him who made the decision to leave me and find a new partner. His dream to win gold was much bigger than whatever we created the past four years. It was all a lie.

There's no one else for me, ice queen.

"I think you're forgetting *you* left me, Justin. I would never have done that to you."

His gaze flashes before it softens like it does when he knows he's wrong but still won't admit it. "I miss skating with you."

"You're with Julia," I remind him. There's no way he means that.

“For now.” The look he gives me makes my ears burn. “Just remember that I’m here for you, Sierra. Always.”

I want to stamp *liar* on his forehead. *Where were you when I was crying in my hospital room until my throat felt raw? Where were you when I wanted it all to end? Where. Were. You?*

I lock those screaming thoughts behind my calm expression, giving him only what I want him to see. Because even as I clutch the fragments of my past self, I refuse to give him credit for breaking me.

So I nod, turning into the arena, and changing into my skates for another solo practice. But I should’ve known it was coming the moment I stepped onto the rink. *Not again.*

“One hundred, ninety-seven, ninety-four, ninety-one …” I begin to count. My fingers tingle, a numbness setting in as my train of thought derails. My breath hitches, and another weight presses down on my chest, suffocating me. “Shit,” I whisper, the words barely escaping my lips. With trembling hands, I go to reach for my phone—the one I left on the bench. “No, no, no.”

I’d gotten a little cocky and decided to skip my pill. I tricked myself into thinking I didn’t need the crutch.

Today, the rink is deserted since there’s time before practices start, and I’m afraid of how long this pain is going to last. I desperately fist the fabric of my half-zip and pull it away from my chest, holding it there to get a breath in before I pass out. Sweat beads on my forehead and blankets every inch of my skin like I’m standing in the middle of an inferno.

It’s when I close my eyes and try to focus on something—*anything*—that I hear the squeak of the gate and a scratch of ice under shoes before warm hands cup my face.

“Hey. Hey, what’s wrong?”

Dylan.

My face must be pale, sweaty, and contorted. And Dylan fucking Donovan is the one to find me like this. If I could cut a hole in this ice and fall in, I would.

“Breathe. Talk to me, Sierra,” he says. So gently, so carefully, like he thinks I’ll shatter.

My skin grows hotter, and the embarrassment clings to me like the sweat soaking my skin. It could’ve been anyone, anyone but *him. Why is he even here?*

For months, I've managed to handle my panic attacks on my own—save for Scarlett, who's seen more than I ever wanted her to. It's always been in places that feel big and then shrink. Like my dorm, where the walls nearly press in on me as I remind myself I'm not dying. Or that time I was on a park bench, knitting, when the panic was so tight in my ribs that I nearly drove the needle into my chest, desperate for something sharp enough to force my lungs open.

"*Sierra*," he calls again.

"I—I …" The words are lost in a fit of heaving breaths and tears that sting my eyes when I wrench them open. This can't be happening right now. Hyperventilating is one thing, *crying* is so much worse.

"It's okay. You don't have to say anything. Just keep breathing." His brown eyes are so softer than I've ever seen them. It almost distracts me.

Dylan scans the empty rink, and when he's going to move, I tighten my hold on his wrist. If I was in my body at all, I'd be mortified by how frantic I've become, but somehow Dylan understands the unspoken words; his hands remain firm on my face. Exactly where I need them to be.

Even with his touch, my thoughts pierce through like shards of glass. *You should have stayed at home. Everyone was right. You're weak now.*

When Dylan's hands shift to my shoulders, I startle, but he doesn't let go. We glide to the boards. I'm sure he's regretting coming here. I'm sure he has better things to do, like girls he actually likes.

It's a wave, it'll pass. Temporary.

I chant Dr. Toor's words over and over. As soon as we reach the gate, a ragged sob tears from my chest. My balance wavers, and I trip over the rink edge, and not even a second later, Dylan's arm catches me around my waist and pulls me back against his chest.

That's when I give up and drop my weight, taking Dylan down with me. My tailbone hits the rubber flooring with a dull thud, and Dylan lands behind me with a grunt. The gate's metal hook must be digging into his back, but he still doesn't let go. Doesn't let me feel the absence of his touch. Instead, he pulls me in, his legs bracketing mine in a protective cocoon. Then he pulls me in so my back rests against his chest.

"Focus on how my chest moves. Match my breaths, Sierra." His deep voice grounds me like gravity.

When his arms come around my shoulders, I allow myself to hold on to his veiny forearms and sink deeper into him. He inhales an exaggerated

breath, and I follow, holding it for four beats as he does, then breathing out. I can feel his heart beating against my chest, and with each breath, I unconsciously try to sync our heartbeats.

"That's it. Just like that," he whispers against my ear. "You're doing so good." His warm breath falls like a blanket on my skin. "Can you open your eyes and tell me five things you see?"

His voice is melodic, and it forces my heavy lids open again. He's doing one of the grounding techniques I learned in therapy. There's a fleeting thought somewhere in my chaotic mind that wonders how he even knows it.

"The trophy case, your gear bag," I say, breathlessly. The dark blue bag with the Dalton logo and the number twenty is forgotten on the floor near the bleachers like he didn't think, just ran. "The bleachers, an empty s-soda can, your shoes," I say a little quicker now.

"Good girl," he whispers, making goose bumps rise on my neck. "Now, how about four things you feel?"

I don't listen to the voice in my head trying to pull me back, I listen to Dylan. "The rubber mats, my anklet," I say, feeling it pressing into my ankle inside my skates. "Your arms and … your heartbeat."

I also feel the sweat soaking my body, but I keep that to myself.

"Three things you hear?"

"The buzz of the lights." I focus to find something else but the only thing I want to hear is his voice. "Your voice, and … I—I can't hear anything else," I say, and Dylan chuckles. This time the goose bumps that crawl on my skin are a result of his proximity and not the panic attack.

"That's okay. Tell me what you smell."

"You," I say too quickly.

I feel his smile against my temple. We're so close, and everything in my brain and body focuses on that detail. The other sensations flood from my body to welcome whatever the hell this one is. Something familiar, yet so foreign. The darkness in my chest ebbs the longer I stay in the moment, right here on the damp floor, with him. But it's still *him*, and we don't do this.

"I think I'm okay now," I say. The silence is nearly suffocating as I sink back into myself. No one wants to be stuck mending something they didn't break. Especially not some hotshot hockey player. Dylan's not here to spend the day tangled with my anxiety. I can barely do that.

But when I try to move, his hold tightens. I hate how much my body likes it.

"We still have one more. Name one thing you're proud of yourself for today."

The question catches me off guard. I turn to him, but he only watches me with quiet patience. "I'm proud of … waking up on time?"

Dylan gives me a flat look. "No. Try again."

"But that's what I'm proud of," I argue.

"That's a cop-out answer. Your alarm woke you up this morning. Try again."

Actually, it was the awful flashes of the Olympics, but I don't tell him that.

"Fine," I mutter. "I'm proud of …" The words stall on my tongue, stretching the silence too long.

Dylan scoffs. When I glance at him, he's shaking his head. "You're ridiculous."

"What? How?"

"You can't name *one* meaningful thing?"

"I was thinking!"

"For two minutes? It shouldn't take that long." He shifts, and I'm sure the mats are as uncomfortable for him as they are for me. "Sierra, I'm proud of you for getting on this ice today, and even on late nights when you shouldn't be. And I'm proud of you for accepting my help."

I can't speak. Dylan must sense it because, after a heavy perusal of my face, he leans forward until his hands are on my skates. I jerk back to avoid bumping my nose against his cheek. His long fingers work the laces loose, and he pulls off the first skate. And now I don't know if my face is hot from the panic attack or my green chameleon socks.

"Nice socks," he whispers.

"They're good luck," I defend.

He hums in amusement and squeezes my ankle before placing my foot on the rubber floor. I can't hold back the immediate sigh of relief, and I slump into him as he removes the second skate, giving the same squeeze, watching the anklet jingle.

"Is that for good luck too?" Dylan asks, touching the tiny charm.

"Used to be. My old partner gave it to me," I say.

He only nods, and we sit there for a minute—or maybe an hour—but it still feels too short when he stands and pulls me up with him. I spin to face him, still cradled in his arms as he towers over me. I try to stand still, not wanting to force him to stay with me any longer.

I'm proud of you for accepting my help.

Dylan's gaze drops to where my hand clutches the fabric of my half-zip. His fingers hover near the zipper, asking for permission. I nod. Slowly, he slides it down, then helps me pull the sweater off, revealing the low-cut tank top beneath.

"Thanks." It comes out breathless.

His lips quirk. "Didn't think that word existed in your vocabulary."

I roll my eyes. "Shut up."

This time, his laugh booms, nearly making me smile. "There she is."

When I go to smack his chest, he catches my wrist, his grip gentle. Dylan's expression shifts, the teasing warmth replaced by something heavier.

"Are you going to be okay?" he asks, his voice low.

There's something so vulnerable about the question that it falls heavily on my chest. Heavily enough that I can't swallow the ball that forms in my throat. I drop my gaze because it's only a matter of time before I see that look in his eyes. Pity.

He's never looked at me like that, and maybe that's why, no matter how much I've trained myself to shrink, I can never to do that with him. I give in to his words every time. So now, when he's probably looking at me like everyone else, I know I won't be able to handle it.

I try to stop it, but the roughness escapes me. "I'm fine. You didn't have to do that."

Three beats of silence pass, long and awkward. I still don't look at him.

"Are you serious? You looked like you were in pain."

I still am. "I'm not your responsibility, Dylan."

"I never said you were." His voice is low, edged with something I can't quite place. Then voices echoing through the arena pull our attention, and Dylan steps back. "I should go."

He disappears down the hall. I sink back to the floor, feeling like absolute crap. And this time, it's not because of the panic attack.

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ELEVEN

DYLAN

SUMMER PRESTON MIGHT be the grim reaper disguised as a sports psychology student.

"It's not that bad. Quit whining," Summer scolds.

The *it* she's referring to is the six-mile Metacomet hike she dragged me on this uncharacteristically cold September morning at the crack of dawn. Ever since she found out about the suspension, she's been hell-bent on getting me to do an activity every day. Something to do with never becoming complacent with my current situation. It's been pretty damn hard not to be, since the only thing I've ever been talented at slipped through my fingers because of one bad decision. It's exhausting trying to juggle my new lifestyle and having to pay attention in class.

Yesterday, Summer tricked me into Aiden's truck claiming there was an emergency. But when she parked outside Dalton Aquatic Center, I refused to go inside. She had to drag me through the automatic glass doors and into a water aerobics class she signed us up for. She must think we're fucking geriatric. The older women were highly appreciative of my attendance but despite my past, the Stifler's mom—or *grandma*—thing isn't really my style. Since then, I've been avoiding Summer, but she barged in my room this morning with her eyes covered, then guilt-tripped me into this hike. I still think she's getting me back for not telling her I'm Turkish.

"I think you're a sadist," I say.

"I'm flattered," Summer says, almost twisting her ankle on a jagged rock before I steady her. "Now, stop complaining. I'll treat you to Lola's after this."

"You can't bribe me with food, Sunny. I'm not Kian," I retort.

“I know you’re not. Kian doesn’t complain when he hikes with me.”

I laugh. “That’s because the guy is incapable of saying no.”

“It has nothing to do with his savior complex. He enjoys the outdoors.”

The only positive to this hike is that I’m not hungover this time. But even the box-breathing exercises and the stretches we do aren’t enough to distract me from the empty pit.

If I’m not playing, then what the hell am I doing? The campus playboy and party animal badge of “honor” lost its luster pretty quickly. Now that I don’t have hockey, it’s like a curtain has been lifted. I’m not Dylan the left-winger who guarantees a good time, I’m the guy they pity.

What do you do when you lose the one thing you’ve always loved?

The answer isn’t a grueling hike and a disappointing view—post-rain, muggy, and anticlimactic, just like you’d expect. There’s not much to see in Hartford.

The quiet of the hike only makes me replay yesterday morning when I went to the rink to find Kilner but saw Sierra frozen and stiff, in the center of the ice. She was having a panic attack. I only knew that because in freshman year when Kian found out his dad died, I found him in his bathroom gasping for air. When I took him to emergency, they told us it was a panic attack and taught us grounding techniques. But while Kian needed space to breathe when he had his, Sierra didn’t want to let me go.

“Worth it?” I ask Summer, who’s busy snapping pictures of the dull view.

“Seeing you like this is always worth it.” She takes a picture of me and snickers, and I glance back over the edge, considering whether I should just hop over it to avoid another hour of misery.

Kilner: My office. Tomorrow.
Dylan: Can’t you just tell me what it’s about now? Suspense gives me hives.
Kilner: Good. Itch all night.

I’ve gotten this same text from him so many times, I’m considering having them embroidered on a pillow. When we got back from the hike this morning, I decided it was time to study. Now I’m sitting in the Fishbowl—the all-glass study area right by the quad—trying to do just that, when a pink-haired girl sits on the arm of my chair, distracting me from my Venture Capital and Private Equity notes.

“I thought that was you! It’s been a while.”

I search my memory for pink hair, and what looks like two nipple piercings straining against her T-shirt. I haven't had sex in a long time—well, long for me—and my brain seems to be lagging. "Hey … Becca?"

Her smile doesn't waver. "It's Carly."

"Right," I say, leaning back in my chair.

"The football team's having their week zero party, you coming? I'll be there with my girlfriend from Harvard."

Oh. Pink hair. Nipple Piercings. *Threesome*. That night I recall very well, and now she's offering again, and the fact that I hesitate at all makes me want to reevaluate my whole life. But I don't hook up with anyone more than once. There's too much risk of there becoming a dependence. I've kept those rules very clear, and I don't move the goalpost for anyone.

"I'll see if I can make it," I say. Sampson texted me about it earlier, and I haven't replied.

"If you change your mind, you know where to find us." Carly leans in to pull me in for a hug, pressing her tits right up against me. "I'll bring rope."

"Donovan," that smoky voice calls in a bored tone.

The pink-haired girl pulls away, sidestepping Sierra, who stands with her arms crossed, green eyes on me. She doesn't even glance at … what was her name again? I'm really off my game.

Sierra's dark hair is twisted in a clip, two loose strands framing her face like a soft halo. She's got her pink skate bag on her arm, and she's wearing a black skirt and full-sleeve sweater.

I blink innocently. "Me?"

"Don't make this harder than it already is," Sierra mutters, her voice tight. Someone still shushes her, and Sierra's lips press together. "I came here to say—"

Another shush cuts her off, her attempt to whisper swallowed by the irritation in her voice. Suddenly, she grips my wrist and pulls me off the couch. My textbook hits the floor, but I let her drag me wherever she wants. It's a thrill I haven't felt since she yelled at me at that party.

Sierra tugs me between two shelves cluttered with charging laptops. Without skates, I'm reminded just how much shorter she is than me. We're so close that if I leaned down an inch, I could catch the faint scent of cherry lip gloss.

Her green eyes are wider, almost electric, and her glossy bottom lip is caught between her teeth, as if she's nervous. Almost guilty.

“Is claustrophobia your kink? It’s the second time you’ve dragged me into a tight space.”

“Look, I wasn’t in the best headspace on the ice yesterday, and I was harsh when you were only trying to help. My best friend seems to think I could’ve gotten hurt if it wasn’t for you. So I wanted to … apologize. I shouldn’t have spoken to you like that when you were being nice.”

Damn, today is shaping up to be way better than I expected. “Go on.”

She blinks. “That’s it. I just came to apologize for being rude.”

I shake my head. “You suck at this, Romanova. But talk is cheap. I’ll forgive you on one condition.”

“You know, now that I think about it, I can live with this tiny stain on my conscience.” She tries to leave, but I block her exit. The space is barely wide enough to fit my shoulders.

“There’s nothing tiny about me. This’ll be a big stain on your conscience—some may say huge. You won’t be able to sleep without seeing this innocent face.” I pout.

Sierra shifts her weight from one foot to the other, her gaze darting to the clock on the far wall. After hockey practice ends, there’s only so much free ice, so this conversation is cutting into her skating time, yet she’s still here.

“Fine, what do you want?” she asks.

“A kiss.”

She jerks back, nearly hitting the shelf, mouth opening and closing as she searches for the right words.

God, I fucking love this. “Don’t get too excited now. I meant on my cheek.” I tap my face. “And all is forgiven.”

She guffaws. “There is no way I’m going anywhere near your face.”

“Why not? I’ve been told it’s very nice.”

“So this is how you get all those girls. By talking about how pretty your face is?”

I grin. “I never said pretty. That was all you.”

She sighs, then glances around again, her shoulders stiff with uncertainty as she steps into my space. I don’t move, and after a moment of hesitation, she rises on her tiptoes, her lips brushing the corner of my mouth in a quick, almost startled kiss. Before I can react, she jumps back like she’s been burned.

“I am actually sor—” Her attention flicks to a student grabbing a book off a lower shelf.

“Don’t say sorry to me, Sierra. I don’t need it.”

“What was that kiss for, then?”

I shrug. “I just like seeing you squirm.”

“Asshole,” she mutters, slipping out of the cramped space.

“Brat,” I shoot back.

She throws a quick glare over her shoulder before disappearing out of the Fishbowl. With a grin still glued to my face, I walk back to my chair, though it’s hard to study when I can still feel the pressure of her lips on my skin. So I pack up my shit and head home.

THE LAST THING I expect to see when I step through the front door is all my friends sitting at the dining table waiting for me. The tension in the air is thick, like they’ve been holding their breath since I walked in. My stomach twists, a knot of dread forming as I realize something’s off. They all look at me, not with the usual easy smiles, but with concern, even disappointment, and it hits me like a punch.

Aiden has Summer pulled onto his lap in one chair, Kian is beside them with his laptop facing me, Eli and Sage are wearing those under-eye patches looking as serious as ever on a video call, and Cole and Sebastian are half asleep but still present.

“What the hell is this? An intervention?” I laugh, but it sounds hollow even to my own ears. I walk to the kitchen, hoping the movement will distract me from the suffocating tension. I come back with a BioSteel, but when I look up, they’re still there, watching me. It’s like I’m on trial.

“It is,” Summer says quietly, but it feels like a slap.

Before I can ask what she’s talking about, Aiden speaks. “We’re worried about you, D.”

“Your lifestyle isn’t sustainable.” That’s Eli.

“We want to show you we’re all here for you. All of us are present in any way you need, because your health matters,” Kian says. That sounds like some bullshit he read off a pamphlet.

It’s an ambush is what it is.

I’m glaring at him as he’s sitting there wearing sunglasses and holding an ice pack to his head. He should be the last person giving this speech.

Cole pipes up. “Hockey isn’t the same without you.”

“Coach hasn’t smiled once since you got suspended,” adds Sebastian.

I scoff. “Coach hasn’t smiled ever. I’m not sure why you all wasted your time, but this isn’t something I need. I haven’t had more than beer since I found out about the test, and the weed was a onetime thing. Besides, Kian was getting just as hammered, and no one has an issue with that.”

Their somber expressions don’t change. *What the fuck is happening?*

“We’re not here because of the drinking or the weed. We see how much not having hockey is affecting you and we don’t want you to fall down some reclusive hole,” Summer says.

I know she’s worried about me. They all are. But what we have here is important to me, and I wouldn’t ruin it by revealing all these messed-up parts of myself now that it’s already too late. No one wants a broken person around. That’s why alcohol has helped me piece things back together, so I could always be the Dylan they wanted—the one who never adds to the weight they’re already carrying. I was trying to be a friend, an escape for everyone, even if it meant I could never escape myself. I’d be that for them forever because that’s what people need. Not another reason to be depressed. Not another burden.

I feel my jaw tighten, the pressure building in my chest. I can’t let them see me like this.

“Well, this was great, but I don’t want to hear it.” I knew this would happen. I fucking called it. The moment I stopped masking it, reality came crashing through.

“You’re going to have to,” says Aiden. “Coach thinks he can get you back, but you can’t risk it this time.”

The room feels like it’s closing in under the weight of their expectations. I swallow hard, trying to hold it together, but I’m not sure how much longer I can pretend everything’s fine.

“I won’t,” I say.

“You already did,” he says, harsher this time. “You have to figure your shit out for good.”

Summer pulls away from a heated Aiden to hand me a white card that says the name of a therapist who works at our sports clinic. “If you can’t talk to us, talk to someone else. Someone who can help. There’s no pressure.”

I take the card and mutter a thanks that doesn’t sound the least bit appreciative. However, none of them force me to stay. They let me go, and I step straight into my shower.

Here, I don’t have to pretend I’ve got it all figured out.

When I was a kid, whenever my dad came home after a business trip, my mom would rush me into the bathroom and turn on the shower. “The steam is good for your skin,” she’d say, her voice a mix of urgency and comfort. “You can be as quiet or as loud as you want in here.” Then she’d promise she’d be right back, and the door would click shut behind her. After a while, I understood what she was doing. I found myself stepping into the shower more often. By the time I would come out, my dad was gone, and my mom would be in the living room, crying into her clenched fists.

I’m not sure if the card I tossed on my desk can help sort all that out. Especially when I don’t think it ever ended. But what I do know is that I won’t let my friends worry about me. I’ll do whatever it takes to get reinstated.

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TWELVE

SIERRA

WHEN LIDIA TOLD me to meet her this morning, I thought I'd be meeting my new partner. Not sitting in Coach Kilner's office to watch him shuffle through papers and answer calls with quick yeses and noes.

But then there's a knock on Kilner's door, and he drops the stack and rounds his desk. I'm trying to be patient to show Lidia how determined I am to be disciplined with the rigorous training we have to do. But when I look at her, she's blinking rapidly. It throws me off.

I'm counting the number of stress balls in Kilner's office before I hear a voice that makes my stomach flip.

"Have I told you how young you look lately?" The smirk is loud in his voice.

I peek over my shoulder to find Dylan leaning with one hand against the threshold.

"Sit your ass down, Donovan," Kilner says, and my hope of this being a hallucination puffs away.

I'm in a nightmare, and Dylan Donovan is my sleep paralysis demon.

Though instead of the scary long fingers and skeletal frame, it's thick biceps and broad shoulders striding in confidently in gray sweats and a black T-shirt that's tight around his arms, hair a little wavier than usual, like he just rolled out of bed.

Wake up, Sierra!

"Sierra?" Amber brown eyes find me, and he stops. "I was joking about the stalker stuff before, but this is getting a little creepy."

"You two know each other?" Kilner asks.

"Yeah—"

“No,” I blurt at the same time. My fists clench at my sides, and I can’t tear my eyes away from the idiot, who’s staring at me like this is amusing.

When Dylan drops into the seat beside me, he smells fresh, like soap and clean laundry. The distinct smell of him is one I had been surrounded by under the bleachers and in the Fishbowl. When he obnoxiously manspreads, his knee hits mine, and I reflexively pull away. He follows the move with a smile on his lips, like he’s holding back a laugh. How could he possibly find this funny?

“That’s great,” says Lidia. “Because you two will be skating together.”

This can’t be happening to me. I whip my head toward Lidia. “Is this a joke?”

“Coach, I thought this was about my reinstatement,” Dylan says.

“It is,” Kilner says firmly. “They’ve agreed to lift your rink restrictions, but only under one condition—you need to be a part of a sanctioned program.”

Dylan furrows his brows, skepticism written all over his face. I look between Coach and Dylan in confusion. But then Lidia interjects, and it hits me all at once, because this isn’t a sick joke or nightmare. With the way things have been going for me, I should have known.

“Sierra needs a skating partner before the deadline,” Lidia explains, her voice clipped. “And this late in the season, no one else is available. We need someone to help her qualify for next year, and since she’s brought Dalton such positive accolades, they’ve made an exception.”

In other words, the USFS couldn’t find anyone to partner with me. Or worse, no one wanted to. My last flicker of hope swirls away like water down a drain.

“And,” Coach Kilner continues, “since you’re suspended and need to prove your discipline, the dean approved this partnership. You’ll skate with Sierra to help her qualify, and in return, you’ll work toward reinstatement while keeping your ice time. You’ll undergo periodic drug tests, and based on your behavior, it’ll determine your NCAA eligibility and release you from the NHL hold before graduation.”

Dylan leans back in his chair like that’s the last thing he expected.

I don’t want to make a scene in front of Kilner and have him think that I don’t appreciate his help, but this is insanity. I can’t possibly be *this* desperate.

“But he’s a hockey player!” I blurt. From my periphery, I can see Dylan looking at me.

“Actually, I’m suspended,” he says matter-of-factly.

“You know what I mean. You could never keep up with me.”

“Oh yeah? You want to test out my stamina, princess?”

“Dylan,” Coach scolds, and he shuts his mouth. My cheeks are burning when I look between Kilner and Lidia.

“We don’t have much time. Yes or no?” Lidia asks, her bluntness catching me off guard.

“No way.”

“Sure,” Dylan says.

My head snaps to Dylan. His lips are tight, fighting a laugh, but the way his eyes dance with amusement gives him away.

Lidia pins me with a scary look. The last time I got one of those it was because I was training on my off day. “This is not the time to be picky, Sierra. You said you wouldn’t.”

“I know, but—”

“Sierra.” Kilner’s voice is steady. “I understand how much this means to you, and Lidia is well aware of Dylan’s experience. Still, you’re free to require a tryout and decide from there.”

He’s got that fatherly stare he’s given me plenty of times, and I can’t do anything but nod. Then he turns to Dylan with a look sharp enough to cut glass—a silent *Don’t fuck this up*.

Dylan throws his hands up in mock surrender, but his smirk remains intact.

My gaze ping-pongs between the two of them. I can’t quite read Dylan beyond that or find any cracks in the way he wears the confidence of a god.

“Tomorrow, six a.m. sharp. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

Dylan glances at me briefly. “Done.”

“But, Lidia, what about the people you reached out to?” I have to ask.

“I’ve made calls, posted on every forum, and reached out to colleagues. So far, no one has shown interest, and we’re running out of time. If we delay this much longer, you’ll risk missing the qualification window and having to delay your entire season.”

So, it really is true—no one wants me.

She must read that realization on my face. “No one is available in time for what you need. Unless you’re okay sitting this season out.”

I blink away the sting behind my eyes.

“Have the tryout, then take the night to think about it,” Kilner suggests.

I nod, and when we’re dismissed from his office, Dylan’s already headed out the double doors of the arena. I’m chasing him down by the time he’s halfway to his car.

“Donovan,” I call, and he stops just as he reaches for the door handle. He turns, cocks his head, and smiles.

“Don’t even think about showing up tomorrow,” I snap. I don’t have it in me to be subtle. He’s suspended for drug use. And I know his reputation on campus. How could I rely on someone like that when I have so much on the line? I’ll have to try harder to find someone on my own. “This isn’t a joke, and I won’t let anyone screw this up for me.”

He steps into my space. “You need a partner, Sierra. And I’m on suspension. It’s not like I have anything better to do.”

“Gee, thanks. You really know how to make a girl feel special,” I bite out. “But even if I do need a partner, it is never going to be you.”

The words hang between us, sharp and pointed, but he doesn’t back down. Instead, his expression hardens, something competitive flickering in his eyes. That’s when I see the hockey player in him, the one everyone says is dangerous and has a reputation for brawling on the ice.

“Look, we both know I can skate pretty damn well—”

“You’re okay,” I cut in.

“And you need a partner with a schedule that can allow for an intense training plan.”

I hate that he makes sense. “You expect me to believe you actually want to do this?”

He sighs like I’m being difficult. “You were in there with me, Sierra. Does it look like I had a choice?”

My chest feels heavier. The last thing I want is to be in a forced partnership. After Justin, it feels impossible to jump back in and trust someone new. Especially someone whose lifestyle is so different from mine. Dylan plays hockey, but it’s not his entire life. Skating is mine, and he won’t ever understand that.

“Don’t show up tomorrow,” I say.

Dylan raises his brows. “Is that a threat?”

“Yes.”

“Shouldn’t have said that, Sierra. I’m dying to see what one of your threats entails.”

“You don’t want to find out,” I say.

For a moment, he just stares at me, his brown eyes gleaming with something I can’t quite place. I brace myself for a smug comeback, something sharp and infuriating that will make my blood boil. Instead, he steps back, maddeningly confident as he unlocks his black Range Rover.

Before he sits inside, with one hand on the door, he leans just close enough to catch my eye. “See you tomorrow, princess.”

And then he’s gone, the roar of his engine fading into the distance, leaving me standing there, fists clenched, heat prickling at the back of my neck.

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THIRTEEN

DYLAN

BREAKFAST AT THE hockey house was tense. I suppose it's the kind of awkward that lingers long after your friends host your intervention at the dining table. After that the silence in the house felt loud and was only broken by the creepy old radio Kian thrifted last week. It exclusively plays country, but I'm convinced that's his way of getting on Aiden's good side. Apparently, I wasn't the only one who got a lecture. Sucker.

But after my meeting with Coach Kilner and Lidia Orlov, I know this is the only way to prove myself. Still, they've got to be out of their mind if they think Sierra and I could make a good partnership. But watching her squirm? Fuck, it made me wonder what she'd do with my hands on her and her focus on me, inches apart on that ice.

"There he is!" Kian shouts when he enters the house. "Our figure skater."

I had finally sat down to study when my friends burst through the front door. They're wearing plastic glasses with tiny spinning wheels on the sides, one frame emblazoned with a *D* and the other with an *S*.

Great, it's started.

"How do you even know about that?"

"I've got ears everywhere, Dill Pickle. And Aiden told us." Kian drops a giant cardboard box with a thump on the dining table, right where I was trying to study, and beams at me.

He's wearing a T-shirt with Summer's and my faces on it. "What's up with the shirt? Are you starting a cult?"

"More like a fan club," he replies, still grinning. "We've got invitations!"

Summer drops another box on the table. "Except Kian wasn't paying attention, so when I said we needed five hundred invitations, he printed

fifteen hundred." Summer turns back to the front door, probably to grab another box, but Aiden walks in carrying two massive ones.

He deposits one of the boxes and turns to Summer. "Babe, I told you I'd get it."

"You're injured, and I'm stronger than you, Crawford. I do Pilates now." She smiles.

His gaze runs down her body. "I know."

"Ugh, I had enough of this in the car. I think I prefer you guys yelling at me about the invitation mishap," Kian says. "At least now it'll be a rager, and we all know Dylan loves those."

The joke feels off the mark considering they just gave me a stupid intervention and I'm here studying, decidedly *not* at a rager.

Kian thinks I love ragers, and for a while, I did. But the last one was for him. Now that the guys are in the pros, they don't come home much. On Kian's birthday, it was just the two of us, and I wanted to make it count. I threw that party to show him it could still be like old times.

"That would be Dylan from a few weeks ago. The new Dylan reads"—Summer reaches over to flip my textbook—"*The Anatomy of a Merger* in his free time."

"I would be reading it if you guys weren't so distracting," I accuse. Aiden watches me carefully, like he's wondering if this new version of me is real.

Kian snorts. "A face like this comes with consequences that we all have to learn to live with. But all this stuff is for your birthday, so be grateful."

It's hard to feel grateful for something I didn't ask for, but I'd never voice that. Not only because it's Summer's birthday too, but because they've been planning this for weeks. It's the first time in months that we'll all be together, and I promised myself I wouldn't ruin it. I would be the Dylan everyone wants.

Suddenly, the room feels stuffier than usual. When Cole drops into his seat at the table, he whips out his phone and turns the screen toward us. "Did you guys see what Yale did to our mascot? Poor guy got his ass kicked by their Bulldog. We're not letting that slide, right?"

"I'm thinking we kidnap their mascot. That'll show 'em," Sebastian chimes in.

Kian snorts. "Dylan and I already did that sophomore year. I say this year __"

"We do nothing," I cut him off. Aiden watches us closely.

Kian’s gaze flickers to me. “Right, that’s exactly what I was going to say.”

Sebastian and Cole give me a look like I’ve gone crazy.

Aiden laughs with his arms around Summer as she places the sunglasses on his face. “You seriously think I’d fall for that crap? I know you idiots. Just don’t get caught.”

The guys cheer, and for a moment, it feels normal. But then it sneaks in, sharp and heavy, the thought that’s been gnawing at me most nights when I can’t sleep. This isn’t my team anymore. Apparently, figure skating is my only shot at even being considered for reinstatement. If I can’t get that, hockey will just be a distant memory.

I push back from the table, grabbing my keys. “I’ll catch you guys later.” I ignore Aiden’s burning gaze.

Kian grabs my wrist, frowning. “What about the mascot?”

“You’ll figure it out.” I free myself from his hold and keep moving. The weight of their stares follows me to the door, but I don’t look back.

“No invite?” Kian shouts just as I shut the front door.

When I get in my car, I don’t know where I’m headed, but as long as it’s away from the house, anywhere will do.

It’s only fifteen minutes later that I find myself at my frat house. The Kappa Sigma Zeta brothers are more than happy to welcome me, because apparently the failed drug test doesn’t affect my membership. The ass-kissing has gotten out of control. Another thing out of control? The party they’re having. I had just fallen asleep in my room upstairs when the thumping started.

I realize pretty soon that frat parties are fucking boring when you’re sober. This is the third time someone’s tried to bribe me into doing a keg stand. The second time, Kian—yeah, he followed me—asked if I’d hold his hair back if he was throwing up in a toilet bowl. His hair is barely past his ears. And the first time, I wished parties ended at ten p.m.

The booze makes everything better, or at least easier to ignore. I’m slouched on a stool in the kitchen, watching drunk couples go at it against every available wall. It’s like a full-contact sport just to squeeze past them. Not that I can judge. I’ve definitely been that guy.

I’m half scrolling through my phone when an email from my dad’s assistant pops up, asking me to RSVP for the vow renewal. I shove my phone in my pocket, slide off the stool, and head to the living room.

Before I can make it, Mehar Chopra steps in front of me. Her hand brushes my chest, and I try to flip the switch, be the guy she was with that night. Just to keep up that version of me, even though what we had was a onetime thing. It always is. But her voice is just static, her laugh echoing in some far-off tunnel.

She shakes her head, then hands me a can before walking off. White Claw. As I'm going to the back door, my fingers itch to crack it open, but I leave it on a table.

Then, like someone lifting noise-canceling headphones, she comes into focus. Black hair, green eyes, bold red lips. Sierra's perched on a chair while the group around her clinks shot glasses and laughs loud enough to shake the walls. Her redheaded friend—Scarlett, I think—slaps her leg, doubled over in laughter, but Sierra's smile fades the second Scarlett looks away.

There's no telling why I walk over to her, but I've stopped trying to understand the shit I do when I see her. *Like agreeing to be her fucking partner.*

"Double D!" one guy shouts. My eyes don't stray from the girl who's suddenly gone rigid. Scarlett nudges her, but Sierra only empties her can.

My head cocks with an amused smirk when Scarlett eyes me curiously.

"My friends back at Waterfell weren't too happy after that last game against you guys," the blond in front of Sierra says, pulling my attention away from her. I have no fucking clue what he's talking about. Last semester is a blur, and I have no desire to relive those games. I was reckless, irritable, and far too eager to bash my fists into something on the ice. The commentators dubbed me Dalton's most physical player. It pissed me off.

"Which friends?" I ask, my tone flat with disinterest.

"Well, the defenseman you cross-checked, for starters," he says.

Oh. That game. It was after another one of my mom's calls saying my dad hasn't been home for days. Not my finest moment. But it wasn't a fucking cross-check. Their massive defenseman, eyes glinting like melted gold, came at me just as hard as I came at him. Helmets flew off, noses and lips were bloodied, and I even managed to tear his jersey, revealing a tattoo that resembled one of those swirly Van Gogh paintings.

"A game's a game, buddy. Pretty sure we ended up at their house party afterward." I only remember that because I got so drunk I woke up in a

room I didn’t recognize.

I shake the memory away only to see Sierra placing her second empty can onto the table, then excusing herself quietly. A subtle trace of cherry lingers in the air when she brushes past me.

Like a dog caught on a scent, I trail after her into the second living room. She finds an empty couch by the window and plops down in relief.

I collapse on the cushion right beside her, and she goes rigid. She grips tightly onto another can, and I have no clue when she grabbed that. I can’t help but wonder why she’s indulging, and whether it’s because of this morning.

Sierra groans loudly, rolling her eyes in that way I’ve become too accustomed to. She mutters something about staying for Scarlett.

“Can’t leave me alone?” she says, irritation lacing her words.

“Incapable of it,” I say.

Sierra’s red lips flatten into a thin line. “First you want to be my partner, and now you’re following me around. I think you’re the one who’s obsessed.”

I lean back on the couch. “Nah, I just like to know when the circus is coming to town.”

Her glare sharpens. “Funny, I thought you were their opening act, *Captain*.”

“Sounds like you’ve been asking around about me. Trying to get to know your new partner, or do you just like calling me *captain*?”

“I’m not impressed. Your praise either comes from sorority girls or your frat brothers.” Sierra sloshes around her half-empty can just as a group of girls stumble into the quiet of this second living room. “Your fans are admiring you,” she mocks.

I turn to see one of the girls waving at me. I wave back.

“Is that like your bat signal or something? Are your pants going to fly off?”

“I just said hi. You’re the one who wants my pants to come off.”

She tips her can in the girl’s direction. “So, she’s not your next conquest?”

“*Conquest* would mean I have to win her affection. I’m pretty sure I already have it.”

Sierra looks at the girl again, before hesitantly meeting my eyes. “Why her? What makes her worthy of *the* Dylan Donovan.”

I shrug. “She seems like a fun time.”

Her green eyes soften, probably from the alcohol. “And how do you determine that?”

“It’s not a tangible thing; it’s her energy,” I say. “Wanna know what yours says?”

I’m not sure I can even read it half the time, but right now, it’s all heat, crackling like thin ice splintering under the weight of a skate.

“No. But you might wanna go get her before her eyes fall out of her skull.”

I cock my head. “I don’t think I will.”

“But isn’t that your thing?”

“My *thing*? You make it sound like I’m a player. It’s just sex—completely consensual, and fun for everyone. No strings, no awkward talks.” My eyes flick to the lip she drags between her teeth. “And definitely no feelings.”

“I’m well aware of what sex in college is like. You don’t need to defend yourself to me.”

“I’m not.” It comes out more defensive than I intended.

Without another word, she pushes off the couch, standing to fix her skirt, but she missteps and falls right back down. Almost completely in my lap.

“Whoops,” she mumbles, scrambling to sit on the actual couch. “Stood up too fast.”

“Or drank too fast. Am I that unbearable, Sierra? That I’m driving you to drink?”

Her eyes lock on mine, sharp enough that I swallow. She shifts to face me, and the air hums when her hand lands on my thigh, and the warmth of her palm seeps through my jeans. *Fuck*, I’m too sober for this.

“Something like that,” she says.

Without much thought, I tuck a strand of her hair behind her ear. She swallows, and the delicate column of her throat moves before whatever usually holds her back seems to disintegrate with the help of the drink in her hand.

“Why do you want to help me?” Sierra asks softly, her hand pressing harder. Each press of her warm, soft fingers on my leg leaves a static charge in their wake.

“I told you, Sierra. This’ll help us both.”

The air between us crisps like a dare, and I fix my gaze on her. When she stands to leave, I instinctively reach out, my fingers wrapping loosely around her wrist. I don't know why, but the thought of her leaving makes my solar plexus ache.

Sierra stands between my legs. Then her hand comes up to push my hair back. She drags her fingers through it slowly, almost hypnotically, head tilting and green eyes assessing my reactions. My eyes nearly droop, and when she brushes a thumb over my lips, I bite her finger lightly between my teeth. I hear her quick inhale before she tugs it out of my mouth. The air between us crackles. Sierra studies me carefully before offering her drink to me.

"Not drinking tonight," I reply.

She hums, continuing to weave her fingers through my hair, and I fight the urge to pull her onto my lap and let her do this all night. Sierra steps even closer, her thighs brushing the fabric of my jeans, igniting something raw and dormant.

"Not even like this?" she asks, taking a sip from her can, the liquor pooling in her mouth. My heart stops when Sierra leans forward and sinks her fingers into my hair, a spark lighting in my abdomen when she yanks my head back. I barely stifle a groan, my lips parting as I gaze up at her.

I knew she would be like this, that she'd like it rough. I could give it to her exactly how she'd want it. Hands behind her back, ass against my hips, my teeth nipping her ear until she came with me inside her.

Sierra raises a brow, a silent challenge hanging in the air as she waits for my answer.

I blink. Then I nod, once, twice, and repeatedly until she bites her red lip to stop a smile, still waiting for something.

"Yes," I finally say.

Sierra lets the warm alcohol trickle from her mouth to mine, the bitter sweetness spreading on my tongue. I know then that I'd never have a sip on my own if I could taste it like this forever.

She lowers her head, her nose grazing mine. "Swallow."

I do.

She's smooth as silk and pretty as sin. It's hard for me to ignore that fact while I think about how I'd let her drown me in whatever else she lets me taste from her lips.

Sierra stays close, her breath feathering over my skin, and we remain like that, as though neither of us can decide whether we should pull away or close the space between us.

"There you are!" Kian shouts when he stumbles into the living room. "Seb and Cole asked if you could drive them home. The guys said I can crash in your room tonight."

Sierra pushes away from me, but I don't release my hold on her wrist. When she goes for another sip of her can, I snatch it from her and place it on the floor. Whatever that was between us was a product of alcohol, and I'd much rather she test that reckless confidence on me than some prick at this party.

"Unless you're drinking." Kian's gaze bounces between us, his eyes narrowing.

"I'm good," I say as I stand. Although, even the sip of alcohol from pouty red lips could make it feel like there's six shots of Everclear running through my bloodstream.

He gives me two thumbs up and disappears. Sierra's awfully quiet beside me. I don't know what she's thinking or whatever that was on the couch, but I don't want it to end.

"Do you—"

"Don't come tomorrow," she says abruptly, before nearly sprinting out of the living room. I can't think straight, but when Cole and Sebastian chant my name, I'm forced to walk out the door instead of following her. Being Sebastian and Cole's designated driver is annoying as hell. When they refuse to get out of the car, I leave them in there. They can find their way inside.

In the kitchen, my hands itch for something to drink, but alcohol seems bland after tonight. However, I do notice that the bottle of Absolut I've kept in the freezer is missing. I'm going to kill Sebastian for stealing it again. But it might be for the best.

"Shit, Dylan. At least turn the lights on," Summer says.

I swivel my head to see her at the threshold wearing a baggy Toronto Thunder T-shirt.

"Hey, Sunny."

"Oh, I forgot to ask. Did your meeting with Kilner go well? Are you ice skating now?"

“Yeah, it’s gonna be great. I’ll be reinstated,” I say, even though I’m not sure that’s the truth.

Summer shuts the fridge with a decisive thud and steps in front of me. “You’re not fooling me with this act. I see you’re hurting, Dylan. Just talk to me when you need to.”

“I will.”

Summer sighs but squeezes my shoulder before turning to grab a can of whipped cream from deep in the fridge, avoiding eye contact as she sprints out of the kitchen.

Yeah, weird fucking night.

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FOURTEEN

SIERRA

HAVE I MENTIONED I do stupid things when I'm drunk?

Stupid enough that even with the alcohol in my bloodstream last night, sleep refused to come when Scarlett and I stumbled back to the dorm. Instead, I got in bed, and the night replayed in vivid flashes: long fingers gripping my waist, his rough voice, his Adam's apple bobbing when he swallowed the alcohol from my mouth.

I have no clue where that version of me even came from, but Dylan's energy is contagious. It all felt reminiscent of the braver me, the one who didn't have so much to lose. It's why I felt restless under my covers last night, my fingers drifting beneath the waistband of my pajamas. I haven't been able to pleasure myself since the accident, never cared to, never *wanted* to. But with just a light brush of my fingers, pressure started to build, rumbling to life like an old car. All I could hear and feel were his voice and hands, his thighs and arms caging me in. Just as quickly as the electric feeling began to spark across my body and I thought I finally did it, the impending orgasm died. The euphoria was instantly lost to my loud, restricting thoughts. Snuffed out like a flame.

Call it shame or guilt, I don't know, but it held me back from an orgasm that I'm sure would have had me moaning a name I shouldn't.

So this morning, I woke up a little frustrated and felt like my tension headaches were coming back. Now, sitting in the bleachers, it's exactly three minutes before six and I'm still scrolling through forums looking for potential partners. Maybe Lidia missed someone. Maybe I overlooked a hidden gem.

I stop on a profile, swiping through pictures of the skater on the forum and reading his biography.

"Last-ditch effort?" Dylan's deep voice cuts through my thoughts, yanking me back to the present. "I heard he has gonorrhea."

"I'll be sure to remember that when I'm having sex with him during our long program."

He snorts. "I doubt he'd last that long."

I give him a sidelong glance, scrutinizing him sitting here at six a.m. sharp and not heeding my threat. "Should've known you don't do what you're told."

"What can I say? I like to be punished."

"How submissive of you," I say dryly.

"Yeah? Are you into that? Because I could be, depending on the reward."

God, he's distracting. I try not to pay attention to the reactions from my body and focus on my phone.

Dylan peeks over my shoulder. "Olympics and Harvard? What a try-hard."

I turn to him before jerking back when my nose almost grazes his cheek. "I went to the Olympics and I'm at Dalton. Are you calling me a try-hard too?"

"Nah, you're impressive. *He's* a try-hard."

"You're just jealous that I have better options than you for partners."

"You can only pick one, Sierra. And I'm always in the lead."

We stare at each other for so long, I can almost see him thinking about last night. By some miracle, he doesn't bring it up. He doesn't mention how my hands sank into his hair, weaving through his locks like I had some right. Or the moment I let the drink spill from my mouth into his, as though that was something we've always done.

"Think about the children, Sierra."

I give him a blank look. "You mean the ones you probably flushed down the toilet this morning?"

"Dylan!" Coach Lidia shouts. "I said on the ice at six. I don't see you ready to go."

He glances at me. "Is she always like this?"

I shrug innocently. With a shake of his head, Dylan skates toward the center of the rink. He's wearing a fitted long-sleeve T-shirt with a checkmark logo, snug around his arms. He exchanges quiet words with

Lidia and she *laughs*. I can't hear anything, so I move down the bleachers, edging closer to the ice, my eyes never leaving him.

"I found videos of your past performances with your sister. I had no idea you two made it to the ISU Championship twice. Very impressive," Lidia says.

Finally, Dylan gets into position, and Lidia starts barking orders. "Start with a clean edge into a lunge," she calls out, her eyes keen as she watches him. "Now into a combination spin."

I sit there, my leg shaking, waiting for him to mess something up.

His triple axel makes my grip tighten on my phone. It's too clean for someone who doesn't do this professionally. It's not fair.

Lidia turns to me, catching my eye from where she stands. I snap my gaze back to my phone, pretending to diligently scroll.

I want him to mess up, just a little. Something, anything to remind me why I don't want him as a partner. But for sixteen minutes, he does everything she says almost too well. But then it's the last Salchow that he fails to land on a proper edge and screws it up completely.

Ha! I'm gloating, until Lidia gestures for him to stop, but she's smiling. "Well, I can definitely say I'm surprised, son. There's plenty of work to do if we're talking competitions, but that's a stunning start."

"But that Lutz was brutal. No wonder he stuck to playing hockey," I say when I rush over.

Lidia blinks. "Any luck with your search?"

I deflate. "No."

"I'd say it's a pretty simple choice. That is if you two agree on this partnership and Dylan completes his physical and drug test. Completely clean." She looks at Dylan and emphasizes the last part. He's still smug as hell. I kind of want to deck him in the face. "Both of you get back to me by tonight. We don't have time to waste."

"Did she call you *son*?" I hiss when she's out of earshot.

"Son. Best skater she's ever seen. Ridiculously handsome. I couldn't really keep track."

My retort is caught in my throat when I see who's on the ice. Along with other skaters, there's one that always manages to make my throat close. Justin is talking to his coach on the opposite edge of the rink.

"You're better than him," Dylan comments.

I almost laugh. The one thing Justin has always made it a point to tell me is how much stronger and more capable he is than me. Every time we practiced, every wrong move or slipup was my fault. It made me a better skater as the years went on, but never good enough. *You wouldn't be able to do what I do, Sierra.*

"I know," I lie.

Dylan either picks up on my half-hearted response or just can't resist hearing himself talk, because he adds, "Sure, he can toss her around, but you have more skill. Your movements aren't just memorized, you embody them. And that's what makes a good skater great."

"And what would you know about that?"

"Considering you can't take your eyes off me every time I skate, I'd say I know a whole lot."

"I was just picturing you covered in dirt." I cross my arms. "And that was a silly practice skate; you're not nearly as good as professionals."

"Maybe, but your choices are what, slim to … none?"

I grow defensive. "Not none. If I asked, I'm sure *he* would say yes in a heartbeat." I hitch a thumb to Justin before I realize it. *Did I actually say that out loud?*

Dylan's brows shoot up, and my stomach twists. "Yeah? I'll take that dare," he says, eyes sparking with challenge.

I bristle. "Huh?"

"Go ask him," he says. "If you're so confident. You know, really rub it in my face how much you don't need me. Then I'll happily get off your back and tell Kilner and Lidia that you're right."

My pulse spikes. Shit, shit, *shit*. "Fine," I say.

"Fine?" He raises a brow, clearly surprised.

"Fine," I grind out. Then I take every ounce of my self-respect and shove it deep, deep down. Each step feels like trudging through quicksand, the weight of what I'm about to do clinging to my ankles, trying to drag me back.

I drag my feet over to the edge of the rink where he's standing. "Justin."

He turns, and that familiar surprised yet easy smile spreads across his face.

"Ice queen," he says. The nickname grates against my ears. For so long I let it define me. I was the angry, bitchy, *cold* figure skater. That's how I won

gold at sixteen, and how we made it to the Olympics. But I'm so sick of it. I want to be someone's warmth for once.

"As you probably know, I'm skating again."

Justin nods, too eagerly. For a second, I glance behind me, seeking some kind of push, but the bench is empty. Dylan's already gone. When I turn back to Justin, it all hits me like a flashback. The *I love you* pressed against my lips, *no matter what* before we started our routine, *we're fucking disqualified because of her?* after I'd fallen.

Instead of pushing through the dare, I blurt out a hasty, "Never mind," and bolt.

In the changerooms, I scroll through forums, but it's futile. None of the available skaters have schedules that align with mine, neither would they be willing to train half as hard as I am. I have something to prove; they don't.

I lift my gaze from my phone to my locker—the one with the picture of Scarlett and me at age four, attending our first learn-to-skate program—my smile is wide and excited. I want to be that girl again. I know that I have to suck up my pride for the next three months. Because there's only one other person who has something to prove. And he just so happens to be a suspended hockey player.

WHEN I WALK into the hockey house, I have half a mind to walk right back out. It's dark out because it took going on a walk to the convenience store and buying a pack of Reese's Peanut Butter Cups to build up the courage. I never let myself indulge because my body needs to earn it. But just having the candy feels like a reward. One of Dylan's teammates, Kian Ishida, let me in. Dark hair, dark eyes, and tattoos peeking out of his cropped T-shirt, spanning his muscled abdomen, thighs, and neck. If not for the thick unicorn headband he's wearing, he'd be kind of intimidating.

But the reason for my sudden cold feet: Dylan Donovan standing shirtless, in only a pair of loose flannel pajama pants that hang so low on his waist, I can see that V-shaped muscle that goes down to his … *nope*. Worst of all, he's wearing *glasses*. Black brow line framed and devastating. What kind of sick optometrist would approve of this?

Dylan leans against the archway watching TV while holding a cereal bowl in one hand and a spoon in the other. His jaw works slowly, each bite stealing my attention. The light from the living room casts a bright glow

over his tan skin. He's all hard muscles and smooth skin. I imagine how his body would feel under my palms. Warm, hard, soft—

"You got a visitor, D," Kian says, scattering my thoughts before he sends a stray golf ball past my feet. I blink, taking in the scene of two other guys playing mini golf in the hallway. They wave at me.

The interruption shifts Dylan's focus. His eyes meet mine, and there's a flicker of something in them that makes my stomach flip. Mischief, I decide.

One roommate rushes past me for the ball that he launched down the hall, leaving Dylan and me, with only the sports channel commentator's voice for a distraction.

If he's trying to make me uncomfortable, he's nailing it. His gaze sweeps over me, deliberate and slow, like he's mapping every inch of me in a way that feels oddly intimate. Though that could be the result of my mind being in the gutter last night. I'm fully covered—mom jeans, a black long-sleeve shirt, and the blue-and-white-checkered sweater I painstakingly knit over the summer—but somehow his eyes manage to burn through the layers, searing the skin beneath. It's unnerving. And no one unnerves me.

"Can we talk?" I finally say, breaking the silence because clearly, he's content to just stare me into the next century. "In your room or something?"

Dylan's still looking at me as he finishes the last bite of his cereal and drops the spoon into the bowl with an exaggerated *clunk*. "Not sure if I'd feel safe in there with the girl who threatened my life earlier."

"That was a friendly joke," I say.

"Do you tell all your friends you'd enjoy seeing them covered in dirt?"

"Fine. Let's talk here, then." I take a deep breath. "I accept."

Dylan pauses, processing my words with an infuriating slowness. He deliberately moves to get the cereal box, adds more cereal, and takes a loud bite.

"Accept what?" he asks, through a mouthful of shredded wheat.

"For you to be my partner."

He raises an amused eyebrow. "If I recall correctly, you told me you could have anyone—including your perfect ex-boyfriend, who looked more than happy to fill the role," he says, his voice steady but his jaw tight. "Now you want me? The sloppy footwork hockey player? I'm no one's second choice, princess."

His words hang in the air, layered with a hint of challenge.

“One, Justin is my *former partner*. Two, you’re technically not a hockey player as of this semester. Three, you’re a good figure skater, and you know it.”

“Good?”

“Great,” I rectify.

“Great?”

I narrow my eyes to slits, refusing to let him bait me. “If you’re fishing for more compliments, you won’t get them from me. But me standing here, asking you to be my partner, should be enough.”

He tilts his head with a boyish grin. “But you really hurt my fragile ego with your little temper tantrum in Kilner’s office. I could be persuaded though.”

I scoff. “Actually, I think it’s you who should make it up to me. Did you forget about the IOU? I’m cashing it in.”

He shakes his head like I’m sorely mistaken. “That was for your friend, not you.”

“She’d use it for me.” He’s so smug right now, I wish I could just walk out. But I need him, and he knows it too. “Kilner and Lidia want an answer. If you’re my partner, I can get you back on the ice. You can show the sports director you aren’t messing around and get reinstated,” I say. “So, yes or no? I think I’m getting a rash from being in this house for so long.”

“Oh yeah? Are you allergic to hockey players or something?” he mocks.

“I’m allergic to your cocky attitude.”

“Trust me, you haven’t seen cocky yet.” Then he tilts his head. “I don’t think I like your hostility. Ask me again.”

“You’re seriously going to make me work for it? You don’t even have a choice.” I’m the one who holds his career in my hands, so why does it feel like he’s the one in control?

He blinks. “Still sound frigid to me.”

Asshole just called me *frigid*. “Be my partner,” I grit out.

“*Nicely*, Sierra.”

“Be my partner …” I swallow the thickness blocking the word. “*Please*.”

He stops, like he’s weighing whether to torture me some more. But he glances at my clenched fists, drops his bowl on the table, and heads straight down the dark hallway, probably to his room. I don’t dare follow.

I’m left staring at the rippling muscles on his back when he says, “I’ll see you on the ice, princess.”

The nickname grates my ears. “Asshole,” I mutter.
“Brat,” he says, and then his bedroom door closes.

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FIFTEEN

SIERRA

CHEMISTRY.

I don’t think I’ve ever hated a word more.

“Like any type of dance, partners need to have chemistry.” Lidia continues her speech from the sidelines, and it’s longer than I remember. Though that’s probably because she thinks Dylan and I won’t take this seriously.

Understandable since we spent the first five minutes of practice elbowing each other out of the way as we tried to get through the gate and onto the ice first. I won, obviously.

But it didn’t help that Lidia’s been eyeing me the entire time. It’s because when he walked into practice this morning, I couldn’t stop staring at Dylan. His shirt clings to every muscle, and those slim workout pants leave little to the imagination. I’m pretty sure Lidia caught me fully checking out his ass. And now, with his fresh scent lingering in the air between us, I struggle to keep my focus on her speech.

It wasn’t like this with Justin. Our first practice was all business—formal, obedient. None of his glances set my cheeks on fire. Justin is strong and lean, of course, but Dylan is … *big*. He’s bulkier, his shoulders are broader, and his arms might be bigger than my thighs, and that’s saying something, because I’ve got strong thighs. But with all that, he’s also more irritating.

“You seem nervous, Romanova,” he whispers, leaning in as Lidia goes on.

“For you. I hope I don’t accidentally cut you, *Captain*.” But I love the way his jaw tenses at the mention of his fleeting title.

"… you will learn each other's timing and cues; you'll read each other's movements; you'll be in sync. Fluid. Tethered," Lidia drones on.

"Sounds like a prison sentence," Dylan mutters.

"I'm sure you've been handcuffed before."

He lets out a low chuckle. "Only to my bed."

"Listen with your ears, not your mouth," Lidia snaps, looking up from her clipboard. "Sierra, if you're comfortable, we should discuss your injury so Dylan can adjust his approach."

I feel like the new kid in school who's forced give three facts about themselves. Except mine are all trauma. "It's not a secret, Lidia. He knows I fell. They haven't taken down the video, so he can look it up like everyone else." A ball of dread drops into my stomach.

"How'd you fall?" Dylan asks me.

He hasn't seen it? I don't look at him. "I messed up our reverse lasso."

I can feel him staring at me, but Lidia must notice my unease, because she claps twice. "Okay, enough chatting. Show me your edge work."

I thought we were done with this. We spent two hours on the ice skating laps on our own. It quickly became a competition, and when I realized Dylan might actually be faster than me, I put everything into moving quicker. Lidia was still shouting *Deeper edge work!* for the hundredth time when it felt like some of my stamina from years ago shot back into my body. It didn't work; he was still two laps ahead.

So this time I don't wait for her signal, I just take off.

"As partners!" Lidia calls out. "Side by side and hold hands."

I stand tall, refusing to backtrack. Instead, I lift my hand, palm up, offering it to him. I hear the scrape of his skates behind me before his hand slips into mine, the cold of his skin seeping through the warmth of my glove.

"You're not wearing gloves," I note. "Your hands are cold."

"Are they? I don't usually hold the guys' hands during hockey practice."

I roll my eyes. "You should really wear gloves when we're not doing lifts."

"Is it uncomfortable for you, princess?" he asks, his voice dripping with mock concern.

I glide forward, and so does he, perfectly in sync. The rink is quiet today —no music, just the rhythmic scrape of our blades on the ice. Even with

simple crossovers, our movements blend with surprising fluidity. Lidia's lack of shouting tells me we're doing something right.

As we do another lap, I spot Lidia talking to someone by the hallway. I elbow Dylan, and he's about to elbow me back when I point toward her.

"Isn't that Reed? The one who forced you off the ice last week?" I ask.

He glances at them. "Probably making sure I'm not violating my suspension." The strain in his voice is almost imperceptible, but I hate that I notice it. I skate ahead of him again, but he catches up easily.

"Trying to escape me?"

I would never admit that I doubt that I could outskate him. "Something like that."

"Then you probably shouldn't have begged me to be your partner, Romanova."

"There was no begging involved. I'd probably be a whole lot nicer to you if I did beg. But you don't have the upper hand here, Dylan. You need me just as much as I need you."

"Say that again," he says. "The needing me part. But slower this time, and put a little emphasis on *need*."

I roll my eyes. "Again, I never begged."

"Now that you mention it, I think I'd like that. A lot."

"You think I care about what you want?"

"*Need*," he corrects. "And I think you should care a whole lot."

"Why? Are you planning on dropping me? Been there, done that, Donovan," I joke, but it comes out hoarse.

"What?" He rears his head just slightly, not finding it funny at all. His relaxed demeanor puffs away. "You seriously think that I'd drop you? After all you've been through, you think there'd be a second that I'd ever let you touch the ground before I could catch you?"

I've never joked about falling before. This was the first time I'd let my trauma trickle into a conversation so easily. But even saying it felt a little too soon. I'm sure it always will.

"Sierra," he prompts.

"No, I don't." *Now* I don't. He's so serious about this, I can't mistake his sincerity for anything else. It hadn't occurred to me until now how much I let the fall with Justin begin to wedge itself into our skating relationship.

"Good, because I won't."

Lidia's whistle sounds again. "That's enough warm-up. It's time for mats."

I groan.

THE ROOM IS the size of the dorms in Iona House that nobody wants. Turns out Lidia's "technology is evil" stance messed up the bookings for the training rooms. We walk past the occupied room that doubles as the yoga studio, already being used by other students.

So now we're stuck in a room so small that if we added another person, we'd suffocate. It's extra hot too because of the boiler tank in the corner. There is one window that Lidia asked Dylan to reach, but it's jammed. I'm not even sure if we're allowed to be in here, but with everything in this building booked, we have no choice.

The crash mats are a flashback to how many times I've landed on them face-first. I've done this with Justin countless times, but they were decidedly unmemorable. Today it feels intense. Or I assume it's going to be since my partner is Dylan fucking Donovan.

A bead of sweat trickles down my back as Lidia tries to get the old tabletop fan to work. Dylan tugs off his hoodie, and the white tank he has underneath lifts to expose a flash of smooth skin, but I look away immediately. I'm desperate to remove my own half-zip, but I've only got on a sports bra underneath, and knowing Dylan's hands are going to be all over my abdomen, I'd rather not have my scars on display.

"Stand closer together," Lidia commands, giving up on the appliance. "Closer, Sierra."

I try to stay composed even though I know Dylan's grinning his head off right now.

"Okay, basic lifts today. Let's start with a shoulder lift." I stand in front with my back to him, and he loops his arm around my waist, placing his hand firmly on my abdomen to pick me up and suspend my body weight entirely on his shoulder. "Now spin before you let her back on her feet and face each other."

Dylan's hand covers my entire torso, and he lifts me like I weigh nothing. I hadn't expected it to feel this different, but it does. He doesn't strain or need to adjust his hold, he just does it, like it's easy. Like I'm easy.

“Again. Smoother this time,” Lidia says when I’m on my feet. And we do it again, and again, and again. It’s on the ninth lift that Dylan starts to breathe a little harder, but he doesn’t complain.

“Engage your core. Turn on your green light.

“Let your touch guide you into each movement. Again—this time in sync.

“Arms relaxed. Relaxed! I said *relaxed*!”

Her final shout is laced with pure frustration, the anger in her voice sharper. But her irritation doesn’t even come close to the one simmering beneath my skin. My chest heaves with each ragged breath, and my zip-up clings to me, soaked with sweat. I already know my abdomen’s going to be a patchwork of bruises by tomorrow.

The intensity of his eyes bore into mine like beams of sunlight, and even the burning sensation can’t make me look away. Lidia shouts out a series of moves—hip, cradle, hand to hand. We do them, all of them. Dylan’s hands are firm on my waist, sliding all over my body when he lifts me on his hip and we spin. His rhythm is perfect; he moves like water. There’s a kindling somewhere low in my stomach that I ignore when he lifts me just slightly over his head. I expect my heart to race, or stop, or my breathing to become shallow, but instead I feel normal.

“How did that feel, Sierra?” Lidia asks. She looks much happier than before.

I feel like a child, but I understand her concern. “Comfortable.” And suffocating. The dichotomy makes my head spin.

The moves are simple, and I know Lidia’s not pushing me into any real lifts, but we won’t win anything this way. Judges don’t respond well to safe performances.

“Again,” Lidia shouts. “Watch each other. Stay in sync.”

Her words muffle in my ears when the music restarts, and Dylan’s hands slide down my body—from my face, down to the curve of my neck, over my arms, where his thumb brushes the side of my breasts. My breath hitches, and my gaze springs away from his.

“Eyes on me, Sierra,” he reprimands.

Everything feels hot and dangerous. Having to look into Dylan’s eyes only makes it all the more intense. Each of his long fingers presses over the fabric of my half-zip down to my waist, where the hem rises, exposing a sliver of skin on my back, and lower, until he rests his palm on my hip.

There’s a hot flush that travels with the touch, and I can’t seem to look away from his gaze pinning me right there, unwavering.

All I hear, all I *feel*, is my heart thrumming below the surface of my electrified skin. The room is stuffy as Lidia corrects our stance, forcing us closer than before, placing our hands in each other’s.

This time, when Dylan sets me down, I trip over his foot and fall face-first. Yup, the mats still taste the same.

“Thanks a lot, butterfingers,” I mutter.

“You fell all on your own,” Dylan retorts. “Probably because you’re so stiff.”

I grit my teeth. “Your hold is too loose. You would never be able to lift me for long enough on the ice.”

Coach nods, staring at the mats for what feels like an eternity. “Good. Constructive criticism is good.” That sentence alone tells me it is *not* in fact *good*. “But those are small problems. Problems that partners work through because they trust each other.”

Dylan scoffs, and my head snaps in his direction. It irritates me even more.

His wavy brown hair falls perfectly over his forehead, and he’s not even sweating—like tossing me around for the past hour is just part of his morning routine. Meanwhile, I’m drenched, muscles burning, and all I can think is how effortless he makes everything look. It’s infuriating.

“Dylan, put your hands on her waist, and, Sierra, press into his shoulders as he lifts you. You need to focus on control and eye contact—” Lidia’s phone rings. “I need to take this. Don’t kill each other.”

My eyes dart to the door, and I sigh. “I’ll be in control.”

“Just how I like it,” Dylan says.

I ignore him, purposely avoiding eye contact. When his hands bracket my abdomen, my stomach is sore, but I don’t complain.

“Lidia specifically said we have to maintain eye contact. Why can’t you look at me?” Dylan asks suddenly, breaking the silence.

“I am,” I reply, keeping my tone flat.

“You’re looking through me, not at me.”

My chest tightens as I force my gaze up to meet his. “Happy?”

His eyes flicker over my face, lingering on my lips, tracing the curve of my cheeks. “Extremely.”

“Can we just get this over with?”

“Are you sure? That means you’ll have to keep looking at me. I don’t want to put you out, Sierra. Maybe I should put a bag over my head.”

My lips twitch. “Please do. That would solve half my problems.”

“Yeah? Has my face been on your mind? In your dreams, maybe?”

I bristle. “Mm-hmm. You’re in a lot of them, actually.”

His brows lift with interest. “Yeah? What do we do in them? I should know, considering you’re using my likeness for your fantasies. Could be illegal.”

I stare him down, refusing to falter. “There’s a lot of digging.”

His smirk vanishes. Without warning, he spins me sharply, then pulls me back into his chest. The retaliation knocks the air from my lungs, and I grunt, barely catching my balance as my hands tighten on his biceps.

My gaze snags on the veins on his forearms, but I rip it away, willing the heat in my cheeks to disappear.

“You were a second away from tasting the mats again. You okay?” he asks. “You seem distracted.”

“Fine.” The word barely sounds convincing.

“Are you sure?” he asks, feigning concern as he presses the back of his hand to my forehead. “Looks like you’re burning up.”

I swat it away. “That’s just my body rejecting your touch.”

A smug grin spreads across his face, and his thumb traces the curve of my jaw. A jolt of heat zips through me at the contact. “I wouldn’t call that a rejection. Looks more like a *reaction*.”

“Yeah, an allergic one.”

“Wasn’t aware you felt so strongly about me, Sierra.”

I scoff, trying to keep my composure. “I feel nothing for you.”

“Nothing?” He smirks, his eyes holding mine captive.

That is when I make my first mistake.

I shove Dylan instinctively, throwing him off-balance. He stumbles when I lean forward, sending him crashing backward. He lets out a low “oof” when I land on top of him.

“You okay?” he asks, gazing so gently that something cracks inside of me.

My hair comes loose from my hair clip, falling forward to frame my face. My hands are still pressed into his shoulders, now clutching the fabric of his tank top. Dylan’s expression smooths when his gaze drops to see me

straddling him. The heat in the room has been unbearable, but this close to him, I'd turn into ash.

His cool hand rises, gently tucking a loose strand of hair behind my ear, his fingers grazing my jaw. I lick my lips, the motion drawing his attention, dark and intent.

So this is what it feels like to have a man's attention so focused on you it's borderline predatory. Somehow, I know without a doubt that it wouldn't feel like this with anyone else. So completely flammable and stupidly reckless that I crave it.

That's when I make my second mistake.

I crash my mouth to his, and unlike what I'd expect, Dylan hesitates. I almost pull back entirely, but then as though clearing his head, he grips the back of my neck and pulls me down until my chest is pressed to his.

His grip tightens on my hips, and when he parts his lips, I let my tongue slide between them. He doesn't wait to do the same, sucking my tongue before giving me his. So soft, so wet, so *Dylan*.

He's so good at this it sends a tremor through me. Dylan lets me kiss him like my next breath depends on his. Then it's rough and desperate, teeth grazing my lip before he pulls away, leaving me gasping. His lips trail down my neck, nipping at my jaw as low sounds escape him.

When he finds a spot below my ear, I cry out, but he captures my mouth to swallow every sound.

My hips rock against his firm touch, and I can't consciously stop my body from reacting like this. He's all hard muscles and soft skin, his mouth leaving nothing to question. He moans from somewhere low in his throat, and I don't hold back the whimper that spills out of me. It sparks a wildfire in its wake, traveling from my fingertips all the way to my toes. It feels almost overwhelming.

Then he moves his hand higher to my waist, trying to slip under my shirt when the fog in my brain and body clears, the heat slowly fading. I stop his hand, and he removes it immediately. He pulls back, eyes heavy-lidded, brows furrowed. Then, all at once, his expression shifts.

"Sierra, we—"

The door swings open and I fly off him, lying flat on the mat just as Lidia reenters the room. "Excuse—" Her eyes dart between us before she clears her throat. "Falling is good. That's why we have mats. Now, up."

We scramble to our feet, standing a foot apart and completely stiff. You'd think we were strangers, let alone two people who nearly dry humped.

Lidia notices, and whatever she sees makes her clap twice. "Okay, that's enough for today. The walls are melting."

So am I.

My shoulders drop on an exhale, but I don't protest. I can feel Dylan's gaze stuck to the side of my face, but I don't dare look back. A rash of embarrassment makes my skin itch. I don't know what he was going to say before Lidia came in, but it sounded and looked a lot like rejection.

I swallow against the dryness in my throat, my top clinging uncomfortably to me. I'm out the door before I'm tempted to even look at Dylan. Outside, the cool rain sizzles against my heated skin.

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SIXTEEN

DYLAN

I THINK I need my brain checked. Because I must be insane to pull away from a girl who kisses better than most people fuck—and trust me, that's saying a lot. After Sierra sprinted out of the room, I didn't know what to do with myself. Lidia just squinted at me until I grabbed my stuff and left.

But when Sierra pulled away and those green eyes settled on mine, I realized this wasn't just some girl I could sleep with and never talk to again. It's Sierra. My *partner*.

I can't mess this up, not even if her lips were pink and plump and parted with moans I'd hear in my dreams. I've never felt like this before. I've never wanted someone this badly, that too, completely fucking sober.

"This one's perfect!" Kian says, pointing at the cardboard box off the shelf.

How did I end up at the hardware store with Kian picking out a bookshelf? I have no clue. All I know is that I can still feel the phantom movements of Sierra's hips against mine. She felt so right wrapped around me, straddling me, *rocking* against me. I swear I could feel the scattered pulse between her legs. She had that look on her face. The look I've gotten from women more times than I care to admit. It's all heat and impulsive decisions, the kind of unspoken desperation that makes you do reckless things. Anyone else, and I'd have dragged her mouth right back to mine and let the sweet wet heat of her mouth consume me until we didn't care where we ended up—my car, hers, against the wall.

But nothing about Sierra Romanova is like anyone else. She's the most determined, hardworking, and impressive girl I know, and I'd never take

this chance away from her. I wouldn't fuck this up because I can't keep my dick in my pants.

"Do you need any help?" the worker asks. Her eyes are on me, smiling like she knows me. "Hi, Dylan."

Okay, she definitely knows me. "Hey," I say, though I can't recall her name.

Kian starts asking her a hundred questions about his bookshelf, and I back away because instantly I remember who she is. A Beta Phi sorority girl. I relive flashes of the night I "married" her at our frat wedding. No one really recalls that night, and I'm glad for it, because the flashes I do recall—my reception striptease and consummating with the wrong girl—are better left unearthed.

Girls on campus greet me with sugary smiles, whisper my name to their friends, or flirt with me at parties with bright, eager eyes. It's flattering, I guess. It's also meaningless. It's made my college experience what it is, but after four years, I look back and realize none of it was real. Not one girl I've been with twice, none have stayed the night—not that I wanted them to—and none I've had a single conversation with sober.

Even when I see my friends in happy, loving relationships, I don't feel envy. I see the effort, the balancing act, and it seems exhausting. Love is messy—I've seen enough of that with my parents—and it demands more than I'm willing to give. Lust, though? Lust is simple. Unattached. It doesn't ask for anything beyond the moment. It doesn't cling or linger. It's exactly what I needed it to be. Until now.

"Looking to redecorate?" The woman at the paint desk starts telling me about the sale. All I can think about is how I can still taste Sierra. My mind keeps looping back to that look in her eyes just before it happened—the hesitation, the heat, the way her breath faltered. Did she see me at that moment? Or the charming, cocky guy who can get a girl into his bed without trying?

There's a boulder pressing into my chest that tells me it's the latter. She can only want the Dylan I've shown her and everyone else. The other one doesn't even exist.

I DON'T KNOW what came over me, but after dropping Kian off to hockey practice, I drove to Manhattan. Now there's no escape as the elevator

climbs to the penthouse floor.

For the first time in months, something pulled me to visit my mom. It might be the slight existential crisis I'm having, but I needed to take my mind off all that.

The elevator doors have barely opened before I hear my mom's voice. "You're here!" My mom is tall, but when she hugs me, she only comes up to my neck. Her familiar rose scent envelopes me and takes me back to smelling it on her as a kid.

"Hey, Mama. It's been a while."

"Too long," she says, pulling me inside. "I made *helva*, you used to love it as a kid."

The smell of melted butter and the sweetness of dates from the Turkish dessert is in the air. My mom does everything to make this cold, sterile penthouse replicate the warmth that came from our house in Connecticut, but this was never where she was meant to end up. Never what our family was supposed to be like.

"Where's Dad?" I ask.

She tenses as she plates the *helva*. "Work. But he'll come as soon as he's free."

I want to believe her, but our reality hangs in the air like a thick fog. We both know that at seven p.m. on Friday there can't be anything productive he's doing at the office, but I let the words go unsaid. Every time I've brought it up, it's only hurt her.

She slides me a bowl. "We have lots to talk about. Anything you want to tell me first?"

I focus diligently on my *helva*. "Not really. But this tastes great, Mom."

She tosses the Dalton letter in front of my bowl. Just when I think she's going to be angry, she places her hand over mine. "You can talk to me, *kuzum*. I'm not mad. But I need to know you're okay."

The warmth of her voice and her eyes takes me back to a time when she'd comfort me when I lost a scrimmage or got detention. She was always there; my dad wasn't.

"I'm fine, Mom. Really. It was a mistake, but I'm fixing it now."

From the look on her face, I can tell she's worried, but she doesn't press. She tells me how Ada calls her every day. Unlike me. But the more she talks, the more I stare at the clock. Each bite of *helva* grows bitter, the

longer we wait for any sign of my dad joining us. When she mentions missing the garden at our old house, I can't take it anymore.

My chair scrapes against the polished floor, interrupting her as she reminisces about the day my dad surprised her with the greenhouse.

She stares at the half-eaten *helva*. "*Ne oldu?* You don't like it?"

"I have to go." I reach for my car keys on the counter. "I have a lot to study."

"But your baba—"

"Dad's not coming. And judging by the depressing echo in this apartment, he hasn't been home in a while." My voice cracks, the frustration spilling out.

She rushes after me. "That's not true. He's just late. He wants to apologize for how we sprung the vow renewal on you. He wants you to understand where he's coming from."

"I'm not the one he should be apologizing to." I itch to leave. It's like the secrets embedded in these walls mock me. "I begged you to leave him, Mom. When you said you would, I believed you. I believed you were finally standing up for yourself—because we both know what happens when I do it. So, forgive me if that phone call about your vow renewal wasn't the good news I was expecting."

Last year, I applied for apartments. Kilner even got me a job at Porter's by talking to the bar manager, who agreed to let me work even though I was underage. I covered all the bases even though my mom would likely be well-off with half of my dad's fortune. But I didn't want her to go through the process of a long divorce just because of money. In my mind, it was simple: She'd leave him and be happy again. What more could she want?

"He's changed," she insists, her voice trembling.

I shake my head. "You may not deserve the things I'm saying to you, Mom, but you sure as hell don't deserve what he's doing either. Don't make me feel like the bad guy for being the only person in your life who's telling you the truth."

Normally, I would have beaten myself up over making her cry, but I let all that go the moment she chose him. Again. I'm done trying to fix something that's never been whole.

She moves in front of the elevator. "Stay. You haven't been home in ages."

"Neither have you."

I slip into the elevator, and I hear the faint whisper of *seni seviyorum*—I love you—before the doors close, and I drive back to the only place that's the closest to home that I'll ever be.

TURNS OUT, I did some substantial damage at the hardware store. I realized it only when I unloaded the stuff from my car after getting back from my parents' apartment. Two buckets of paint, every brush the sales associate claimed I'd need, a bedside table, a desk, and a plant that's already wilting.

I've already painted half my room when my phone rings. **MOM** flashes on screen.

It's late, and she's still up. The thought only makes me feel worse for saying those things to her. I should have let it go. Should have pretended like it didn't affect me. Sometimes I think my mom only stayed with my dad to prove me wrong. That if I hadn't voiced what a piece of shit he was, that she would've left on her own. I prolonged it. The deeper your dig, the more likely you are to bust a water line.

"Jesus, open a window!" Kian barges into my room. I shove my phone back in my pocket just as he opens the window to stick his head out, sucking in air like he's suffocating.

"I have the fan on, relax." I use the back of my hand to wipe the paint off my cheek. All my old shit is out in the hall, including my bed, because I ordered a new one. The only memories I've made in this room were ones that lasted a single night. In my bed, against the wall, on my desk—it all felt tainted with the person I used to be and people I don't know.

"How do you have energy for this after skating?"

I shrug. "Ever since Kilner punished us that entire season after you streaked across campus, I've been prepared for anything."

"That's your bar for endurance? He made me do everyone's dirty laundry full of jock straps last season. Sometimes, I can still smell the stench." He shudders.

"Think you need to unpack that trauma with a professional, Ishida."

Kian flips me off. "So, you never told me why we lugged two paint cans and all that furniture. And why is it baby blue like a nursery?"

I look at the lid on the bucket. "Actually, it's called Caribbean Mist."

Kian falls onto a lone chair, making an unnecessary amount of noise as he tries to get comfortable on top of the plastic sheet I've got covering my

things. “I’m totally digging the whole shirtless, covered in paint, depressed Van Gogh thing you got going on. But what’s got you so messed up that it made you want to redecorate? I’m very concerned.”

“You can read about it in my diary.”

“Wait, really?” Kian’s interest piques.

“Get out before I give you something to be concerned about.”

Then he gasps. “It’s a girl, isn’t it?”

“I thought we were over this nursery thing.”

“No, you’re into a girl. Holy shit, how did I miss that? No hookups, no partying, but you’re always finding an excuse to leave the house. Something is definitely up.”

“No idea where you got that. Besides, I don’t always bring girls home.”

He ignores me. “Wow, monogamous Dylan.”

“Monogamous Dylan?” Summer walks into my room with her hands over her eyes.

Kian chuckles. “You don’t have to cover your eyes anymore, Sunny. Dylan’s a born-again virgin.”

“Pulling out a page from Kian’s book?” she jokes.

This time I laugh and Kian glares. “Are you two just watching, or are you going to help?”

Summer grabs a paintbrush, but Kian stands back. “Actually, I just bought these jeans, so …” He sprints out of the room.

“I’ll be the first to say I like this new Dylan. Feels more authentic.”

“I think you mean sober.”

She shakes her head. “Nah, it’s you. You’re not looking for an escape route.”

I chuckle. “Psychoanalyzing again, Sunny?”

“Sorry.” She cringes. “But whatever or whoever it is that’s got you redecorating, I think it might help to talk it through. Nothing is as complicated as we make it in our head.”

“We kissed.” I don’t look at Summer as I say it. It just comes out. “Then I pulled away to tell her we probably shouldn’t, but her coach walked in and … I don’t fucking know.”

Summer’s quiet for a while. The only sound is the paint dripping from her brush onto the plastic-covered floor. “Sierra kissed you and *you* pulled away? Because you didn’t want to mess up your reinstatement or …?” I can hear the smile in her voice, but she hides it when I look at her.

She knows I don’t do this. Confiding in someone is like wiping the protective layer of varnish from a painting people admire, only to find that the glossy finish was the only thing hiding the ugly cracks.

“Everyone trusted me enough to do this, and I won’t ruin it. I’m not the guy she deserves.” I’ve never been that for anyone. And I prefer it that way.

“Maybe it’s not up to you to decide what she deserves.” Summer starts painting. “But I think you should talk to her about it. Figure out where her head was at when she kissed you. It’s hard to know the answer if you’ve been avoiding the question.”

Talking only leads to more complicated shit, but considering I’m partners with the girl, it’ll have to do.

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SEVENTEEN

SIERRA

HOW DO YOU look your skating partner in the eye when you know what he tastes like? I haven't figured it out yet, but so far running off to my parents' house has worked. Poorly.

This past twenty-four hours have not been fun.

Scarlett needed my car for some last-minute meeting she'd been awfully vague about, so she dropped me at my parents' house last night because I got a tension headache, and I couldn't tough it out in the dorms. The communal shower is bad enough on a regular day. So all I did last night was stay warm under my covers with a sleep mask and a pack of ice my dad placed on my head. We only had one ibuprofen left, and I didn't want to tell my parents to run to the store.

The thoughts of Dylan Donovan heated my skin so rapidly that I threw the covers off my body. Even as Scarlett asked me about my first day back with Lidia, I couldn't admit I'd been stupid enough to pounce on him.

Dylan handled my body like he'd know exactly what to do with it, where he'd want it, *how* he'd want it. Each touch was certain, and ready, boiling over with a neediness that can only be created by constant daydreams. Like he's thought about me.

I can still feel the phantom movements of his tongue against mine. Hear the gasp that left me when he pulled away. Then the rejection.

But regardless of the dumb decisions I make, skating always comes first. So, for today's practice, I've got my bag packed as I slip on leggings and a zip-up before I head downstairs. The smell of something sweet wafts in the air, but it sours the moment I hear a familiar voice.

“Mrs. Romanova, I think I’m in love—with your *bliny*,” Dylan says, shoving another forkful into his mouth. The low rumble of his voice makes my body feel like it’s getting a reward.

My mom *giggles*. “Oh, you are too sweet! And I’ve told you to call me Mila.” I stare in disbelief.

“Mom?”

Their heads turn to find me at the threshold of the kitchen, and I ignore the gaze that feels like a laser, coming from the guy sitting at my spot in the breakfast nook.

“Ah, there she is. Sierra, you never told me Dylan here has been such a good friend of yours at Dalton. He even brought over your assignment.”

The paper she’s pointing to on the island is not my assignment. I’m pretty certain he just pulled a random sheet from his pile of classwork. “Yeah.” I force a smile. “He’s great.”

“And he told me he’s a figure skater too.”

“Did he now?” I grit through my teeth. “That’s lovely.”

I haven’t told my parents Dylan’s my partner and that we’re skating again. Not because I’m dreading the inevitable check-in calls after practice, but because they’ll know no one wants to be my partner and the only reason I have Dylan is that he had no choice. I’m no one’s first choice; I’m not even anyone’s last choice.

“Dylan, can I talk to you? *Alone*.”

His gaze flickers to me as always, mischievous and light. For a split second, I wonder if yesterday was all a dream. But the delusion doesn’t last, because I can still feel the light sting of his teeth on my lips.

“I think I’m in trouble, Mila,” he says, finishing off his plate as he takes it to the sink. “But your food might be worth facing your daughter’s wrath.”

“You’ll be fine. Sierra doesn’t have an angry bone in her body.”

Dylan barks out a laugh, but when he sees my mom’s confused expression, he hides it in a cough. He glances at me, but I look away and turn to head up my room. Then Scarlett texts me.

Scarlett: Did you get my surprise?
Sierra: What surprise?
Scarlett: 6’4”, brown hair, cocky as hell and way too persuasive for his own good.
Sierra: You gave him my address? What the hell, Scar?
Scarlett: He’s your partner now! And he said my hair is pretty before he offered to talk to someone at the DU hospital to get me more hours. It was only right I gave him what he needed.

Sierra: You are a weak, weak woman.
Scarlett: Or I’m a perfectly sane woman, and you’re just in denial.

I drop my phone on the bed and turn at the squeak of my desk chair. Dylan’s sitting in it, holding the strip of photo booth pictures of Justin and me from our last Grand Prix.

“Cute,” he says bitterly.

I lunge for the strip, but he’s quicker, standing up so fast the chair scratches against the floor. I go for it again only for him to step back, which causes me to fall into his chest. A smug grin teases the corner of his mouth.

“It’s only up because I look good in it.”

“Can’t argue with that,” he says.

What I don’t say is that it reminds me of when things were good between Justin and me. It helps me believe it wasn’t all bad. Dylan shifts closer. His eyes linger on my face like he’s piecing together something I won’t say. My breath catches, the closeness stirring the echo of a kiss I can’t seem to forget. But then he leans back abruptly, the chair creaking as he drops into it, leaving me standing there, awkward and unsteady, between his legs.

“Didn’t expect you to run away after our first practice,” he says, looking at me from where he sits, the chair barely wide enough. But he leans into it with the kind of ease that makes it look like it was made for him. I suppose he does that all the time. Dylan walks into every room like he owns it, like he’s been there a thousand times.

“I didn’t run away. I visit on weekdays since I study on weekends.”

He gives me a curious look. “So, why does your mom think you’re some sweet angel?”

His fingers graze my thigh, and I flinch, quickly clearing my throat. “Because I am.”

“The only sweet thing about you is the alcohol I tasted from your lips, Sierra,” he says, his tone too casual. “Everything else is hot and scorching.”

“Like the sun?”

“Like hell.”

My gaze cuts into his. “You would know.”

The tension is thick in my room, making me fall back onto my mattress. I stare at the glow-in-the-dark stars on my ceiling. “No one likes an angry girl.”

“I do.”

“Coming from Dalton’s most physical hockey player, that’s not exactly a compliment,” I try to joke, but he doesn’t even crack a smile. “If you must know, you can’t be loud and opinionated when you’re trying to get judges to like you. My partner also wasn’t a fan of my attitude.”

My heart skips when his fingers drag along my desk, over the pink journal where I’ve written all my darkest thoughts from last year. “Having an attitude versus an opinion about something you do professionally are two different things. I think you’ve been around weak people who can’t listen to a smart woman without making it a dick-measuring contest.”

I blink.

“When you’re with me, Sierra, I don’t want you to be who everyone thinks you are. I want you to be the girl who calls me out on my shit and speaks her mind. Can you do that?”

I nod.

“Good.” He grins, but it doesn’t quite reach his eyes. “Now let’s go before Lidia thinks you’ve killed me in my sleep. And take these.” He places a bottle of ibuprofen on my desk.

“How’d you know?” I stare at the bottle. I’ve never told him about my headaches.

“Your best friend mentioned something,” he says before heading for the stairs.

Of course she did. I pull the charger from my laptop, stuff both into my bag, and grab the jacket slung over the chair. My attention catches on the photo booth pictures of Justin and me in the trash can under my desk.

I head downstairs, but my mom doesn’t let me leave until I’ve eaten something, and Dylan spends that time buttering her up. I leave my half-finished food and pull my bag onto my shoulder. I can’t take it.

“Let’s go.” I grab Dylan’s arm, dragging him along. He waves to my mom, who calls for me to slow down.

“I like it when you have your way with me, Romanova.”

Great, so he’s joking about this now. He really didn’t think anything of that kiss. For all I know, it was just another Wednesday—another girl; another kiss; another hot, stuffy room where she’s left burning with the need for more.

“Just unlock the car,” I order.

“The back seat?” he asks buoyantly. “It’s been a while, but you’re small enough—”

“Just drive,” I say, giving him a gentle shove. But even as he jokes, I can’t help but notice his eyes dim. I walk to the passenger side, but before I can open the door, Dylan pushes it open from the inside, a boyish grin on his face as I dodge the swinging door.

“Thanks,” I mutter.

My seat is warm when I get inside, and Dylan takes my bag from me and tosses it in the back. I watch him then, in the quiet of the car’s hum as he puts a hand on the back of my seat to reverse.

When he’s on the road, he glances at me. “You didn’t finish your breakfast. Your headache will only feel worse on an empty stomach.”

“I didn’t finish because I was trying to get you out of there before you became best friends with my mom and told her everything.”

“We already are. She just texted me the recipe for her *bliny*.” He glances at me. “Why haven’t you told her about us? Embarrassed?”

“If they find out Kilner and Lidia put us together, they’ll know that no one wanted me.”

The silence stretches, thick and uncomfortable. He doesn’t even have any music on, and I wonder if it’s because of my headache.

We drive like that for a while before Dylan says, “Can you grab my bag from the back seat?”

“Your bag?” I ask, glancing at him suspiciously, but oblige. I lean back and grab it from the seat, placing it onto my lap as he digs into it and pulls out a brown paper bag.

“There are two sandwiches in there.” He points to the bag. “Take one.”

“A sandwich?” My heart thumps slowly. I never bring a mid-practice snack—my body hasn’t earned it. Justin and I never had cheat days; his diet was strict, and so was mine. A few thousand calories a day depending on what we needed. Nothing more, nothing less.

“Should I be worried about you?” he asks, his eyes still on the road.

“Why?”

“Because I think you’re losing your hearing.”

I scoff. “I just find it interesting that you happened to have an extra sandwich. Peanut butter, of all things.”

“That matters because …?”

I eye him suspiciously. “I love peanut butter.”

“That’s cute,” he says. “You’re like one of those dogs.”

“Funny,” I mutter.

“Is that also why you chose yesterday to run off to your parents’ house?” he says, glancing at me, his hands tightening on the steering wheel.

“I told you I didn’t run away.”

“So it wasn’t because of what happened during our mat session?”

Great, okay, so we’re talking about this. I’m still hoping we can forget about it like a bad dream. I decide to go that route. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Ah, so that’s how we’re going to play it?” he asks. “I thought you were braver than that, Sierra. Seemed like the case when you were on top of me.”

“Look, I—”

“Why did you kiss me?” he asks. There’s something about the question that feels heavier than it should.

“Y-you kissed me too,” I say defensively, though he just gives me a sidelong glance. I sigh. “I wasn’t thinking, and it’s been a while. But don’t worry, I know we’re partners, and we shouldn’t do that.”

“We shouldn’t?”

“Yeah, I mean, I don’t usually do things like that. It’s not me. And I know that must sound stupid to you because, you know …” I gesture to him. He’s so confident in himself and sex. He makes it look so uncomplicated.

“Right,” he says tightly. “I know.”

I don’t say anything else, and neither does he, but I can’t help but notice the way his shoulders square and his Adam’s apple bobs.

The rest of the ride to the rink is quiet, and this time when we get to the arena, Lidia leads us to an actual training room. But it’s nothing like yesterday. Dylan barely even looks at me.

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EIGHTEEN

DYLAN

DON'T ASK QUESTIONS you don't want the answers to. It's pretty fucking clear how Sierra sees me. I knew I should have kept my mouth shut, maybe let the memory of the kiss just linger between us until it got so unbearably tense that she would do it again. This time I wouldn't pull back; I wouldn't care what she thought of me, and I'd give her exactly what I would anyone else.

She knows my reputation, and I'm glad she has no expectations. The only idea of a relationship I've had is my parents. And I'm pretty sure cheating on your wife isn't one of the requirements. It irritates me more that with every one of my mom's calls that I ignore, they get less frequent, and I end up feeling guiltier.

There's a knock on my bedroom door before Kian walks in. "Can I use your bathroom?" He's wearing a pink robe, has a towel over one shoulder, and carries four bottles of shampoos and conditioners in the crook of his arm.

"No."

Today is the first day I'm actually studying. My professors are piling on assignments, and I haven't even glanced at them with how drained I am after training with Sierra.

"Oh, come on! My shower isn't working and no plumber's willing to come by in this weather," Kian whines.

I focus back on my Business Law readings. "Use Aiden's."

"I'd rather not be haunted by whatever he and Summer have done in there."

"Eli's?"

“Too far.”

I roll my eyes. “There’s no way you’re using mine. You know that.”

“You’re so anal about your shower. I thought you were over it being your ‘sanctuary.’”

This is one of those times when I don’t feel bad about all the pranks I’ve played on him. “*Reprieve*,” I correct. “And the answer is still no.”

He pouts and continues to stare at me, but I don’t let the beam of his gaze affect me. My reading is sixty-three pages, and I’ve read the first page three times.

When that annoying feeling of being watched gnaws at me, I get out of bed. There’s still some time left before our second half of practice starts, but I’d rather not be stared at for thirty minutes. I grab my gym bag and pull it over my shoulder just as I point for Kian to exit. He huffs and walks off. I pull together a quick snack and make sure to threaten him before I leave about using my shower.

At the rink, Lidia gives Sierra and me a ten-minute break after two hours of lifts. She’s been strict about keeping us to the basics, and it’s obvious Sierra’s patience is wearing thin. She walks to the bench with a limp, and I can’t help but notice when she winces. I know it’s from the bruises my hands leave on her abdomen.

Sierra pulls out her phone and swipes through her social media, lingering on those lantern festival videos. My gaze flits between her and the screen as I try to understand what she finds so fascinating. They show people gathering for the festival that stretches on for the course of a few weeks. I used to go with my parents as a kid but haven’t been since. Now that I think back, I can’t even remember if my dad was there or if his phone went off while in the middle of lighting the lanterns.

I dig into my bag. “Here,” I say, handing her one of the sandwiches I made.

She stares at it in my hand for so long, I drop it in her lap. Sierra mutters a “thanks” and doesn’t say another word as she takes a bite. Things with us have been awkward. Tension thrums off her, and I can feel it when I touch her. She’s more guarded than usual, and we barely talk during the first four hours of practice and the last four when we come back after classes.

Practice has sucked and Lidia’s been angrier than I’ve ever seen her. Even worse, I’ve seen Coach Kilner walk by plenty of times, and sometimes he stops to watch, and other times he takes off before I can talk

to him. I'm not sure if he's appreciating my effort or just reminding me of how I fucked up his season.

Lidia claps twice, and just like that we're back.

Then when I get the hand placement wrong, Sierra takes my hand and fixes it for me. Sometimes, I wonder if she misses him. Last week Justin and his partner, Julia, practiced on one side of the rink while we were on the other. Lidia made sure that never happened again.

I lift Sierra and she grunts, so I immediately put her back down.

"What are you doing?" she hisses.

I look at Lidia. "She's in pain. I'm not going to lift her until she's black-and-blue."

"You okay, Sierra?" Coach Lidia asks. It's the tenth time she's asked her that, and each time Sierra gives her the same answer. The same lie. It's starting to piss me off.

"Fine," she mutters.

I chuckle, returning to our start position.

"Go ahead," Sierra says, her voice sharp, daring, but there's something raw under it. She doesn't meet my eyes, like she's bracing herself for whatever's coming next.

"What?"

"Say what you want to say," she snaps, but keeps her arms crossed over her chest like a shield.

Something about the way she stands there, so closed off, pulls at me. I can feel the distance between us.

I watch her carefully. "You're scared."

Her eyes flash. "I've been doing this my whole life. I'm not *scared*."

But I feel it—just in the way her body stiffens when I reach for her, the way she holds herself a little too rigid. "Yes, Sierra, you are," I press. "I can feel it in the way you tremble when I lift you. And we haven't even done any real lifts yet."

"That has nothing to do with you," she shoots back, but there's a crack in her words.

"It has *everything* to do with me," I say, the frustration creeping into my voice. "I'm the one holding you up, potentially putting you in the same position where you fell, and I get it, okay? It probably terrifies you because you think I'd drop you like *he* did."

I watch her face change, her breath catching in her throat, and the panic is instant, like a wave crashing over her. It takes everything in me not to reach for her, to ground her like before.

Coach is still watching, and I can see Sierra closing off even more. Like she's trapped.

She stammers. "I—it's a me thing. I'll figure it out."

Lidia steps in, her tone final. "*We* will figure it out."

I turn my focus back to Sierra, my eyes locking with hers. The tension between us is thick, too heavy to ignore. I can see her fighting it, but something's changed, something in the way her eyes soften just a fraction, the way her lips part, like she's trying to find the words but doesn't know how. I want to tell her she doesn't have to.

"Tell me what you need, and I'll be that for you," I whisper.

She freezes. And before I can say anything else, she spins away from me, skating off the ice without a word.

THE DOORBELL RINGS incessantly, the chime echoing through the house. Even when I press my pillow against my ears, I can still hear it. With a curse and half-lidded eyes, I roll out of my bed and yank my bedroom door wide.

"Answer the fucking door!" I shout, but my voice only echoes faintly before the relentless ringing resumes. No one's home; I know, because the usual music from upstairs is absent, and the lingering scent of smoke from failed breakfast attempts isn't wafting through the house. Even the TV in the living room, which is typically blaring at all hours, is silent.

I don't bother throwing on a shirt, and I walk out in my boxers. If someone wants to disrupt my sleep, they're not getting any consideration from me.

Exhaustion lingers in my foggy brain. Business Law has a way of lulling me to sleep better than Ambien. My professor, well past retirement age, seems more interested in a power trip rather than teaching; he grades our assignments based on how many times we reference one of his old cases. Once I figured that out, it's been smooth sailing, and retaining anything I learn from him hasn't really been my priority.

Speaking of power trips, when I yank the door open, I'm met with the familiar dark blue of a crisp Tom Ford suit and those cold blue eyes I'm

relieved I never inherited. My dad stands in the doorway, his expression unreadable, until he gives me an unimpressed once-over.

"Sleeping away college? That's one way to throw away your life," he says.

My jaw twitches. "Wouldn't know. You're the expert at tossing things aside," I retort, already fed up with his presence. This is the only place that feels like mine, and having him here feels wrong. He's had four years to visit. I start to close the door, but he stops me.

My dad balances the box he's holding on one hand while using the other to hold the door open. "Wait, I came here to apologize."

"Hell of a start to an apology visit."

He stares impassively. "Are you going to invite me in?"

Reluctantly, I gesture to the living room, and he steps inside, his eyes taking in the house with that hint of judgment he always carries.

"Where are your roommates?"

"My *friends* are at practice, so it's just me." He hasn't said anything about the letter they got from Dalton about my suspension. I wonder if my mom even told him. Either way, he'd be happy that I'm done with *that barbaric sport*. Though he hated figure skating more.

He doesn't sit on the couch—probably for the best—so we're just standing in the living room, him in his suit and me in my boxers. I surpassed him in height a few years after puberty, and that small imbalance felt like a foreshadowing of the catalyst that altered our relationship. It serves as a physical reminder of how much I've outgrown him.

"I understand you felt blindsided by our previous call. We should have discussed it as a family first."

His words are an ice pick to my solid resolve, but I don't let him see that.

"After everything we've been through as a family, I know this isn't a Band-Aid solution to our problems. But this vow renewal means a lot to your mother."

Means a lot to your mother. Not him. The words leave a bitter taste in my mouth. I wait for him to continue, but he just stands there, staring at me like it's my turn.

"Is that all?"

He exhales. "Your mother would appreciate it if you would put aside our personal differences and join us in the renewal of our vows. I've done some

things in the past that I'm not proud of, and I want to start fresh. I love her, Dylan. I love you too."

"Congrats," I say. "I'll have to check my schedule."

My dad looks at me as though he wants to say more but thinks better of it. "I brought something for you," he finally says, acknowledging the large white box in his hands. He places it on the coffee table, and I see the lavender envelope sitting on top. "It's your tux for the ceremony. Your mother picked it out, and wrote you this letter."

I stare at the envelope on the box, deciding then that I'll never open it.

"Your friends are welcome to come. We'll be sending out their invitations soon."

Knowing it's my mom who's running around, finalizing all the details for their ceremony, makes anger bubble beneath my skin. While he's out late at night, she waits for him at their glass home, clinging to the same hope she's had ever since he built this business.

"You don't need to invite my friends," I say.

He doesn't respond, only stares at me for so long that I eventually gesture for him to leave. "I'd prefer it if you confirmed your attendance."

"And I'd prefer if you never came here with your half-assed apology."

His jaw tightens. "I won't tolerate your disrespect. You think you can talk to your mother like that because she lets you get away with it, but that won't be the case with me."

"Right, because you're the only one who's allowed to disrespect her."

"Dylan—"

"Next time you want to apologize, try using the words 'I'm sorry,'" I spit out. "Get out of my house."

His eyes blaze with intensity, and I know that right here, right now, the only thing left of our relationship will be its ashes.

"Leave. Now," I say, bracing for his cold response. Instead, he walks out of the house without a second glance. His presence lingers in the air like a sticky film

Just a minute later, the front door swings open again, and I'm about to raise my voice, when Kian rushes inside. "Was that your *dad*?"

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NINETEEN

SIERRA

"YOU TWO ARE going on a date," Lidia says.

I spit out my water, slapping a hand over my mouth. My eyes dart to Lidia while Dylan's gaze sears the side of my face. I wipe the water off my pink zip-up that I wore to trick Lidia into thinking I was turning on my "green light." That was a talk she had with me every year because body language and appearance says everything, and mine was telling everyone to fuck off.

She's not wrong.

"Joking around doesn't really suit you, Lidia," I say.

She narrows her eyes. "When have I ever joked?"

"But we should be using every second we have to skate; there is no way that's your solution."

Dylan hasn't said a word, and the silence is making my ears itch. He should be opposing this just as strongly as I am. The last thing we need is *more* time together.

Since I spent most of practice avoiding eye contact with him, it takes me a good while to meet his gaze. He catches my attempt to get him to take my side, but he must suck at reading facial cues because he says, "I think that's a great idea."

My jaw drops, and Lidia appears surprised too.

"Not the date part," he clarifies, and I relax but not before a tiny beelike sting pokes me in the chest. "We can have another chemistry read as we practice. On the ice this time."

"Chemistry isn't the issue. That was made very clear during our mat sessions." She says it like she wants to roll her eyes. "Now that I've heard

both of your tired excuses … get changed, we're going on a field trip."

After our prickly practice last week, Lidia has made it her mission to get Dylan and me on the same page. On the ice we work well together, but there's a layer of unease that lingers in our routine, and after Dylan pointed out that it's coming from me, the practices have been shitty.

I'm used to falling, but it's when I'm hauled over his head that panic hits. It's not the pain I'm worried about, because I barely felt it that night. All I could think was that I'd left a sparkling solo career to train with Justin for four years just to end up on the fucking floor. I was furious. I used to obsess over skating fail compilations. I'd study the mistakes, practice the moves, and know it could never be me. It was never supposed to be me.

I stare at the skates I'd meticulously laced before practice, then glide behind Dylan to the gate. He clicks on his guards, hands me mine without a word, and holds open the gate for me before heading to the locker room.

Outside the arena, we get into the back of Lidia's red Toyota Yaris. I tried taking the passenger seat, but she didn't unlock it. Dylan stood with the back door open for me, and I tried to squeeze myself as far over as I could, but her seat was filled with boxes and boxes of spare skates, outfits, and foam rollers. There's a first aid kit by my feet and mini orange cones that we use for drills. The lack of space leaves Dylan's huge body crammed right next to mine, and our sides stuck together like glue.

As he manspreads like he owns the back seat, I knock my knee into his, but he doesn't move and instead knocks my knee back. When I roll my eyes, I spot Lidia watching us from the rearview mirror with a slight shake of her head that makes me straighten.

She drives for so long, all my lost sleep from the week starts to catch up to me. The heater turned up to the max doesn't help either. The feel of Dylan's body, the heat, the low hum of classical Russian music coming from the radio all blend together to weigh down my eyes.

It feels like hours have passed when I wake up only to find my head resting on a warm shoulder and the car parked in some deserted area on the side of the road. I spring up, to find Lidia on her phone, yelling at someone, when her eyes meet mine in the rearview.

"Nice of you to finally join us, Ms. Romanova," she says deceptively sweetly, carelessly tossing her phone on the passenger seat. "For the passengers that were awake, we've been dealing with some road bumps."

I glance at Dylan, then curse myself for doing it. He's so quiet it tricks my brain into thinking he's even more attractive than he already is. Something about him not running his mouth does it for me.

"What kind of road bumps?" I ask.

"One that punctured my tires, and another that got your cooking class canceled."

Dylan lets out an amused breath.

"Cooking class?" I ask. "You thought us being around sharp knives and fire was a good idea?"

"Kinky," Dylan whispers, speaking for the first time since I used him as my personal pillow.

"If you had the option, and didn't use it, that would be a win. But they had a gas leak," she says. "So, we'll postpone, because even with the terrible cell service I was able to call a tow—" A horn beeps, and a red Roggi's tow truck parks in front of us.

The driver comes to Lidia's window, and she manually cranks the lever. "You guys can hop out. My truck only has room for one though, so I can't give you all a ride."

"I told you on the phone there were three people," Lidia argues.

The man scratches his long beard and pulls at the collar of his stained coveralls. "Poor reception, ma'am. We barely got your location."

"I'll call an Uber," Dylan suggests.

The driver lets out a hearty laugh. "You won't get the bandwidth for that out here. We could barely make out Lidia's call. But there's a bus stop half a mile out."

Lidia shakes her head, and the man seems to shrink. But then her blue eyes light with something new. Like an idea. *Oh no.*

"Perfect." Lidia smiles. "You two, get out."

"What?" Dylan and I say in unison.

Lidia simply gestures to the door.

Dylan seems like he's still got more to say, but to save us from the wrath that follows, I push him to get out of the car. His gaze catches mine, and he must see the fear on my face because he reluctantly opens the door and lets us both out.

There are times that I've thought Lidia's gone insane, but this one tops them all. The man tows the car and gets it all strapped in before opening his passenger side door.

“Lidia, we don’t even know where we are. Plus, there’s no service,” I try to reason, watching her pull her coat tighter around her and tame her hair as it whips in the wind.

She roughly pats my cheek like I’m dumb. “That’s what teamwork is for, *devushka*.”

There it is.

Dylan shifts behind me, letting out a soft sigh as he gazes up at the sky. As if I *want* to be here.

“*Kysh!* I’ll see you two on Friday,” she says, and climbs into the tow truck. The driver seems to pity us, and I wonder if he’d let us just hold on to his bumper.

“Lidia!” we call in unison, but all it does is make her plastic smile fade into a sharp glare she shoots us through the window, the kind I’ve never dared to mess with.

The pebbly dirt road crunches under the swift speed of the tires, and I watch the red truck drive away with the tiny red car with the *Figure Skating Federation of Russia* sticker on the rear window. There’s a lot of ways I imagined today going, but being stuck in the middle of nowhere with Dylan Donovan isn’t one of them. The bushes and trees surrounding the area dance in the wind, and I hug myself a little tighter. I forgot to check the weather network today. Dale Thunderman would be so disappointed.

“Now what?” I say, turning to stare up at Dylan, who only gives me a brief sidelong glance before he starts walking. “Hey!”

“What?”

“You don’t even know if this is the right way.”

“Well, since I was the conscious one on the ride, I was actually paying attention to the road.”

Those words keep my mouth shut, and I let Dylan take the lead.

When we’ve walked for what feels like miles, I start to worry that I’ll have to find a dry patch of grass to sleep on tonight. Based on the length of the drive, I’m assuming we’re either in Andover or Georgetown.

Just when I think this trek can’t get any worse, a drop of rain lands with a cold splash on the tip of my nose. My thin leggings and zip-up barely shield me from the biting wind, and now the rain soaks my cold skin.

“This is a nightmare,” I mutter.

Dylan seems to find it amusing, because he chuckles, shaking his head as he quickens his pace. I hurry to keep up with him.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing.”

The caustic tone makes me stop to pull on the sleeve of his hoodie. “Tell me.”

“Don’t,” he replies in that deep, rumbling voice. My hand drops from the hoodie, but for some twisted reason, it only makes me more determined to drag out whatever he’s holding back.

“Don’t pretend to spare my feelings, Dylan. Say what you’re thinking.”

He shakes his head again, and the sardonic smile on his face remains firmly in place. The wind whips around us, and the sun begins its slow descent toward the horizon. Rain-soaked strands of my hair cling to my face, and I’m pretty sure a few leaves have tangled in there too.

“Say it.”

“Sierra,” he warns.

“*God*, you are insufferable!”

That makes him stop so abruptly that the side of my body collides with his and I stumble back. The dirt from the makeshift path smudges my white shoes—at least, I hope it’s dirt. But I can’t focus on that. The slow turn of the irritated man in front of me suggests I should be scared, but something about his darkening gaze makes me stand straight and hold my chin up. No matter how scathing his glare may be, I won’t let him see me weak.

“Maybe if you stopped acting like you’re the only one on this team we wouldn’t be here in the first place.”

“Me? Are you kidding?” I shout, straining to be heard over the torrential rain that lashes down on us now. “You haven’t done a single thing to make this feel like a partnership.”

“And you have?” he retorts.

“You act like you don’t want to be here, and I’m not in the business of begging people to stay.” Nothing could force me to do that again.

“You’re seeing what you want to see, Sierra,” he says, releasing a frustrated breath. “If I didn’t want to be here, I *wouldn’t* be here.”

My chest heaves, and my rain-soaked lashes send droplets of water cascading down my cheeks, like tears. My words are tangled in my throat. Dylan closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, and then meets my gaze directly. The intensity of his stare is unsettling.

“You won’t tell me how to fix this,” he says sharply. “You’re struggling, and I can feel it, yet you’re so fucking stubborn that you won’t let me help.

If you'd just tell me what's stopping you from trusting me completely, we wouldn't be in this mess."

My lips stay pressed together as the rain drums on them. His words are sharp jabs at my chest. There's a pinch in my throat that tries to force the words out, but they don't come. They stay tied up in an old knot that was created so long ago, I no longer know how to unravel it. I want to tell him I'm trying, that this isn't easy for me anymore, but I'm stuck.

I clench my fists, cursing myself for my silence and for making him believe I don't care. Just as I gather the strength to speak, Dylan shakes his head and looks away. My eyes track his movements as he yanks his hoodie over his head. Underneath, he wears a snug, dark green long-sleeve shirt, those tight ones he often practices in.

"Take it," he orders.

If I was speechless before, I'm pretty sure my throat has closed up entirely now. The navy DU hockey hoodie, marked with his last name on the sleeve and his number on the back, hangs from his hand like a sacred artifact. I stare at it. He extends it toward me again, and I feel the weight of his silent plea.

"Your teeth are chattering. Wear it, Sierra."

"What about you?" I say, barely above a whisper.

He doesn't answer, so when a shiver racks through me, I take the hoodie from him and pull it over my head. The warmth of his body heat still lingers on the cotton, and I let it soak into my cold, wet skin, mingling with the fresh scent of his body wash. The hoodie wraps around me like a hug, and an ache settles in my chest, deepening when I catch him glancing back to check if I've put it on.

With my ice-cold hands buried in his hoodie, we walk toward a long strip of lights ahead of us. The quiet feels louder than the whistling wind.

"I'm trying," I finally say. A part of me hopes the background noise of the occasional passing cars and rustling trees will drown out my words, but when he tenses, I know he heard me.

Just as I brace myself for him to say something like *try harder* or *that's not good enough*, he turns so I can see the side of his face illuminated by the flickering streetlights we pass. In a soft voice he says, "That's all I need."

My mind tries to convince me that I heard him wrong. After everything I said, how could he be so understanding?

Those thoughts vanish when the blaring honk of a car and its glaring headlights make me jump, and I stumble right into Dylan. He grabs my shoulder and pulls me close until I'm practically tucked under his arm.

"Get off the damn road! This is West Hartford, not the boonies," the driver shouts from his cracked window.

West Hartford? We found the main road! I can't contain my smile of pure joy when I twist to look at Dylan, who shares an exhausted, lopsided smile with me.

"I know where we are. Come on," Dylan says. This time when we start walking again, my chest practically caves into itself when warm fingers, wet from the rain, intertwine with mine, pulling me along.

The pink sign with flashy yellow bulbs on the perimeter lights up the entrance to Lola's Diner.

"I don't have money," I tell him.

"I'll take care of it," Dylan says before the server arrives to seat us. She seems to know him, and he enjoys the attention, because he whispers something to her that makes her laugh and squeeze his arm. A little too long if you ask me. Especially since she's seen his hand in mine. We could be together for all she knows.

You're not.

I slide into the booth, and when I'm about to pull away my hand, partly in annoyance, and partly because I expect him to sit across from me, he holds on tighter and squeezes his big frame right beside me in the booth. We're close, too close.

That's when I notice the ring of black around his iris. Where he's all brown eyes, brown hair, and golden skin, I'm dark hair, a red lip, green eyes. Everything about me is icy and edged, like my skates. It feels obvious when we're this close.

I try to pull back. "I don't think bonding means you can't leave my side."

"What if I don't want to?"

I shoot him a bored look. "So we're back to this? Flirting with me?"

"That wasn't flirting," he says, leaning in close. "If I were flirting, your ass would be in my lap instead of on this cheap leather."

I bristle. "Good thing you're not flirting, then."

"Do you want me to?" he whispers, our noses inches apart. "We can order drinks. I know you like sharing those."

My pulse spikes. This is the first time he’s mentioned that night at the party when I drunkenly let him taste the alcohol from my lips. Now he’s so close, and his lips look so warm. Unconsciously, I feel myself leaning in because I’m sure if he pressed his wet body against mine, it’d light me up. His tongue would be hot and skilled and—

“You look like you need a towel, Si,” a voice interrupts, and I pull away from Dylan’s darkening eyes to see a man in a wrinkled white Lola’s chef’s coat.

“Ajay.” I try to exit the booth, but Dylan’s like a boulder in my path. I gesture for him to let me out, but he only looks at me with a blank expression. Giving up, I awkwardly scoot out the other end, and Ajay pulls me into a hug I’m not expecting.

I’m not a hugger, and even now when he embraces me tightly, I don’t hug him back. When I step back, he lets go and starts to ask me a question, but before I can hear what it is, my view is blocked. By Dylan Donovan.

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TWENTY

DYLAN

THE FIRST THING that irritates me about this diner is the song playing on the jukebox. The second thing is the cook hugging my fucking partner.

They're still tucked in a lover's embrace to the sounds of those depressing vinyls Kian always plays. Sierra's first to pull away and I try not to let my lip tip upward at the action. Her gaze flits to mine quickly then to a random spot on the wall. If the girl blushed, I'm sure it would show right now, and the thought irritates the fuck out of me. *Ajay the cook* starts to ask her a question, but without a second thought, I outstretch my hand and stand between them.

"Dylan," I introduce myself.

Ajay's gaze drops to my hand. He's just an inch or two shorter than me, and when he finally puts his hand in mine, he squeezes it a little harder than I expect.

"I know who you are, Donovan," he says with a bite to his tone. "I'm Ajay."

I have no idea why he seems protective of Sierra. "How do you know my partner?"

There's an insinuation in my words that I don't correct. There's something about her standing next to me, soaked, and wearing my hoodie that makes the words come out harsher. The possessive cord wrapping around my irritation feels dangerous.

Sierra steps forward, her arm bumping into mine, but her eyes are on Ajay as she smiles.

"She used to come in here on the rare days she wanted a cheat meal. Though her 'cheat' meals meant a lettuce-wrapped veggie burger."

Sierra laughs. “He still managed to *accidentally* send me an order of cheesy fries.” There’s an unspoken memory that plays between them. I want to crush it with my bare hands.

“Probably better than the sandwiches I make you for practice, huh?” I interject.

Ajay looks between us. “You two practice together?” His words are slow and uncertain, like he’s contemplating whether he wants to know the answer.

“Yeah, he’s my new partner.”

“Is that all we are?” I’m hoping the smirk on my face suggests so much more, because the glare she sends my way is not going to play out well for me later. But I couldn’t care less. I take the chance to throw my arm around Sierra.

“What made you stop by?” Ajay asks her.

“Our coach’s car broke down and our phones are dead. We’re kind of stranded,” Sierra informs him.

Ajay looks confused but nods when he assesses our soaked clothes. Namely, my hoodie on her. “You can use the kitchen phone; it’s right down that hallway.”

Sierra smiles gratefully, then turns to me. “I can try calling Scarlett, but she’s probably studying with her phone turned off.”

“I’ll call Kian,” I offer. Ajay points to the hallway with the phone, not even looking at me. He smiles down at Sierra, and I have the urge to pull her with me, but I tamp down the weird possessiveness taking over. Why do I even care?

The kitchen phone hangs on the wall, and it’s one of those old rotary-dial ones. Kian answers on the last ring, and his voice is laced with sleep.

“Hey, I need you to pick me up from Lola’s.”

“Dylan?”

I sigh. “Who else, Ishida?”

“Oh right, well, I totally would, man, you know that, but I just got back from a date with Aiden and Summer, so I’m kind of super tipsy from all the wine.”

“Why were you on their date?” I ask.

“They felt bad leaving me home alone. But they probably should have left me. There was screaming, a fire, and a lot of cursing.” He seems to shudder at the memory.

“Never mind. I’ll just call a cab,” I say.

There’s more rustling. “You want me to find someone sober? I’m sure Aiden will pick you up.”

“No,” I rush out. “Don’t—”

“Aiden!” I hear his door opening and then his feet padding across the hall. “Are you decent? I’m coming in.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. There’s more conversation happening, and with impatience riddling me, I eye the twist toy vending machines. The ones with plastic rings and random figurines. An idea pops in my head.

It’s been months since I’ve pranked Kian by pretending to be his stalker ex, Tabitha. She was a nightmare—hacked our phones, slept in our bed, siphoned our gas. After that, Kian felt guilty for putting us through that mess, and moped around for weeks. So I started pranking him. Sure, he was a little scared, but the more “she” targeted him, the more he stopped blaming himself. Now I just do it for fun.

There’s a muffled scream, a groan, and more shuffling. “Hello?” Aiden’s irritated voice comes through the receiver. “What’s wrong?”

“Hey, Cap. Nothing’s wrong. Was just calling to see if Kian could give me a ride, but all good, we called a cab,” I lie.

“You sure? I can come right now,” he says sincerely. Kian snickers in the back. He’s going to regret this when he’s sober. “And who’s we?”

“*We?*” Kian must have snatched the phone.

Fuck, did I say that? I clear my throat. “No one. I’ll be home soon.” I hang up the corded phone, and just as I’m turning, Sierra’s behind me.

“No luck?” she asks. Her hair’s soaked and stringy, but somehow, she looks as good as she usually does. Fuck, maybe even better. Her nose is red from the cold; so are the apples of her cheeks. I’d bet her lips would be cold if I kissed her.

The thought snatches me back into reality, where that is not a fucking option. Or even a thought I should be having. I clear my throat. “How’d you figure?”

“You slammed that phone pretty hard,” she says. “But it’s okay, Ajay said his shift is over in ten, so he can give us a ride back.”

Wonderful. “How much does he charge?” I ask flatly.

“He’s not a chauffeur. He’s doing me a favor.”

“And what are you doing to return that favor?”

“People can do favors without needing something in return,” she snaps.

“I saw the way he looked at you. This isn’t just a fucking favor, Sierra.”

“Not everything is about hooking up. He’s a friend,” she says. “Even if he was more than that, that’s none of your business.”

“Friends don’t just cook for you when you’re in the area, give you rides that throw them off their route, or size up the guy you’re with.”

“You’ve given me food before,” she simply states.

“We’re not friends.”

The ding of a bell splinters the heated look stringing us together. Neither of us moves, but when Ajay interrupts our stare down, Sierra’s the first to look away.

“Just clocked out,” he says. “My car’s out back.”

Outside, Ajay unlocks the doors, and I *accidentally* push Sierra out of the way and call shotgun. She curses under her breath and sits in the back seat. That doesn’t stop Ajay the cook from glancing at his rearview mirror to talk to her the entire ride. It also doesn’t stop him from dropping me off first, which lets Sierra switch seats when I exit the car. But before she can sit inside, I grab her wrist. Green eyes watch me curiously, and I don’t know why I do it, maybe because she’s in my hoodie, or because her words from earlier about trying fucked with my head, but I yank her forward.

“What are you doing?” she asks before she hits my chest. “I’m not a hugger.”

“I know.” I pull her closer.

“Dylan.”

“Let it happen, Romanova.”

She sighs, and it warms the center of my chest. “But, Ajay—”

“He can wait. I can’t.”

“But—”

“Shh,” I whisper into her hair. “We’re having a quiet moment.”

I don’t even need to look at her, her head pressed against my chest, but I know she’s rolling her eyes. I run a hand over her back, tightening my hold, and feel her relax. Her shoulders drop as she burrows into me. The silent surrender nearly pries my chest open.

We stay there for a while, and I forget about the running car and the cook sitting inside. I think she does too, until he calls her name, and Sierra pulls back. With one last look, she ducks into the car, and closes the door.

Everyone’s asleep when I get inside the house. Sebastian is passed out in the living room, the TV still on. I search for an envelope, and once I’ve got

it, I go past my room and head up the stairs to the right.

I pull out the toy “diamond” ring I dispensed from the machine at the diner and slide it into the envelope. With my best cursive, I write *Tabitha* on it, then slide the white envelope under Kian’s bedroom door.

His hungover brain is going to have fun with that.

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TWENTY-ONE

SIERRA

DYLAN WAS RIGHT.

It brings me a great deal of pain to admit that. Simply thinking those words leaves a bitter taste in my mouth. After Ajay parked in front of Iona House last night, he asked me on a date.

I told him I needed to check my schedule, but even my subtle rejection left me tossing and turning. I couldn't figure out why I even rejected him, but deep, deep down, where the Mariana Trench probably is, I knew that spark of attraction that flared in my belly disappeared as soon as Dylan Donovan exited the car. I couldn't stop thinking about the hug, how gentle he was, his words whispered in my ear. I don't hug people. Every time it's happened it's been wholly unpleasant, but with him it didn't feel that way. Not even a little bit.

I spent most of the night knitting. I felt myself spacing out, ping-ponging between the oversize Dalton Hockey hoodie drying on my desk chair and the memory of the heated look Dylan shot me before I sat in the passenger seat. When I did finally fall asleep, I dreamed of him. And for the first time since I moved into Iona House, I slept through the night.

"So, are you ever going to tell me what's going on with you and Donovan, or should I guess?" Scarlett asks from her place on the floor when I step out of my room. "Because my guesses include rope, more rope, and a blindfold. Possibly a gag."

I plop down next to her textbooks, clutching the purple gift bag in my hand. "None of that. But …" I can barely say it. "I kissed him."

"Was it good? That's rhetorical." She's not even remotely surprised, and I feel attacked. "What? It's Dylan fucking Donovan, and you haven't been

with anyone in over a year. It was inevitable."

"Hey! I'm not that touch deprived." She gives me a look. "Fine, a little, but that was all that happened. We're just partners."

She snorts, eyeing my jacket. "And where are you going on Sunday night? A just-partners booty call? Do you have toys in the bag? Whips?"

"Yeah, everything I'd need for my sex dungeon," I say flatly. "I just have a last-minute errand to run. Besides, I don't even own a vibrator, Scar, you know that."

"That's gotta change. I think I'd go a little crazy if, on top of all that stress, I couldn't get a proper release."

"I'm doing fine. No need for releases here." Except for the fact that I might start whistling like a pressure cooker any minute. Scarlett tells me to use protection when I walk out.

When I get to the hockey house, I'm fidgeting with the handle of the gift bag as I wait for someone to answer the door. The wind nips at my ears, and I hope it masks the way my body shakes from the dull feeling of anxiety.

Kian Ishida opens the door, and country music plays from a radio on the entry table. He tilts his head, assessing me carefully. "Sierra," he says.

"You know my name?" I didn't even think Dylan talked about me.

"Of course. We don't get nearly as many girls at our door anymore. The ones for the rest of us usually text rather than ringing the doorbell, and Dylan's been awfully busy skating lately. And since you're here, dressed like that"—he takes in my tight black leggings and Dalton Athletics half-zip like they're a clear giveaway—"it was only logical."

"Well, then, Nancy Drew, can you get your friend? I need to give him something."

His bright smile makes me give him one in return. "You know, if you ever want to talk about how irritating Dyl—"

He's yanked away from the door, swinging it open wider to reveal an annoyed Dylan. When he sees me, his entire demeanor changes. He stands up straighter and steps forward as he closes the door, shutting us both in the darkness that shrouds the front porch.

"Hi," I say, suddenly feeling exposed.

"Sorry about him," he says, hitching a thumb to the door.

The porch lights flicker on, and I finally see Dylan's face. It should be a crime to look this good at every hour of the day. His black T-shirt is tight,

making his biceps the center of attention, and the gray sweats he's wearing try to hypnotize me into looking down. I don't.

"I wanted to give you this," I say quickly, shoving the bag in his hand.

"What is it?"

"That would defeat the purpose of a gift bag, wouldn't it?"

He watches me in amusement. "Never going to give it to me easy, are you?"

The comment isn't intended as a jab, but it still cuts. I've never been easy, I was always reminded of that. Suddenly, I feel stupid for being here and barely getting the words out when I practiced them on the way here. Even when I'm trying, I come off as cold, and I don't know how to fix it.

Dylan doesn't take his eyes off me even as he takes the tissue out of the bag. He pulls out the red gloves and stares down at them for a long minute.

"Gloves," he says.

"You never wear anything on the ice, so I thought you could use some." I take a step back, feeling claustrophobic with him so close. "I guessed the size, so if they don't fit, I can remake them."

"Does someone care if I'm cold?" He coos, as if I'm a child giving my mom a shitty hand-painted photo frame on Mother's Day.

"You know what? Forget it." I try to snatch the red gloves, but Dylan grabs my hand. I glare up at him, and he smiles. It's like staring at those bus stop ads for teeth-whitening strips.

Then he blinks like he's just realized something. "Wait, wait, wait. Did you *make* these?"

I nod.

"With your hands?"

"No, with my feet," I say dryly. "Yes, I knit them. It's not a big deal."

He stares at me like it's a very big deal, and I want to snatch them back and pretend like this never happened. Maybe incinerate them in a nearby tire fire, because Dylan's whole face lights up into the cockiest smile I've ever seen him wear, and I close my eyes for a brief second, knowing that he's going to fucking gloat about this.

"You knit me gloves." He says it with a sort of awe that makes me feel patronized.

I look at anything but him. "You never wear them to practice, and I know how hard it gets to do all the lifts if your hands are frozen," I explain.

"You care if my hands are cold."

“Dylan—”

“You *care* about me.” He pulls the gloves onto his hands. “It’s a little creepy that you have my hand size memorized though.”

I hold back from rolling my eyes. “It’s pretty universal.”

“I’m sure.” He’s not even trying to stifle his chuckle. But I know behind that stupid smirk, he sees the gloves for what they are, an olive branch. “Do you have matching ones? We’ll be the cutest couple on the ice.”

“Can’t you just say thank you and not make this weird?” I mutter.

“No way. You knit me gloves and you think you’re going to get off easy?” he says. “Miss Rot in Hell but Do It With a Pair of Gloves So Your Hands Don’t Get Cold.”

Suddenly, a man dressed in a red Uncle Frank’s Pizza windbreaker walks up the steps and interrupts our conversation. “Pizza?”

Dylan looks confused, but he pulls out his wallet anyway and hands the man some cash. The front door swings open again, and the bright light from inside makes me squint. The rest of the team and their friends are in the living room. There’s some reality show finale playing, and half the school has been obsessed, so there are watch parties across campus. Scarlett went to part one of the finale last week at Porter’s when they did trivia and played the show on the big screen. She invited me, but I opted out to spend extra time on the ice instead.

“Thanks, Jesse, you the man!” Kian shouts, clearly on a first-name basis with the pizza guy, as he relieves him of the weight of six boxes of pizza. The smell of pepperoni puffs around the patio. “You staying?” he asks me, and I falter.

Dylan’s expression gives away nothing. Does he want me to stay?

“I should get back,” I say, lacking conviction, but Kian doesn’t push.

“You sure?” Dylan asks just as a bout of laughs from inside steals my attention. There’s a warmth that emanates from the house, and that’s the last thing I expected from a place that has frequent parties and sweaty grown men. I spot a massive bulldog head, like one of those mascot costumes, sitting on the floor by the living room.

“Is that a bulldog costume?” I ask.

Dylan rubs the back of his neck. “Long story, but I can tell you all about it if you stay.”

“They’re your friends. I don’t want to impose.”

“Pretty sure you know some of them. Even if you don’t, you know me.” His smile is almost convincing. *Almost*.

I let myself imagine what it would be like to have a big group of friends like that. With Scarlett I feel fulfilled, and we’re more sisters than we are friends, but sometimes I worry I’m holding her back from meeting more people. I made an effort to go out with her this year, but I’ve never clicked with anyone the way I’ve seen Dylan and his friends behave. They’re a family.

But when you let people in, you let them see all of you. All the heavy, inadequate, complicated parts of you.

With that cold thought seeping into my bones, I step away from Dylan, not letting myself dwell on the way his smile falls.

“I’ll see you at practice,” I say.

“Hell no, Romanova.” Dylan places the gift bag by his feet and holds out his hand to me.

I blink at him, a confused laugh escaping. “What are you doing?”

“We’re dancing.”

I look around wondering if he’s lost his mind. Maybe those brawls are finally catching up with him. “On your porch?”

“Yup. If this is your way of calling a truce, I need to believe it.”

I furrow my brow, trying to make sense of him. “I literally made you gloves. It took me all night and this morning!”

“And I appreciate them, but I want more.”

My stomach dips. “Greed is a sin, Donovan.”

“Then you’re my temptation, Sierra,” he says. “Come here and dance with me.”

“I don’t dance.”

“You dance on the ice all the time.”

“I dance to win gold medals.”

“Will a gold star work? I’ve got two, I’ll put them anywhere you want.”

My unamused expression must convey my answer. I look at him, a beat of silence between us, and the pull in my chest grows stronger.

“Dance for you this time,” he says softly.

It’s a simple sentence, one that shouldn’t have my heart flipping on its side.

I take a tentative step closer. “There’s no music.”

Suddenly, a radio crackles, and “Wondering Why” by The Red Clay Strays plays. The window curtains move, and I spot black hair, and the radio is now by the open window.

The soft strum of the guitar grows steady, and this time instead of staring at his hand, I take it. His smile is unforgettable. The way his warm hand completely engulfs mine; the effortless tug that pulls me flush against the solid planes of his body; and the crisp, intoxicating scent of him wrapping around me like the lyrics.

Dylan sways, with my hands on his shoulders and his pressing into my waist. He’s so effortless in his moves, so fluid, I melt into him like butter on hot toast. The song slows, and the lyrics of the chorus do nothing to drown out the way my heart beats against his. Dylan pulls back, and his eyes roam my face with such tenderness that it almost physically hurts to stand here and let him look.

Dylan draws a featherlight path to my jaw, dusting his thumb over my lips.

I imagine how the tiny quirk of his lips would feel against mine. He looks like he needs this, like I’m giving him something he’s never had before. Then as the music feels louder in my ears, he wraps me in his big arms and leans in so his head is buried in the crook of my neck. When he inhales, I can’t help but do it too. We’re dancing on his porch, with the cold fall air not even touching us. The hum of a guitar and a deep voice serenade us while we hold each other like we’re not two complicated people with bad luck. Like we’re just two college kids, dancing on a porch.

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TWENTY-TWO

DYLAN

Sierra: Why is your entire hockey team following me on social media?
Dylan: Because they're nosy idiots.
Sierra: Aw, you talk about me?
Dylan: No. I think about you.
Sierra: You're thinking? Big day for you then.
Dylan: Brat.
Sierra: Asshole.

I live with three children. Since the night on my porch, the guys haven't stopped talking about Sierra. Apparently, they found watching us from the window more interesting than their reality TV show. I've been avoiding them, so I'm early to the rink when I spot Kilner in the equipment room, laying into some rookie. When he sees me, he waves the kid off. I'm pretty sure the poor guy was about to cry.

"Isn't scaring the rookies supposed to be the captain's job?"

He scribbles something on his clipboard. "Captain's too busy getting himself suspended."

"About that, I never apologized," I start. "You trusted me, everyone did, and I broke that. It was never my intention to let my personal issues affect the game, and I hate myself for it more than you ever could."

"Hate you? Why would I hate you?" He sighs heavily. "I've told you. I don't give up on my players. You can be in the NHL, in a different sport or career, and I'd still support you. But lucky for you, we've got movement on your suspension. Reed and Dean Hutchins just need to approve you for a portion of the games."

"Really?" I've been so focused on skating that I hadn't thought about why I was doing it.

“I’ve reached out to the NCAA, and once we get you fully reinstated, you’ll be reassessed by New York. Then all you idiots can finally leave me alone and I’ll get a normal captain.”

“You’re going to miss us,” I tease. “But since Sampson can’t, and I’m out, who’s interim captain?”

Kilner grits his teeth. He pulls out a stress ball and squeezes the life out of it. That makes my brain fire before the answer hits me like a puck to the face. No way. Holy. Fucking. Shit.

“It’s Kian, isn’t it?” I guess.

Kilner doesn’t answer. He rumbles something between a groan and a growl.

“Oh, this is amazing. I love this. I love this so hard.”

“You know what? I am angry at you.”

“No way. I might throw a party for the new captain right here.” I can’t stop laughing. Kian being the interim captain might be the best news I’ve received all week.

Kilner runs a hand over his jaw. “Why do I even bother with you idiots?”

I clutch my stomach, trying to calm myself down. “You’re going to get so much quality time with your favorite player. Can I tell him?”

“Let’s hold off on giving Ishida any news that’ll make his head burst,” he says.

“How noble of you.”

He snorts. “Get out, Donovan.”

On my way back to the rink, I see there’s still time before practice, so I grab a spare stick, do a couple drills, and dangle a puck, moving it smoothly back and forth. My stick scrapes the ice, and I flip the puck onto the flat edge, balancing it there when I hear the familiar scratch of skates.

“You’re late,” I say, eyes still on the puck.

“And you’re playing … hockey.” Sierra glides next to me, wearing a lavender skating dress.

Usually, she’s in a Dalton half-zip and leggings, the one she wears when she sleeps in after obsessing over our training videos. Sometimes, it’s that all-pink outfit she wears to convince Lidia she’s in a good mood. Then it’s the all-black dress, worn when she’s faster, more determined, and angrier than ever. It’s like she wears them to melt into whoever she wants to be for the day.

“Is skating getting too hard for you?” Sierra asks.

“You think hockey’s easy?”

“It’s just chasing after a puck. Doesn’t take a genius.”

“Oh yeah? Then show me.” I toss her my stick, and just as I expect, she startles but catches it easily.

The stick’s meant for my height, but her grip is all wrong. Sierra inches forward, draws back, and almost misses the puck, moving it just two feet. “There. Easy,” she still says.

“You’re not even holding the stick right.”

“Yes, I am.”

I shake my head. “So damn stubborn.”

When she’s focused on her hands, I slide behind her. Her back presses against me, surrounding me in cherry. She stiffens as my arms encircle her, closing the space between us.

“I didn’t ask for your help,” she says.

“I’m giving it to you anyway.” I move closer, until I’m nearly breathing the same air and my nose almost brushes her cheek. My hands come over both of hers, sliding them lower and adjusting her elbows. I let her get comfortable with it.

“Like this?” she asks, voice tight.

“Yeah,” I whisper. “Like that.” My voice comes out rougher than I intend, and I don’t pull away. Not yet. The warmth of her skin against mine is almost too much, but I keep my hands steady, guiding her through a slap shot. “Now try hitting the puck.”

She hits it hard, sending it flying to the boards. She gasps. “Told you it was easy. My childhood Sidney Crosby obsession is probably paying off. Though, I am good at everything,” she says to me, her smile inches away from mine. Yeah, I bet she’d be great at anything. And now all I can think about is how I know what she tastes like, and if all of her tastes the same way. Sweet. Soft. *Maddening*.

Two claps sound, and Sierra jolts away from me. “*Davai!* You should be warming up before I get here,” Lidia shouts.

And just like that we fall into a long practice.

It’s hours later when I come off an intense bout of spins and jumps. “That’s nowhere near a quad Lutz, Dylan,” Lidia chides.

“It was a triple. Close enough.”

Sierra’s doing a terrible job of suppressing her amusement as she sits on the edge of the boards, swinging her feet. “Close enough doesn’t win

competitions, Donovan."

"Not having a partner doesn't either, Romanova."

That shuts her up.

"All right, get a drink of water, and when you're back, we're running through the whole program. Your first competition is next weekend. We need to be the best we can be."

We glide to the bench, and Sierra's in her thoughts, probably thinking about the competition. I hold out the energy bar for her. She takes it slowly, almost like she's unsure, and the crinkle of the wrapper sounds too loud in the quiet between us.

"Aren't you going to eat?" she asks.

My gaze drops to her lips, and I nearly lose my train of thought. "Are you offering?"

She stares blankly. "It's yours."

"Yeah?" A smirk tugs at my lips. I lean in, my gaze fixed on hers as I take a bite of the energy bar still in her grip.

She bristles.

I chew.

Sierra watches my mouth, letting the silence stretch like a thread pulled too tight. With her green eyes on me, she takes a bite, as if accepting some unspoken challenge.

When we're on the ice again, moving into our second position, I try the simple lift Lidia allows us to do, but Sierra looks irritated.

"Your hold isn't right. It's blocking my core extension."

"If I hold you any lower, I lose my grip," I say.

Sierra glances at me and then Lidia, who watches us curiously. Just like that, she goes from crackling fire to a snuffed-out flame. She shrinks into herself, and I notice her hands ball into tight fists.

"Right. I shouldn't have said anything. Sorry."

My head whips around as she skates back to our starting position.

"You're *what*?" I ask, incredulous.

"I said I'm sorry," she mutters, a hint of anger flickering in her gaze.

That's the frustration I expected, but it's restrained, caged behind whatever tumultuous thoughts swirl in her intricate mind.

"That's it? You're not going to challenge me on it? Shit, Romanova, I expected you to make *me* say sorry." She's so stuck on pleasing others, she'd choke on it.

“You want me to fight you on this?”

“I want to know what you think. You shouldn’t blindly follow what I say.” She looks at me like I’ve lost my mind. “Come on. Argue with me.”

“You can’t be serious.”

I glide right up to her, invading her space. “Fight me, Sierra.”

She exhales sharply. “You’re ridiculous.”

I tower over her now, a palpable tension simmering between us. Something ignites within her, and then I give her a light push, watching as she glides backward, mouth parting in disbelief. “You did not just push me.”

“Oh, I definitely did. What happened to the girl who told me off without thinking twice?”

She glances at the ice. “Nobody wants to be partners with someone like that.”

“I do,” I declare, my voice resolute. “I *am*. Tell me how you need me to hold you.”

Hesitantly, Sierra takes my hands and places them just above her hips.

“Like this?” I ask, feeling the weight of my palms flat against her body.

She nods once before Lidia’s whistle sounds.

“Practice that lift with the new placements and take off into doubles,” she orders.

We’re both breathing hard after coming off the spin. When Sierra glances at me, her gaze snags on my hands in my red gloves, the ones she knit me, and her lips quirk.

In my periphery, a few girls I don’t recognize wave at me from the sidelines. I wave back and notice Sierra watching me. “What?”

“Aren’t you going to go over there? They seem … eager.”

I shake my head. “Unfortunately for them, I’m off the market.”

Sierra furrows her brow. “*You?*”

“Yup, I’m saving myself for marriage.”

She snorts out a laugh. “You couldn’t save yourself for marriage if you tried.”

Fucking feels like that’s exactly what I’m doing. “Are you trying to tempt me?”

“You’d know if I was trying to tempt you, Dylan,” she says. “And you wouldn’t last a second.”

“Wanna bet?”

She shakes her head. “I like bets that make me work for it.”

“I can make you work for it, Sierra. For as long as you want. As hard as you want.”

A new energy spark between us, like someone’s lit a match. This time when we twist and turn, we don’t lose eye contact. That’s when I feel the change in her. It’s like a firework shooting up from the ground, and into me. Because she nods once, and then my hands draw her in from her waist, and I toss her forward. One, two, three, *four* twists, and she lands with posture so clean, I’m left blinking in pure fucking awe. She just did a quad twist.

She gasps when she does, eyes shooting to mine. We’re both wide-eyed.

“Holy shit,” she whispers just as I do.

And then she’s in my arms again. Crashing into me harder than ever. Sierra lets me lift her up as she wraps her legs around my waist and puts her hands on my shoulders. A loud, uninhibited laugh bursts from her before she buries her face in the crook of my neck. Her sweet cherry smell clouds my senses, and I suppress the satisfied groan rising from my chest.

“You did it,” I say.

“*We* did it,” she corrects, vibrating with excitement. I can feel her breathe out a disbelieving chuckle, pressing her cold cheek right against mine. Her arms tighten around me, and her blunt nails press into the fabric of my cotton T-shirt. The rush of having her want to hold me this tight makes my blood burn hotter.

My lips brush right against her ear, her cold skin against my mouth. “I’m so proud of you, baby.”

A slight tremor runs through her. “Me too,” she whispers.

Slowly, I glide us back to Lidia so I can keep Sierra in my arms a while longer.

“*Krasivo*. What did I tell you?” Lidia shouts. “Slow and steady.”

“Slow and steady,” I repeat to Lidia, because Sierra is clinging to me, and I’m not ready to let her go.

Lidia’s smile slips just momentarily. I’m not sure what she sees, but whatever it is, it makes her clear her throat and clap twice. “Let’s end on a good note. See you tomorrow.”

“We should celebrate,” I whisper to Sierra, pressing the words to the cold shell of her ear.

She pulls back and I put her down. “You and me?”

I stare at her. “Who else?”

“Like a date?” Her nose scrunches like she’s repulsed by the idea, still avoiding eye contact.

I clear my throat. “As friends.”

“Oh, so we’re friends now?” Her lips quirk. She’s struggling with a knot on her skate. I lift her leg and wedge it between my knees, undoing her laces for her. She watches me carefully, a hint of something unreadable in her gaze. “Can I bring a friend?”

I shrug. “Sure.”

She smiles tightly, and I’m not sure I like how it makes me feel.

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TWENTY-THREE

DYLAN

I'D SINK MY teeth into that ass.

I know, fucked-up thing to think about my partner, especially when she walks into Myth, the converted warehouse bar, with the cook from Lola's. When she asked to bring a friend, Ajay is not who I had in mind. I thought it'd be Scarlett, and that's precisely why Kian tagged along.

"Is that girl staring at me or you?" he asks, nudging me.

My attention is pried away from where Ajay and Sierra talk, her hand hitting his shoulder every time she laughs. I've never seen her laugh like that before. It looks fake as fuck.

I turn to Kian, who has a drink in his hand and bobs his head to the loud music. I couldn't sit there and watch Ajay whisper in her ear, so I grabbed Kian and came to the bar.

Kian's back is against the crowded bar, and he's smiling at someone sitting just a few seats away. The girl's got curly brown hair and blue eyes. Her red lips only manage to pull my thoughts right back to Sierra.

"Definitely you," I say, slapping a hand on his back.

He drains his drink—it's water, in solidarity with me—then he stands straight, black Rage Against the Machine T-shirt straining against his body.

"You okay alone? Or I guess, third wheeling."

My gaze drifts back to the booth at the opposite end of the club, and I catch Sierra's lips around the straw of her drink. "I'm not third wheeling anyone."

He laughs. "Pretty sure Sierra's going to swallow the cook whole."

My grip on my glass tightens. "He's just a friend."

“Right, ’cause all of us snuggle up with a hot girl at a club because we’re being *friendly*.”

“Shut up.”

Kian chuckles, then his eyes widen to saucers. “Wait, wait, wait. It’s her, isn’t it? You’re into her! Are we plotting something? Is that why you invited me?” He sounds almost giddy.

“No,” I say quickly. “No plotting.”

“I should have known. Now I owe Summer twenty bucks.”

“I’ll give you fifty to stop talking.” I chew ice. Crushing something between my teeth seems to ease the ugly feeling.

“Do we not like the cook?”

“Don’t you have a girl waiting for you?” My gaze flits back to the other end of the bar, where the girl’s still looking our way. I’m not actually sure which one of us she’s looking at, but I only want one pair of eyes on me. And they’re definitely not blue.

Kian shrugs. “I’d rather stay here and figure out how we’re going to send the cook running for the hills.”

“*We* are not doing anything.” If we did, Sierra would “accidentally” cut me during practice.

“You’re no fun.” He drops his chin in his hands. “I could tell him his car is on fire.”

Is it bad that I consider it? “No. You’re not doing that.”

“There’s your chance,” Kian whispers when Sierra stands. “I’ll take care of it, trust me.”

I don’t trust him to do anything remotely sane in this situation, but I’m not thinking straight right now. I may have developed a hoarding problem, but only when it comes to Sierra. Without a second thought, I slowly head down the hall and wait. When Sierra comes out of the bathroom, she spots me instantly. Green eyes land on mine, and her hips sway like they’re hypnotizing me. *Fuck*, she’s hot. Why does Ajay get to look at her?

“Could you be more creepy?” she says.

I fight a smile. “I could.”

She rolls her eyes, walking up to me until my back is against the wall. “You’re being weird. Even Ajay asked me if he did something to make you hate him.”

“Hate him? I’ve met him once,” I say. “But since you’re here and we’re alone, we should celebrate. One dance.” I press the words to her ear and

inhale the heady rush of cherry scent.

“I don’t think Ajay would like that.”

“I don’t give a fuck what he’d like.”

She raises a perfect brow, smirking. “Thought you didn’t hate him?” She makes it look like she could take me if she wanted to. I’d probably let her. My gaze finds the buttons of her dress. I could rip it open with one tug.

“Sierra?” Ajay stands there in his white button-up, staring between us with irritation. Kian’s behind him, rubbing the back of his neck and looking guilty.

“Ajay,” Sierra starts. “I was—”

“It’s okay. I felt like I was intruding anyway. I’m going to head out. I’ve got work tomorrow.”

He’s lying, and I watch the way Sierra’s face falls. It’s eerily similar to how it looked when I pulled away from that kiss. The memory only adds weight to my chest.

“Hey, man, is that your car that’s on fire?” Kian interrupts the awkwardness.

“What?!” Ajay rushes out, and I glare at Kian before he disappears into the club. Sierra doesn’t look at me. Instead, she rushes out after Ajay.

“I had nothing to do with that. It was all Kian,” I say innocently, trailing her. “Don’t let this ruin our night.”

“You just drove him away my … friend!” she shouts. “I have to stop him.”

I can’t say I enjoyed that pause before she landed on *friend*. “You’ve got to stop acting like you’re responsible for other people’s actions. If he’s not an idiot, he’ll come back.”

“He saw us together.”

“Talking,” I say. “He’s a big boy, Sierra. He can work through his emotions.”

“You’re a dick.”

“And yet, here you are.”

“You shouldn’t be rewarded for your behavior.”

“Just punish me for it later. Any way you like.” I grin.

She narrows her eyes. “You’re driving me home.”

“After a dance?”

“Now.” Sierra goes to the booth to grab her jacket and takes the drink with her. She sips it the whole way, almost like she’s using it to avoid

talking to me. When she heads in the wrong direction, still stubborn as hell, I guide her with a hand on her waist to where my car is parked.

She opens the door before I can and slips inside, arms crossed. We sit in silence, and I text Kian that we're leaving, but he doesn't answer. I glance at Sierra, unsure if she's mad. Either way, I'm not afraid to find out.

"If you're mad, I'll let you punch me," I say, breaking the silence in the car.

That gets her to look at me. I *love* when she looks at me. "In the face?" she asks.

"My *arm*. You wouldn't like it if you ruined all this." I point to my face.

"How hard?"

"As hard as you can," I say, but she doesn't move. "It's a onetime offer, princess—*ow*!"

Sierra jumps and puts her hands over mine on my throbbing biceps. The girl can punch; I should have known. She holds it tight like that would help, and I think I'm going slightly insane because it does. Except something else is throbbing now. "I wasn't going to, but then you kept talking, and it was like a reflex, but I'm sorry—"

"What have I told you about saying that?"

"That I shouldn't say it." She swallows. "Not to you, at least."

"Good, so you do listen to me."

"Sometimes." She's staring at my arm again. "Did I really hurt you?"

"No," I say. "Are you mad at me?"

She slumps back on a sigh. "No, but now I'll never know if he was going to kiss me." She stiffens, like she didn't mean to blurt that out loud.

Irritation runs heat down my back. But there's a part of me that rejoices in the fact that Ajay's never kissed her. "Trust me, he wanted to do a lot more than just kiss you."

She looks at me curiously. "How do you know?"

"I can tell when a guy wants the girl I—" I stop. "I just do. He's into you."

Sierra fidgets with the hem of her dress, and I'm barely sitting still. I'd rather not sit here and discuss how Ajay would kiss Sierra. Where the fuck is Kian?

"Doesn't matter anymore. It's not like it'll happen now," Sierra says.

"You actually wanted him to kiss you?" I try not to sound so offended.

She shrugs. "Maybe."

“Yes or no?” I ask, staring at her.

“No.”

The silence that follows feels thick enough to choke on. “Who do you want to kiss you?”

“You.”

My throat is filled with gravel. Those warnings are blaring in my head again, but this time I don’t want to listen to them.

“One kiss,” I say. The half-baked idea sounds idiotic when I want to do so much more. When I shouldn’t do anything at all.

“I don’t need your pity kiss, Donovan.”

“Not a pity kiss.” I unclip her seat belt, and she just stares at me as my seat whirs back. “Come here, Sierra.”

“Where?”

I take her hand, and I pull her close. Sierra climbs over the center console and straddles me in the driver’s seat. When her ass hits my lap, I realize this might be my dumbest fucking idea yet. I choke on her cherry scent.

Sierra moves closer, her ass moving too, and I groan. “Is this some kind of chemistry read?” she jokes.

“Nah, this is for us,” I say.

“To do what with?”

I smooth a hand across her cheek. “I want to figure out if whatever the fuck I’m feeling when I’m this close to you is real or just in my head.”

She bristles. “How do you feel?”

“Like I’m losing my mind.”

Sierra seems to enjoy that answer. Fuck, I like that. “So, this is a onetime, casual kiss?”

“Casual,” I repeat, even though that word burns my esophagus.

She leans in, close enough that I smell the fruity drink on her breath. “And platonic?”

“So platonic,” I whisper.

I’m not sure who kisses who first, because we’re both at it immediately. It’s not just one kiss, not even fucking close.

She steals my breath straight from my lungs, and for a second I wish I could drop dead. That way this is the last thing I’d feel. Her moans fall on my tongue like snowflakes, and I bask in the press of her hips on me, barely holding back from taking control and dry humping her in the front seat of my car.

The kiss silences every ache in my body. If I thought I was losing my mind before, it's eviscerated now. I could walk on water.

Sierra's still smiling, and I know it's because she can feel me turning harder than a damn pipe. She's enjoying it, and even though it's torture when she moves her hips again, I let her do it. But she must want to reward me, because she slides my hands up her body to her full, perky tits. I palm her chest over the fabric of her dress, desperate to yank it off. I press my thumb to her nipples, making her head fall back on a moan.

We're walking a thin line around what *one kiss* is, especially when she reaches for the buttons on her dress and undoes them one by one. It's slow motion until she stops just below her chest, and I want this view to melt into my memory. I almost whimper. Fuck, I think I do.

Her red lace bra holds up her tits prettily. I groan. "Ajay could never deserve this."

She laughs and it's pure bliss. "And you do?"

"I think you know I do, Sierra." I kiss one. "I've been so good." Then the other. "Such a good boy."

I press the pad of my thumb against her distended nipple and her head falls back on a breathy moan. My lips cover her flushed skin until I pull down her bra and draw her nipple deep into my mouth. Her skin tastes like cherries too.

I lick and suck and bury my face between them. She rocks against me.

My hand travels to the buttons to see all of her, but Sierra stops me. I drop my hand and instead grind her down on me to feel the perfect weight of her in my lap.

"Does this make us friends?" she asks in a playful whisper.

I could be best friends with her tits. "You wanna be friends?"

She smiles, and I feel it against my lips. Fuck, I don't think I've ever had a conversation while kissing a girl like this. But with Sierra, I could do this forever. I would drag this one kiss into eternity if she let me.

She hums, and I taste it in my mouth before she says, "I won't tell anyone if you don't."

"Deal. Can't have it mess up our image."

"Definitely not," she says. "This stays between us."

She rubs her ass against something else that's between us. She's magnetic, and my dick is clearly trying to appease the charge.

Then there's a knock on my tinted window. "Are you guys in there?"

“Kian,” Sierra whispers between kisses.

I bite her lip. “Don’t say another guy’s name when my tongue is in your mouth.”

She laughs, and I pull her right back. Kian mutters something, and then we hear footsteps retreating. That’s when Sierra’s dress slides up, and I can see the flash of red lace between her legs. My heart stops.

“Touch me,” she rasps. “*Please*.”

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TWENTY-FOUR

SIERRA

ORGASMS MAKE ME stupid. Because anyone with half a brain would know that this is not one kiss. The moment his lips touched mine, my skin became an inferno. I think I could heat a small village. It's like my body was trying to burn my dress just so it could feel Dylan's hands all over my bare skin. I don't know why those words came out of my mouth. All I know is that if he stopped touching me, I would turn to ash.

"So you only use that word when you want something from me, huh?"

How is it possible that I want to wring his throat, but also kiss it? "Don't make me say it again."

His eyes darken, almost entirely black. "Tell me how you want to be touched. Any way you want, and I'll give it to you."

"Why? You don't know what you're doing?"

Dylan chuckles, and it makes my stomach tighten. "Baby, you're fucking lucky we're in my car. Now tell me what you want, so I can see those pretty eyes roll back."

My heart thrums like it's detached and bouncing around in there. "I—I don't know."

His amber eyes grow soft. "That's okay. How about I stay right here?" He leaves a light kiss between my breasts. "And if you want more. You tell me, yeah?"

I barely nod.

"You have the prettiest tits," he whispers, playing with them like they're his favorite toy. I've never had anyone touch me like this. Like every part of me is something precious. With the way he's staring at me, you'd think I was made from pure gold.

Dylan's teeth graze my nipple, and my legs clench. "You like it when I play with them, don't you?" he says. "Your pussy is soaked, isn't it, princess?"

"Oh God."

"Just me, baby." Dylan hums a pretty sound. "I think I'll make you come just like this. Just from my mouth on your tits."

There's electricity in my veins. That spark that always disappears when I'm on my own flashes red hot. I'm grinding my clit against him, where he's already hard. "I'm so close."

His gaze flicks up, surprised. Clearly, I'm a hair trigger, but if this is embarrassing, I don't care. I need this from him.

Instead of taking me over the edge, Dylan releases my nipple with a pop, and I whimper. He pulls back to take my forgotten drink from the cupholder and lifts it to his mouth. I'm staring at him, confused, because Dylan doesn't drink as of recently. I'm sitting here, half naked, on the verge of an orgasm I'm sure will ruin me, and he's thirsty? For that?

The ice moves noisily in the cup when he sets it back down. I look at him, and he's got an ice cube between his teeth.

"What are you doing?"

His brown eyes are dark, heavy-lidded, and so far gone I almost come from that alone. Then he leans in, and the cold shock of ice from his mouth circles my nipples. Making them even harder. It's the exact moment he bucks his hips. *Oh fuck.*

That does it. I'm screaming his name, and he's gripping the insides of my thighs, whispering for me to give it to him, while hot white light flashes. I come so hard, I gasp for air.

There was kissing. And then there was *that*.

I slump forward onto his shoulder, and he holds me there. There are voices in the parking lot. But I don't focus on anything but the way his heart beats as rapidly as mine. And in sync.

A knock on the window startles me. "I checked inside. I know you're in there. Let me in! I'm freezing and the bouncer kicked me out for telling people their cars are on fire," Kian complains.

I'm still coming down when we burst into laughter, our foreheads against each other's, our breaths mingling.

"We should probably let him in before we have to drag his frozen body inside," I say.

Dylan doesn’t seem to agree, because when I’m about to climb over the console, he stops me. He tucks my hair behind my ear and kisses me so hard, it empties the oxygen from my lungs. I memorize the way he tastes, and the way he makes me feel when I’m in his arms. Like I’m something he wants to keep. Something precious. I let myself believe someone’s chosen me for once.

Lidia: I’m out today for a meeting with the federation to get you two cleared for competition. No ice. I mean it, Sierra.

An idea pops into my head when I get that text in the morning, but it’s put off by my phone ringing.

“Why didn’t you tell us you have a partner and you’re skating full-time again?” my mom asks before I can speak. “And with the boy who came over to our house. Dylan Donovan?”

Great. This is the last thing I needed today. Especially since the mention of him does something dangerous to the nerve endings in my body. “I was going to tell you, Mom. This partnership came out of nowhere, and I’ve barely had a second to breathe.” Partially because my mouth’s been occupied by other things.

“Well, we know now. Your papa and I will be at your competition. See you soon.” She hangs up before I can say anything. She knew I’d talk her out of it. The last thing I need is them worrying about me in the stands. Not even one second later my dad texts me: Take it slow. Wear a helmet.

I roll my eyes, but I can’t help my smile. By the time I’m dressed and out the door, I realize I have a problem following orders. I know it, because after seeing my dad’s message and Lidia’s, I’m driving to the hockey house. They’ve got a black wreath on their door and very early Halloween decorations on the lawn. Skeletons are on top of one another, each in a different position. Even the scarecrows on the corner are getting it on.

I hesitated to come here. After last night, I realized I don’t actually know the definition of *casual*. Dylan’s mouth on mine, his whispers against my skin, his rough hands on my thighs—the memory heats my skin, but I push it away. We’re partners, and skating always come first.

“Hey, Sierra.” A bleary-eyed blond opens the door. Cole, I think.

“Is Dylan home?” I ask.

“Probably. Other than skating with you, he’s been home a lot lately. It’s weird,” he says. “First door down the hall and knock just in case. For your

own good.” With that, he vanishes into the dark basement.

Inside, the house is unnervingly silent, a stark contrast to my previous visit with hallway mini golf and a cranked-up TV.

When I knock on his door, it creaks open on its own. A normal person would just wait in the hall, but I don’t have time. The room greets me with a jumble of disarray: an unmade bed, a desk with an open textbook, and a overflowing laundry hamper. On the dresser, there’s a single photograph—a snapshot of Dylan in mid-spin with a blue-eyed blonde. I assume she’s his sister, though they don’t resemble each other.

“Find anything interesting?”

I fumble with the picture frame when Dylan emerges from the steaming bathroom. It’s hard to stop the onslaught of memories that runs through my mind like a very explicit digital diary. Dylan’s in only a towel. I try to look anywhere but *there*, but end up looking at his mouth, feeling the ghost of his lips on my heated skin. And the faint hickeys he left somewhere lower.

“No. But I bet I would if I ran a black light around your room,” I reply. There. We’re back to normal again.

His gaze drags down my body, and a smirk tugs at his lips. “Try my car.”

“I think you mean your jeans.” *Oh my God. Shut up, Sierra.* I clear my throat. “Uh, do you have any plans today?”

Dylan sighs as though he’s bearing the weight of the sun. “Should’ve known you’re the clingy type, Romanova. I mean, showing up at my house on our day off?”

“*Clingy*?” I scoff. “You’re the one who barely let go of me last night.”

“I happen to recall you begging me to touch you while you rubbed your needy cunt all over me. Was that right, or am I the one that needs my hearing checked?”

A lash of heat hits my body, and I fist my hands by my sides. “Don’t know. It was just one kiss.”

“Careful, Sierra, or I’m going to think you want another.”

“I think one was enough.”

He steps closer. I try not to focus on the singular drop of water that drips from his damp hair, onto his shoulder, and down to his pecs. “Was it that unmemorable for you? I didn’t even make the top five?”

Casual. Partners. I need to remember that. Dylan’s been with girls before, enough that a night that was new and charged and weirdly revolutionary for me could be another Tuesday for him. I’m not stupid, I

know people hook up in college on a whim; it's essentially a rite of passage for some. For Dylan, I know that's true.

I shrug. "Guess not."

He looks at me like he knows I'm lying. So damn cocky. "Who's number one?"

You. "Want me to make you a list?"

"Yes." He's serious. But then his gaze falls to my hands, and something in those brown eyes softens. "You do that a lot."

"Do what?"

Dylan gestures toward my hands. "Clench your fists."

I look down at the crescent-shaped impressions from my nails embedded in my palms. The sight brings back memories—times when my palms would be stained with blood after struggling through a difficult move or the agonizing wait for scores after performances. When I was paired with Justin, he preferred to remain focused and detached, unwilling to give me a warm touch. So I'd resort to clenching my fists, trying to keep it together on my own.

"Didn't realize you were tracking my every move," I say, but Dylan's expression remains serious, thoughtful even. He reaches for the desk drawer between us and pulls out a pen.

"Palm," he orders.

"Huh?"

"Give me your palm, Sierra."

I hide my hands behind my back. "What for?" I eye the pen with suspicion. "If you're planning to stab me, you'll need something sharper."

He ignores me and pulls my hand out from behind my back. My fist remains clenched, and with a shake of his head, Dylan unfurls each finger. His hand is warm and calloused, dwarfing mine. He cradles my hand, applying just enough pressure with the pen to avoid hurting me. A stray lock of brown hair falls across his forehead, and as he doesn't move to push it away, I find myself itching to do it. To curl the soft strand around my finger and brush it from his warm temple, letting my fingers linger on his smooth skin.

There's a faint tickle as his pen moves across my skin—slow, circular strokes, two quick dots, and a swift swipe. He drops the pen on the desk and looks at me expectantly. I glance down at the new ink that sits in the center

of my palm where I'd just pressed my nails. It's a smiley face. He drew a smiley face on my palm.

Despite myself, my lips twitch, the hint of a smile creeping in before I can tamp it down. Dylan watches, his gaze steady as I study the drawing in confusion.

"Huh, that's new," he murmurs. "You have nothing to say."

"It's a smiley face."

"Oh good, I didn't think you were going to figure it out." Dylan drops my hand and goes to his bedside table to grab his phone. "Any reason you're here? Or were you just hoping to catch me shirtless again?"

I'm still caught on the smiley face inked on my palm, its simplicity now at odds with the flicker in Dylan's eyes—something deeper than the casual mask he's slipping back into now. For a split second, it felt like he'd let me glimpse something beneath the surface. But then he calls my name, pulling me from my thoughts.

"I want you to lift me."

He doesn't look up from his phone. "I lift you all the time."

"In a reverse lasso lift."

His jaw tenses. "No."

"Come on! Lidia won't let me try it because she's worried I'll freak, and I can't keep training without knowing if my brain will malfunction the second I'm up there."

Dylan blinks, and for a moment I think he's considering it. But then he turns to his closet, pulling out a pair of sweats and a crewneck. His hand moves to his towel before he lets it fall. My breath catches, and I whip around so fast the room tilts. "Lidia's made it clear that we're not doing advanced lifts until later. We're not even supposed to be on the ice today," he says.

"Since when do you care about what we're supposed to do?" I turn back around, not caring if he's still naked, letting the frustration seep into my tone. "You've changed our choreography because you thought your way was better. Besides, she's being too cautious, and it's driving me crazy. I need to do this."

I'm practically begging now. We're both highly aware it's the same lift position I was in seconds before my life flashed before my eyes. He studies me in silence, crossing his arms over his chest, his biceps flexing beneath the snug fabric of his shirt.

“We can’t.”

My heart sinks.

Dylan heads for the door, but before he can open it, I slap my hand over it. He twists the knob anyway, showing me just how little my hand is doing to stop him from leaving. I don’t know whether it’s my anger or Dylan not even considering it, but I yank him toward me, and his back hits the door. My hands press firmly into his shoulders, trapping him in place as I tilt my head up to meet his gaze.

“I’m sick and tired of everyone treating me like I’m fragile!” My voice trembles. “I’m not some doll that can’t handle a few bruises. I’m not the girl bleeding on the rink or the one crying in the hospital. That’s not me anymore, and I won’t let anyone—not even you—stop me from doing what I used to do with my eyes closed!”

His brows rise, and he blinks at me.

“So, I’m asking you again, Dylan. Will you *please* help me with my lift, or should I go find someone else?”

A long beat passes, thick and heavy.

“There is no one else,” he says, voice low and firm. “I’m the only one with you on that ice, Sierra. Got it?”

Then his amber brown eyes watch me, and I let those words soak in. I nod.

“Then I’ll do it.” A familiar glint flares back to life in his eyes. “But only if you promise to manhandle me like that again. Perfect spank bank material.”

“*You* need a spank bank?”

“Where you’re concerned, absolutely.”

“STARING AT MY ass the entire routine isn’t going to help you perform better,” I say.

“How would you know that? Maybe it’s exactly the kind of motivation I need.”

“Fine, it’s your turn. I’ll watch your ass and see how you feel.”

He balks, a hand on his chest. “Save the dirty talk for the bedroom, Romanova.” He pauses. “Or my car.”

My cheeks burn. “Can you stop stalling and lift me now?”

He smiles, and I notice his Adam's apple bob before he schools his expression into utmost confidence. Dylan's eyes are focused on me, and he waits for each of my signals for the moves. He's slower and more deliberate today, but I don't say anything.

Today's skate brings flashes of the old Sierra from before it all when this sport was an outlet, something fun. So, when Dylan and I connect again, the words are out of my mouth before I know it. "Lift me."

"Are you su—"

"Now."

I twist away from him, and he must read my mind, because he locks his hands with mine and lifts me clean over his head. No shaking, no hesitation, just pure strength and trust. He spins, and euphoria floods through me as I regain my footing.

"We did it!" I shout, clutching his hoodie. He holds me in his arms, lifting me off the ice. "Let's do it again!"

He barks out a laugh, and it only adds to how good I feel right now. Dylan leans in the tiniest bit when the sound of skates scraping the ice makes us turn to the gate.

My smile falls. Julia and Justin step onto the ice, and their coach starts shouting orders. I can't help but notice how pale Julia looks, and the jittery movements in both their stances. It's hard to ignore, especially when Justin looks so *different*.

I turn back to Dylan, who holds my gaze with a level of scrutiny I don't understand.

"What?" I ask.

He starts to say something, but I don't hear it because the next sound that drowns out the echo of the arena is Julia's high-pitched scream. A kind that I know all too well.

Their coach rushes onto the ice. I don't even notice when the warmth of Dylan's hand disappears, because my entire body has gone cold. There's cursing, and an agonizing gasp from their vicinity. She tripped over Justin's skate and cut her hand open. My heart bumps against my spine, and when I skate forward, everyone is crowding her. Pins prickle against my throat, and crimson paints the white ice, some of it on her coach's fingers.

Justin is standing far away, and I notice that seconds before my vision tunnels. *No*.

“Close your eyes,” Dylan shouts. He’s helping their coach hold Julia up, and I can’t seem to look away. “*Sierra*.”

I startle, gaze flickering to Dylan’s stern expression. “I—I can’t—”

“Close your fucking eyes, Sierra!”

They lift her now, and my throat almost closes up. I hate that Justin gets to see this reaction from me. He stares at me like I’m some wounded animal. Then Dylan’s in front of me.

“You don’t need to see that. Don’t look.” He’s pleading with me now, brown eyes desperate as he cups my face. “Please, baby, you have to close your eyes.”

His warm breath falls on my lips, and I close my eyes as tears gather, soaking into my lashes.

“Everything’s going to be okay.” Dylan’s lips press against my forehead. “But I need you to keep your eyes closed and turn around, okay? Just until we can get her help, then I’ll take you home.”

I nod, and just like that he’s gone. The scuffle of shoes and skates makes me squeeze my eyes shut harder, and I skate away, not opening them until I know I’ve hit the rubber mats that lead to the locker room. As soon as I change out of my skates, I’m out the double doors.

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TWENTY-FIVE

DYLAN

MY PARTNER HAS a bad habit of running off, and at this point, I'm one chase away from investing in handcuffs.

Inside Iona House, I knock on Sierra's dorm door, after some girl—who happened to remember me very well—let me into the building. When I helped take Julia to the medical room, my mind was stuck on Sierra. It was like it all had flashed before her eyes. I went to find her in the changerooms, but she was gone. Coach Kilner was the one to tell me he saw her leave.

He also decided that was a good time to tell me I've been approved to come to some of the hockey practices. I've barely registered that; I couldn't even think about anything other than Sierra's face. It fucked with something in my chest.

Scarlett opens the door with a sympathetic smile. "She's not feeling so great, Dylan."

"I know, but I just want to make sure she's okay. Please, Scarlett."

She must see the desperation in my eyes, because she pulls the door open wider and lets me in. But just as I start toward Sierra's room, Scarlett stops me, turning me to face her again.

"Dylan, I know you're her partner, and I can see you care about her. But she's been hurt before, and she's not the kind of girl that's going to let you hold her hand."

"I know," I say. "But I'm going to anyway."

I step past her and rap my knuckles once on Sierra's door before pushing it open. The sight inside knocks the breath out of me. She's lying on her side, curled up with her hands tucked between her thighs, and she's wearing my hoodie.

It’s too big on her, the sleeves swallowing her fingertips, the hem brushing her knees. The image of her wrapped up in something of mine makes it hard to swallow.

“Sorry I left—” she starts when she sees me.

“Don’t.” I close the door and move to sit on her bed. It’s small, nowhere near big enough for me, but I stay there, brushing a hand across her cheek.

Sierra’s lip starts to tremble, and she buries her face in her hands.

“Come here, baby,” I whisper, gently drawing her in. She moves without hesitation, tucking her face in the crook of my neck. Sierra melts into my arms, just like she did last night. Like she belongs there. I’m not sure she even realizes that she scoots back to make room for me on her bed. I don’t question it; I ease down beside her, pulling her close until we’re tangled together.

“I thought I was better. But seeing all that blood, and hearing her scream, it took me right back.” Her voice shakes. “And *he* just stood there. Exactly like he did when I fell. It just reminds me of how stupid I was trying to be enough for him and never measuring up. I would let him throw fits and scream at me, thinking it was my fault. I always tried to improve because I knew I could be better.”

A storm threatens to break inside me. “You don’t need to be screamed at, ever,” I say roughly.

She shakes her head. “But I still understood why he did it. He was just frustrated, and I know how I can be.”

“Don’t say that, Sierra. Not to me. Because if I see him again, I won’t be able to stop myself from knocking his teeth out.” I make her look at me this time. “You could never deserve that.”

She sighs, clutching my shirt. “It’s like the universe wanted to remind me that, at the end of the day, that’s my story. No matter how far I try to run from it.”

She’s shaking, but I can tell she’s not crying or, rather, fighting not to. My fingers slip into her hair, combing through the strands. “Your reaction doesn’t mean you aren’t healing. You’ve gotten yourself all the way here.” I pause, my thumb brushing gently against her temple. “And if you need my hand to help you make it the rest of the way, I’ll be here. But this is all you, Sierra. It always has been.”

She’s barely smiling, but I’ll take it. “It sounds easy when you say it.”

“Seeing you in pain isn’t something I enjoy, but the way you continuously push through it is the most incredible thing I’ve witnessed.” Her cheeks go pink, and I can’t help but chuckle.

She furrows her brow. “Don’t laugh at me.”

“Can’t help it,” I say, a grin tugging at my lips. “I’ve never seen someone who’s threatened to slit my throat blush this much.”

“Must be an allergic reaction,” she mutters, her palms flying up to press against her cheeks.

I lean in, closing the space between us, and press a soft kiss to one flushed cheek, then the other. Her hands drop, her eyes wide as she blinks at me, nose to nose. Her warm breath brushes against my lips, and I don’t move. Scarlett’s words come back to me, but every single one incinerates when Sierra’s lips press against mine.

The kiss is nothing like the one in the car, or on the mats. This one is slow, gentle, and vulnerable. Her tongue slides against mine, and she fists my shirt while she moans into my mouth. I could never get tired of this.

Then, when my hand falls against her waist, where the hoodie has ridden up, Sierra slaps a hand over mine and pulls away. It’s the third time she’s done that.

“What’s wrong?”

She sits up, moving right against her headboard, frantically shaking her head. “Nothing. Sor—I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“When you kiss like that, Sierra, you don’t get to go shy on me.” Her gaze is fixed on the bed, until I sit up to take her chin between my fingers. “What is it?”

“I have scars,” she blurts out.

SIERRA

THIS IS NOT how I expected tonight to go, but feeling Dylan’s soft hands and words fall on my skin sparked an unexpected craving. Enough that I told him about my scars. He’s the first guy to see me like this. So unprotected, so *open*.

I show him the one on my skull first, but it’s barely visible with the new hair growth. Then the long linear scar going down my ribs, raised and bumpy. The fading hole from the chest tube, puckered and sunken. Harsh

and ugly. I wait for him to move back, to look at them with poorly hidden disgust. To *leave*.

"I know you've been with girls that are all smooth skin and flawless. And I know no one wants a constant reminder of my shitty past during this."

"Sierra."

"I know, they're ugly."

"*Sierra*." My name falls off his lips like it's painful to say. His eyes darken like he can't fathom I just said that.

"This?" He runs his hand along the jagged scar like it's something precious. "This scar is the reason you're here right now. With me. There isn't a single thing about you that's ugly."

My chest feels like it's caving in. It feels like too much and not enough at the same time. My eyes start to sting. I scramble off the bed, but Dylan grabs my wrist before I can get far.

"Will you let me see you?" His gaze follows the scar that disappears beneath the waistband of my shorts.

My heart hammers before I swallow and just barely manage to nod.

Without warning, Dylan drops to his knees, and my breath catches. "I can do it," I say quickly.

He stares up at me with a wicked smile. "Just let me be on my knees for you, Sierra. I know that's where you've always wanted me anyway." Dylan drags the shorts down my legs. He must notice my fisted hands, because he takes them and places them on his shoulders.

A bucket of ice-cold self-consciousness nearly drowns me. "I know guys don't always like doing this. You don't have to—"

"What kind of idiots have you let touch you?" He shakes his head. "I like it. And since I'm the one between your legs, that's all that fucking matters."

I believe him. I don't think there could be a world out there where Dylan Donovan doesn't worship every part of a woman.

"This is about you, okay? Well, a little for me too." A pause. "Okay, a lot for me, but I can make you feel amazing. It's what I'm good at."

He just made my chest burst open with his words, but he thinks this is all he's good at?

"I fucking knew it." Dylan chuckles, hands trailing my exposed scar. "Unreal." He kisses the scar, then just above my navel, and lower, toward my core. I'm on fire. "Beautiful."

I go completely still, and he notices. Dylan stands, lifting my leg with him, making me realize how terribly *wet* I am.

"If this is too much, we can put your shorts back on and forget this happened. But I would really like to show you exactly how I feel about your body by kissing every inch of you and your scars till the sun comes up."

I'm sure I could disintegrate into a puddle at this moment. "I haven't done this in a while," I admit. "I haven't even touched myself. Not since …"

My inexperience feels jarring when Dylan Donovan is in front of me.

His gaze flickers. "You haven't masturbated in over a year?"

There's no judgment in his voice, but I still feel like a prude. "Why would I give my body this pleasure when it took so much from me?" The words slip out so fast, I purse my lips. No one thinks like that; no one punishes their body like it's not a part of them. But after the accident, that's all I've seen it as.

His expression softens to something breakable, exactly how I feel. "Let me show you how much you deserve it, Sierra. Not your body, not your brain, but *you*."

He still wants this? To kiss my ugly scars? "Why?"

Dylan chuckles. It's so sexy I almost clench my thighs together, but he's between them. "Because you calling your scars ugly is unacceptable, and I want to rectify that."

Oh.

"Tell me, Sierra. Are you gonna let me taste you until the only thing you're saying about your body is how much you want me inside it?"

I nearly choke, but my body shakes with anticipation as I nod.

"Thank you," he whispers against my skin as his nose drags down my body. "You're so brave." Another kiss. "So pretty." Another one. "So fucking mean it makes me hard."

I laugh and he gazes up at me like he doesn't want to miss it. I feel his smirk on my skin as he trails lower, pulling my leg over his shoulder, pausing only a millisecond when my anklet jingles, but just as quickly, his hot mouth is on me. He doesn't break eye contact, observing what every movement of his tongue does to me. How it makes me go from the straight-thinking, rigid girl into this goopy mess.

"*Dylan*," I whimper. I'm embarrassed that I could probably come from this alone. But then his hand reaches under my hoodie, and his fingers roll

my nipples.

I throw my head back, letting his hand roam over my scars like they haven't haunted me, haven't been the reason I avoid looking in bathroom mirrors when I shower. His tongue drives into me, he presses his thumb against my clit, and his moans vibrate against my pussy. It feels so *good*, I envy him for making my body feel this way. Like in just a few minutes, he understood its language better than I ever could.

"*Fuck*, you feel like heaven," he whispers, low enough I almost don't hear it. "And you taste like cherries." Then he sucks on my clit, and my body is on fire.

"I think I'm going to come," I pant. Dylan grips my thigh, tight enough to leave a mark.

He tuts. He actually fucking tuts at me. "You come when I want you to."

"Dylan," I mutter, pulling his hair harder so he looks at me. "Don't tell me what to do." A part of me is afraid if he doesn't give it now, it'll be snuffed out like a flame.

"Why not? I have a pretty good feeling you'll do whatever I say right now." He pushes his two fingers inside me, watching as my eyes roll back the deeper he goes. "Don't. Come."

"Dylan."

My body feels heavy, and he just watches me, teasing. The orgasm builds and builds. Dylan doesn't give it an option to quit. He holds it hostage, and I need it badly.

"*Please?*" I run a shaky hand through his hair.

It's almost like he melts. His dark eyes are warm, like honey dripping into his irises, the brown glowing like they would in the sun. He's so attentive, so focused on me, it makes me feel electrified.

In less than a second, he hits the perfect spot, and coil after coil of need causes hot sparks to drench my body. I let out a high-pitched moan, shaking out of my release. Dylan stands to wrap his arms around me.

He doesn't give me a second to breathe. He kisses me, swallowing my breathless moans like they're his to have. I give them to him, every single one. Then I'm rubbing against him, needing him again. My kisses become sloppier, eager, untamed.

Before I can reach the drawstring of his sweats, he flips me around so fast, I squeak.

“Hands on the wall.” He puts them there for me. Then he comes close behind me, the material of his pants rubbing against my bare ass where I feel the hard head of his cock so close to where my pulse flutters. Like it’s having withdrawals from his touch.

I reach back trying to touch him, to make him feel as good as he’s making me feel.

He doesn’t let me. His lips press roughly against my ear. “What did I tell you, Sierra? This is for you, and I’m not going to stop until you can’t think about anything but me pleasuring you. That’s what you asked for, isn’t it?”

“What about y—”

He nips my ear, and his fingers slide down my stomach and in between my legs, where he slaps my wet core. “That’s not how this works. Move again, and I’ll have to tie you up.”

His other arm snakes around my body, palming my tits. “*Please*. I can’t.”

“You’re so pretty when you beg, Sierra. You should do it more often.”

“Don’t let it get to your head, Donovan,” I force the words through gritted teeth.

“It already has, baby.” His fingers move in tandem with his hips, and I feel exactly how much it’s gotten to his head. He’s still teasing me, playing with every inch of my body and enjoying each gasp he elicits.

“I need more,” I say, trying to touch him, but he moves so quickly, I’m pinned on my back on the mattress.

“Such a greedy girl,” he says. “Be good, Sierra, or I’m going to suck on your tits for so long you’ll be begging me to stop.” He goes down again, and I try to push his head where I need it, but he shakes off my hands, grazing my nipple with his teeth. “You wanna come?”

“*Yes.*”

“Then tell me.”

Everything feels too sensitive and heightened. I’m crushed under his muscular body, knowing that with just one more kiss and a little friction, I won’t be able to function.

“T-tell you what?”

“That I’m the best partner you’ve ever had.” His voice is low and possessive, and it makes my toes curl.

“You are,” I say honestly. “You’re the best partner I’ve ever had.”

When he smiles, he looks so handsome. But even though he may think I said it to get off, it’s true. Never have I had someone so confident, so

extremely self-assured that it made me believe that I could be that way too. That I could be good enough.

Dylan draws out my orgasm like it's easy. He moves up to kiss me, and when he curls his fingers inside me, he watches my eyes roll back with unadulterated satisfaction.

"I could come just like this. Just from watching myself fuck you with my fingers."

I whimper. "I'm coming."

He hums in approval, trailing kisses down my chest until he sucks on my nipples. "Ride my fingers, baby. Take what you need."

All my inhibitions flew out the window the second he saw me naked. So I ride his hand, and my vision swims. I don't know if I scream or cry or whimper, but I erupt like a once-dormant volcano. I'm sure Scarlett's got her headphones on now.

Dylan's still kissing me, and I'm acutely aware of his lips on my scars, dotting my skin like a constellation. While I drift down, light as a feather, I watch him with a dopey smile that I can't seem to hide. My heart hammers seeing him caress where I haven't allowed anyone else to even look.

Dylan pulls my leg over his, pulling me close and cradling my body like we've never not been this way.

"You are so much more than your scars." He presses a kiss on the scar on my head. "So much more."

And right now, for whatever reason, I choose to believe him.

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TWENTY-SIX

DYLAN

IT'S BEEN A week, and I still think I can taste cherries. Today, Lidia called me into her office after one of our shorter practice sessions. I was exhausted by the time I slumped in her chair, and she told me we needed to adjust our schedule if I'm going back to hockey. Coach hasn't confirmed anything, so I haven't even thought about it. The only thing I do think about is staying in sync, trying to anticipate Sierra's every move, and making our lifts look as easy as breathing. Along with trying my hardest not to think about her breathy moans and the sweet taste of her lips whenever she's close.

Earlier this morning we went for a run, and apparently, I was too chipper. But I think that's thanks to Summer for dragging me on all those hikes. Sierra huffed against the tree bark, staring at me with disdain.

"It's two degrees. Why is your shirt off?" she asked.

"Does it make you uncomfortable?"

"Put on a goddamn shirt, Donovan."

"Only if you put it on me."

"Grow up."

"I'm plenty grown. Want me to show you?" That comment got me dirt to the face. But I did notice the way Sierra reddened, and I'd bet money she was thinking about my face between her thighs. However, I've decided to be a gentleman, so if Sierra wants me to give her the orgasms she doesn't allow herself and make this a lot more than just *one kiss*, she's going to have to ask me.

"Where have you been?" Kian asks as soon as I enter the house.

"The rink."

Kian flips his textbook shut. “How is it that you spend more time at the rink after being suspended than you did when you were actually on the hockey team?” He taps his pencil against the wooden dining table like a ticking clock.

I ignore him as I open the refrigerator.

“I have an answer.” He pauses for dramatic effect. “It’s because you’re whipped.”

The only things in the refrigerator are a single loaf of bread, half-finished jars of strawberry jam and peanut butter, and a few Slink drinks. Kian comes into the kitchen to stare at me from a distance. I drop bread in the toaster and do my best to ignore him.

“First Aiden, then Eli, and now you? My friends are dropping like flies, and I’m just here studying for a philosophy test. I’d rather be whipped too.”

“Not whipped,” I correct.

“Okay, then why did you put four slices of bread in the toaster and take out two plates?”

I look back at the toaster and realize what I’ve done.

He tuts. “Making food for a girl that’s not here. Like I said, you’re whipped, Dill Pickle.”

“I’m making it for you.” My attempt to cover the slipup doesn’t work, and I know it when he laughs. Kian pulls out his phone to take a picture. No doubt sending it to the group chat.

He snickers to himself, then slips his phone in his hoodie. “Never asked you to make me one.”

“You don’t want it?”

“I want it,” he says shamelessly.

I slather one side with peanut butter and the other with jam. After a single diagonal cut, I slide the sandwich across the counter to Kian. He stares at me as he takes the first bite. That’s when Summer walks in, her eyes glued to the sticker-decorated e-reader that Aiden got her when Kian lost her old one. I think he has it and just pretended like he lost it at an away game so he can use it.

She startles when Kian clears his throat, and turns her screen off immediately. “Why are you guys still awake?”

“Late practice,” I reply.

Her brow furrows. “Sierra’s coach makes you practice this late?”

“Nah, it was just us. We got a few extra hours in since the competition is on Monday.”

A giddy smile takes over her face. Her eyes move to Kian, who matches her expression, and I roll my eyes.

“I think I need to download a dating app,” he says through a mouthful.

Summer scoffs. “You’re a D1 hockey player. College is your dating app.”

“If that was the case, I’d be dating right now, Sunny.”

I take a bite of my sandwich. “You’re too much of a hopeless romantic for casual relationships.”

“Yeah, thanks to her romance books.” He aims a pointed look at Summer. “I think I need to adopt a cat.”

“I thought you guys had a no-pets rule for the house,” Summer says.

“That’s only because Dylan and I adopted Marty the lizard in freshman year. We didn’t have time to take care of him, so Aiden made us rehome him in Dalton’s Nature Center.”

We bought Marty off some guy in a van because Kian said he needed to save him. We visit Marty sometimes, and he’s got a way better life than we could have given him.

The front door opens, and Aiden walks in. He drops his gym bag by the shoe rack and stalks over to the fridge to grab a water bottle. Aiden’s only here a few more days, since he has to head back so the team’s doctor can clear him to play again.

“Kilner just told me the good news,” he says to me. “You’re back for a third of the practices. Keep it up and you’ll be reinstated and let off the NHL hold.”

“You’re coming back? Thank God, I’m dying out there without you,” Kian says. “Coach has been acting super weird around me. More than usual.”

Kilner’s still avoiding telling Kian about the captaincy. “Is it confirmed that I’m back? Coach said it was in the works.” I try my hardest to sound enthused by this. *I should be happy.* And I can’t understand why I feel so detached from that part of me since skating with Sierra.

“Yeah, he’ll probably email you tonight,” Aiden says as he pulls out his phone. “And I had my manager check in with New York, and they’re watching. If you stick to the plan, they’ll lift the hold before graduation.”

After everything, I’ll still get to play with Kian on an NHL team just like we’ve always planned. What should be a dream come true suddenly feels a

lot like a nightmare.

“That’s …” I pause, feeling unworthy. “More than I expected. I appreciate it, Cap.”

His heavy palm slams against my back when I pull him in for a hug. Just as we’re pulling away, Kian joins in and holds us still, our faces too close in an awkward three-way hug.

“You know what this means?” he says.

“No, but I bet you won’t let us go until you tell us,” I say.

He smiles. “The peace has been restored. We get to play hockey together again, like it’s supposed to be.”

“Yeah. Exactly how it’s supposed to be.” There’s that jab again.

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TWENTY-SEVEN

SIERRA

I HATE SUNDAYS. Not only is it the day before another week of what feels like endless classes, but it's a rest day.

Lying on my back with my legs propped against the wall, I take a few breaths, letting the wind rattling the windows and The Paper Kites fill the silence. Lidia is very serious about rest, so off days mean no cardio, because she thinks I'm incapable of taking a break.

I am, but it's not fun being called out for it.

Closing one eye, I count the dots on the ceiling, but my bedroom door pushes open and makes the three-digit number fall off my lips. I hear Scarlett call out that she's leaving. She's probably also the reason I see Dylan standing at my doorway. He's wearing a gray Carhartt hoodie and black pants, both a little wet from the rain that hasn't stopped since last night. Dylan tilts his head, assessing, before he comes to lie on the floor too.

No words pass between us as Dylan stretches his legs way past mine and stares up at the ceiling. We lie on the floor together like this is normal. Like he didn't make me see stars in this very room just a week ago.

Something soft starts to play from my speaker, but I don't register the song over my beating heart.

"Are you into weathermen or something?" Dylan asks, looking over at my laptop screen.

They're showing the lantern festival again. "Oh yeah, Dale Thunderman is exactly my type."

"Bald?"

"Charming."

“You must love me, then.”

I snort. “Not the verb I’d use.”

“Why do you watch it? Isn’t it just a loop?”

“It’s comforting. And it’s all I could watch in the hospital without having a panic attack, so it kind of stuck,” I admit, then quickly change the subject. “Did you just come here to check on me? Texts exist, you know.”

“But then I wouldn’t get to see your face. And all the little wrinkles you get in between your eyebrows and around your eyes when you glare at me. It’s extremely attractive.”

I scrunch my face away when he tries to boop my nose. “Don’t make me injure you before the competition.”

He drops his hand gently on top of mine. I’ve held his hands countless times before, but this feels different. Especially when his pinkie curls around mine. “I’d still perform,” he says.

“While you’re injured?”

“For you, I would.”

Suddenly, this feels foreign, and I need words to fill the uncomfortable pit in my stomach. “I’m assuming you didn’t come here to lie on the floor with me,” I say.

“Maybe I did.”

I bite my lip, turning to stare at the side of his face. His hair has grown longer, his skin is smooth, and I’m glad for his hand by mine, because I’m not sure if I could keep myself from reaching out and touching his face.

“It’s Lidia, isn’t it? She told you to check if I’m resting.”

He shrugs. “Not in so many words.”

I can’t help that nudge of disappointment that he’s not here because he wants to be. “You’ve confirmed I am, in fact, resting, so you can go.”

Dylan’s nose hovers mere inches from mine, so close I can almost feel the warmth of his breath on my skin.

“Resting doesn’t mean you have to lock yourself in your room.”

“Since my life revolves around skating, I don’t exactly have any plans outside of it.”

“Then it’s a good thing you have me.” He stands and extends his hand for me to take, just like he does on the ice. “Come on.”

“Where are we going?”

“Let me worry about that.”

I put my hand in his, not wanting to focus on the mess my brain is constantly spinning. And in the quickest almost imperceptible move he flips it, looks at my palm—at the faded smiley face—then back to hold it in a firm grip. One that doesn't loosen, not even when he asks if I'm ready to sprint to his car in the pouring rain. We bolt across the rain-soaked pavement. My hair is wet even after he tries to hover a hand over my head. I almost slip, but he's quick to steady me. I don't recognize the laugh that spills from my lips.

As soon as we're in the car, I carefully gather my hair, mindful not to let the droplets touch his leather seats. He, however, has no such concern. With a carefree grin, Dylan shakes his head, sending water splattering across the bright display and onto me.

Is it bad that I want to lick the water droplets off his face?

"It was supposed to be clear skies tonight," Dylan says. There's a crease on his forehead as he looks at the darkening sky.

"It's only supposed to rain for a few more minutes. Why? Do you have somewhere to be?"

He looks at me then, the crease disappearing. "Yeah."

Oh.

A jolt of disappointment torpedoes into my stomach, and I hope it doesn't show on my face. In the short time I've been outside the stuffy dorm, I've relaxed. Rather than obsess over my routine and relive flashbacks of a certain competition, I'm occupied with each smirk Dylan gives, and counting how many shades of brown his eyes are. A part of me wishes it would stay gloomy all day, so he'll have to cancel.

The radio is tuned to the hockey game, Toronto versus Los Angeles. For some reason, I thought after we started skating, hockey kind of blurred away for him. He never talks about it, never mentions it. But right now, I realize how much of it is still inside of him, how much he must miss his sport.

"Do you miss it?" I blurt.

He tenses, but then he shrugs, eyes still on the road. "It was a part of me for so long, I don't think I ever thought I'd lose it. It's like a limb. You take it for granted, and one day maybe it aches, gets injured, or you lose it altogether, and you realize how much you relied on its function. But I guess that's how most things go. You only appreciate them when they're gone."

I'm taken aback by the sudden insight into his head. "I get that."

He glances at me. “Yeah, I guess you do.”

Still lost in my thoughts, I jump when he drops his phone in my lap. “Here, play whatever you want. It’s unlocked.”

I pinch it between my fingers. I can only imagine the kinds of things this gadget has seen.

“It doesn’t have a disease, Sierra.”

“You sure?” I don’t have to look at him to see his glare. “I mean, you could have pictures and other … things on here.”

“Just play the music,” he orders.

Well, there goes my innocence. What was left of it since the other night anyway. When I scroll through his favorites, I’m met with an endless stream of country music—playlists upon playlists, mostly shared by his friends. But then, one catches my eye, standing out from the rest. A playlist titled *Firefly*.

“Find something?” he asks when he merges onto the highway.

I’m still scrolling through the songs, my suspicion growing with each one I recognize. It’s eerily similar to the music I skate to—disjointed yet perfectly suited to my moods. Somehow, every one of those tracks is here.

“Do you ever make your own playlists?” I ask, trying to sound casual.

He glances at me, then back to the road too quickly. “If I’m inspired enough.”

My heart flips. The next question lingers on the tip of my tongue, but I bite it back. Instead, I shuffle his favorite songs, letting the first one play, as a swirl of thoughts bubbles.

“Where are we going?” I ask, trying to steady my voice. “I’d prefer to know the location so I can tell Scarlett. You know, just in case.”

“I wouldn’t let anything happen to you, Romanova. We’ve got a competition to win, remember?”

When he says it like that, the competition doesn’t sound so scary. Neither does the prospect of going for a win. It feels so certain on his tongue.

It isn’t long before the rain patters to a stop and we’re past the infamous Connecticut scenery—dying trees and yellow grass—to pull onto a crunchy gravel back road that leads to a parking lot. There are people carrying their kids, couples hand in hand, and friend groups.

Dylan parks and is already out of the car to open my door. I’m wearing mid-length rain boots, and I’m glad for it when I step on the muddied gravel

with patches of grass poking through. Dylan doesn't seem to mind that his white shoes will get dirty.

We approach the tent, and that's when I see them. Lanterns.

I freeze, but Dylan places a hand on my lower back and ushers me forward. I barely notice him greet the cashier and pay until he hands me a lantern.

We make it to the field with the crowd, and Dylan pulls the Sharpie from the items we got. He's focused as he scribbles on the thin lantern paper. When he finally turns it my way, my heart constricts.

Dylan + Firefly

Seeing it written there makes my face flush. The playlist on his phone feels like so much more now. But with that heaviness pressing on my chest, I roll my eyes half-heartedly before taking the lantern from him to write on both sides.

Dylan + ~~Firefly~~ Sierra ☺

"That's better." The countdown clocks loom on each side of the area, so we wait to light our lantern. "Have you been here before?" I ask Dylan.

"Every year with my parents. Ada loved it. But after a while, it felt like going with strangers." He clears his throat like he's revealed too much. "You've never been?"

"Time was of the essence. I couldn't spend it on a farm lighting lanterns," I say. "But my parents would go."

"Without you?" he asks. "That's kind of messed up."

"They weren't sneaking behind my back. They just knew I was exhausted after practice."

"I'll gladly take your firsts then, Romanova."

I laugh. "I've only got a few of those left."

He cocks his head. "Yeah? When was your first kiss?"

"Freshman year of college. First time at a real party and first time being drunk." I glance at him. "I know, incredibly late and lame."

"Not lame," he says. "I'm pretty sure Kian and I had our first kiss with the same girl. Think we lost our virginity to the same girl too."

I burst into laughter. "You dated the same girl?"

"Nah, I've never been in a relationship."

“Me neither,” I admit.

He raises his brows. “What about Justin?”

“Uh, no. I suppose we would have, but after the Olympics, I realized he didn’t want me. He just wanted my accomplishment. I gave him every ounce of myself, and he just tossed it aside like it was nothing. Like *I* was nothing.” I pause. “Sorry, that was a lot.”

Dylan holds my gaze. “You could never be nothing, Sierra.”

I try to bite my tongue, stopping myself from asking, “How do you know that?”

“Because I know you.”

The silence stretches like an elastic thread. All I can think of is how he may not think I’m nothing, but I’ve felt like that for so long, it’s how I see myself.

“It feels true, though,” I admit. “I gave my entire life to skating only to end up as this inexperienced, broken girl. Even with Ajay, I can’t help but think that if he got to know the real me, he wouldn’t even want to kiss me.”

Dylan goes almost completely rigid. “You’re not his to kiss,” he says.

I chuckle. “And I’m yours?”

“If you want to be.”

My heart lurches. “Lucky me,” I try to joke, my voice wavering. “W-what would that entail?”

“I kiss you.” He leans down to barely brush his lips to the corner of my mouth. “Whenever.” On my cheek. “Wherever.” My chin. “You want.”

When he pulls away, the silence hangs like a wet coat on a hook.

“I only have to ask and you’ll give it to me?”

“You only have to *look* at me and I’ll give everything to you, Sierra.”

I forget how to breathe. “That’s quite the contrast to the first time we kissed.”

“Oh, you mean the first time you attacked me?”

“I did not! You kissed me back!”

His eyes flicker. “Your hips rocking against me made it pretty damn hard to resist.”

“So you were just overcome by lust and didn’t see past my lips or legs.”

“I didn’t see past *you*, Sierra. Still can’t.”

I hope I don’t blush, because I never have before, but for some reason with Dylan I’m always glowing red like fucking Rudolph. “So, what? You’re going to give me lessons? A how-to guide for your local prude?”

Dylan chuckles, so close I think he might kiss me, but he doesn't lean in. "Whatever you want, Sierra. You know that no one else can teach you the way than I can."

I suppress the bodily reaction his words cause and try to appear casual. "I'll think about it."

His Adam's apple bobs, and I watch his expression fall the tiniest bit.

The lights around us glow, casting a soft warmth over the crowd. One by one, people light their lanterns, and we follow suit. The pretty flicker of orange surrounds us, creating a warm bubble of light. Dylan's gaze is so intense, it feels as if he's lit the fire in my chest rather than the lantern. Above us, the sky stretches in a deep, velvety blue, eager to be painted with light.

I remember when Scarlett and I planned on attending this event. But our first year at Dalton, September was nothing but rain, and it got canceled. Never did I think I'd be here with Dylan Donovan.

There's a round of cheers from the front of the group, but I'm too focused on Dylan to hear it. Then the first lantern rises, a single golden orb lifting into the night. Then, one by one, hundreds follow, soaring upward in delicate arcs like fireflies, transforming the sky into a sea of floating lights. It looks like those glow-in-the-dark stickers on my ceiling.

I steal a glance at Dylan. "We make a good team," he says.

I let out a noncommittal sound.

"Admit it. We do," he presses.

"Yeah. We make a good team," I say.

My gaze falls back to the lantern as we lift it together. Just before we release it, Dylan's brown eyes focus on mine. The lantern catches the wind, billowing happily as it floats upward. I watch it spin slowly, our names etched on either side, both of us, up there, in the stars.

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TWENTY-EIGHT

DYLAN

SHE'S FREAKING OUT. Or, at least, I think she is.

Sierra is in a corner when she takes three steps, pivots, takes three more, then pivots again. Those movements have been on repeat for the past sixteen minutes. I spot Scarlett on one side of the rink with a small sign that reads LUTZ BE REAL, SIERRA & DYLAN GOT THIS!

The guys are here too, and by that, I mean our whole hockey team. Kian and Summer hold up our faces on Popsicle sticks. I'm pretty sure Kian's holding a blow horn and a sign that says YOUR CAPTAIN ORDERS YOU TO WIN. He found out he's interim captain, and none of us have had a peaceful night's sleep since then. Coach even texted me, saying I'd better be on my best behavior because he can't handle Kian on his own. Sierra's parents are here too. I was expecting them to size me up, but they just hugged us. They spoke some quick Russian with Lidia, then gave me a *take care of her* before finding their seats. I think there was an *or else* tacked on at the end of that, but he didn't need to say it. His icy blue eyes did that for him.

I adjust the collar of my vest, trying to get it to sit right. It's a deep, almost royal blue, made of a thick material, and sleeves that billow out a bit. We're Rapunzel and Flynn.

The gold accents on the skirt of Sierra's pink dress catch the light and shimmer with every step she takes. Her corset has floral patterns stitched in gold thread weaving their way up the fabric to the neckline.

Sierra's calves flex with each pivot, and I realize I could watch her for a long, long while.

"Does she always do that?" I ask Lidia, who's texting on her phone. I've tried striking up a conversation with her four times, but she only grunts.

I'd peek over and tease her about whether she's texting a new fling, but the texts are in Russian, and I'm not confident she won't throw the phone at my head.

Lidia doesn't even glance back at Sierra's odd ritual. "Only when she's freaking out."

That makes me take the pen from Lidia's clipboard and walk over to Sierra. "Why are you freaking out?"

Sierra pauses mid-step. "I'm not."

"Lidia said you were." When I take her hand, she doesn't pull it back; she lets me unfurl her palm, seeing the faint nail marks and a faded smiley face. I draw over it, darkening the edges.

Sierra lets out an amused breath. "Lidia probably said that so you'd stop talking to her. I do this as a warm-up, to center myself."

I drop her hand just as one of the crew members rushes past us to Lidia, signaling that we're up after the Russian team who just killed their free skate.

Sierra takes my hand. "This is it," she says.

"Well, technically we have one more and then the final."

She rolls her eyes, but her hand stays fixed in mine. Neither of us lets go even for a second. Not even as she checks her skates for the third time or when she brushes away the pink on her cheeks. I have a feeling she needs this grounding touch, and I want to give it to her.

"You ready, Romanova?" I ask.

I put her hand on my chest, the steady thrum of my heart against her palm. She doesn't hesitate as she takes my hand to do the same. It's in moments like these where I see her. Not for the darkness she thinks surrounds her, but for the girl that glows. Like a firefly.

"Ready."

One synchronized nod, and we're off.

In hockey, there's six of us on the ice, and the focal point of the game is the puck. Figure skating is different. I never really focused on how many people were out in the crowd, that was a normal occurrence for me since I was a kid, but right now the attention is homed in on us.

Now, that still doesn't bother me. I couldn't care less about what these people think, but seeing the way Sierra blinks rapidly, eyes darting to the crowd and the twinkling lights until the spotlight turns on, I know I'll do everything I can to execute this to perfection.

The music starts, “Lay All Your Love on Me” by ABBA, and in an instant, I see the version of her that won an Olympic gold, the one she’s been chasing. Poised and perfect. If she thinks I’m cocky, she needs to see this side of her. It’s untouchable. Anyone else, and I’m sure they’d be out of their element, but I feed off her energy.

This performance is point heavy, packed with jumps, spins, steps, and lifts. In our opening sequence, I stay just outside the reach of the light, waiting. Sierra spread-eagles into a deep outside edge, arms extending like she’s seeing the world for the first time. I push forward and just as she turns, I take her hand to show Flynn entering Rapunzel’s world.

We skate in unison, our strokes powerful, building speed so we can enter a double axel, our right knees swinging up and around mid-rotation, crossing loosely like a pretzel before we land in sync. We slow down to move into our first major element—a triple twist.

I catch her easily, but Sierra lands a second too early. That’s when I see the first crack. She glides backward, allowing me to catch her waist for the first lift. Our step sequence follows—mirrored three turns, quick mohawks, deep edge changes. We weave around each other, keeping close without touching, eyes locked. Then she grabs my hand, and we push into a throw triple loop. She grips my fingers before I send her flying. The air is silent as she rotates, one, two, three revolutions. My breath stalls until her blade touches down. It’s solid. No hesitation. No break in momentum.

It’s almost perfect, but I notice the tremor in her hand. I try to meet her gaze, to understand what she’s thinking, but then she stumbles on the second jump combination.

Her smile doesn’t quite reach her eyes, and the next modified lift comes too soon. She hesitates, bailing halfway and landing awkwardly on the ice, panic written on her face. She’s locked inside her head now, her movements robotic, her steps trialing behind, a half second late.

“Look at me.” The noise in the rink swallows my voice, but I know she hears it. When she doesn’t look, I take her hand and hold tight. The space between us is charged, a hairbreadth apart, but it might as well be miles. We finish with a sit spin as the last note of the music fades into polite applause, but her gaze doesn’t meet mine, not even when we glide to the bench to wait for our scores.

As expected, our scores are low. None of our lifts had the technical depth to score big, but that wasn’t the goal; Lidia wanted us to do just enough to

qualify. But Sierra, she's drowning in it. Her silence, her shoulders curling inward, how she can't look at me—it's all wrong.

"Sierra—"

She flinches away from my touch. Lidia gives me a look, like I should drop it, let her just simmer in this self-deprecating garbage routine she puts herself through. It pisses me off.

"You don't get to do this with me," I say, voice low.

Her head dips, and she blinks rapidly, like she's trying to drive away the tears. There's something so fragile about it, the way her walls crack but don't crumble. How she looks so *young* and vulnerable.

I lift her chin, making her face me, but her eyes stay fixed on the floor. I don't think I've ever met someone as stubborn as she is. There's a cut of desperation in me that needs to see her eyes, needs to know this isn't going to get locked in her head.

My lips just barely graze her ear. "You are not going to cry," I say roughly. "Don't give that to them. *Nobody* deserves your tears."

When I pull back, there's a flicker in her eyes. Green, like sunlight filtering through leaves after a storm. It's a tiny spark, but it's enough.

"You hear me?" I press, my voice softer now, almost pleading.

She swallows hard as she nods. Slowly, she blinks, letting the tears retreat without falling. Her spine straightens, her jaw tightens, and her usual confidence covers the cracks. I know it's not real, but it's enough for her to hold it together.

That is, until Justin Petrov and Julia Romero take the ice. Sierra's eyes lock onto them like a predator's to prey, but there's no fight in her stance, just tension coiling tighter with every perfectly synchronized movement. Like they're on another level. Strong, fast, and abnormally perfect. The two minutes and forty seconds feel longer than any hockey game I've played, the kind of time that makes you aware of every heartbeat.

Then their scores go up. Higher than ours.

My gaze snaps to Sierra just as she goes still. Her shoulders hitch, like she's been struck, and I swear I can see her unraveling, piece by agonizing piece. I know it's already too late. Because we just barely made third place.

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TWENTY-NINE

SIERRA

THIRD. BRONZE. *DEAD last*.

I've been skating for sixteen years, save for the time I spent in hospital rooms. But I've never placed last. Not even during juvenile competitions. In figure skating, third is technically not last since there are at least eight teams here, but it is in every way that matters.

"How?" I whisper more to myself.

But Lidia levels me with a look so serious, I hold back my tears. She knows I don't mean how we scored so low. I know why that happened, I felt it all in my body. I should have taken my propranolol. I mean *how* am I going to make up for so many lost months in the next couple of weeks? How can I improve more than this? I know I'm resilient and determined to a fault, nothing has ever stopped me before, but this new voice in my head that's clawed into my resolve is hard to shut off. I try to quiet the viscous doubt that drips all over my thoughts.

"Like we always do," Lidia simply says. "We're not quitters."

There's so much conviction in her words that I can't refute it. But a part of me wonders why I do this. If it's worth the pain. I used to think about that possibility, even dreamed about it some nights. It was more prominent after the accident, when I'd sit in bed for hours imagining where I'd be if I didn't choose this life. If I could just be someone else. *Do* something else. But this sport is a part of my very being, and you can't walk away from your soul.

A warm, firm touch lingers on my arm. Dylan's been watching me with a cautious look that's driving me a little crazy. I never expected it to be me who sucked out there. I'd been so hard on him for every mistake that now,

having him try to maneuver through the skate to salvage whatever points we could, just so I didn't fuck it up, makes my chest hurt.

"I'll be fine." I swallow the pain of failure that bitters my tongue in hopes that no one else will ever have to taste it.

"I'm not asking you to be," he says.

My gaze lifts to his, and it's like the tension finally melts off his shoulders.

"I get it, okay. The first time we lost an important game, it took me a week to recover. I played a shit game, and my anger got the best of me. So, trust me, I get it. But this performance doesn't dictate what happens next. We still have time to improve before the next one."

My competitions are spread out over a year. For Dylan, he's played nearly forty games in a season, it's a competition every time. If anyone gets it, it's him.

The announcers call out our names, and I try to wipe the grimace off my face as we skate toward the podiums, the third place stand looming like a slap to the face. I grit my teeth, swallowing the sting of disappointment, but it doesn't go down easy. Justin and Julia glide up, hand in hand, arrogant as hell, taking their spot on second place. My chin quivers, more from anger, and I tamp it down because Dylan's watching me so carefully, I know he'll see it.

His hand fights through the tight fist I've made, gently threading his fingers between mine. His grip is so tight it feels like it might break me open. I can't move. I can't pull away.

Then I catch sight of Justin, and I wish I hadn't. He looks at Dylan's and my intertwined hands, then flicks his eyes to me before he mouths, *Anchor*.

The word lands like a heavy blow that would have knocked me off the podium if Dylan hadn't been holding me so tight.

Anchor.

It sinks deep, claws its way down into my chest, and gives an unforgiving twist. It was ours. A promise, something we clung to when everything else felt uneasy. But that's not true. I don't know if it ever was. Yet the word comes with the memory of each time it was said, and made me feel like I mattered enough that someone would hold me down, keep me steady, stay with me. Now it's a taunt.

When I look away, I see Dylan glaring at Justin, who immediately looks away, probably realizing he wouldn't stand a chance defying the six-foot-

four hockey player who starts brawls.

After that, the awards ceremony is a blur because the pressure in my chest is unbearable. I drop the flowers on the bench, and Lidia doesn't stop me when I pull off my skates and head for the door. I go straight for my car, before the rush of people crowds the exit.

"Sierra." Dylan grips my elbow just as my fingers brush the door handle.

"I'm fine," I say, sharper than I intend, forcing a breath through my tight chest.

He steps closer, my breath catching and quickening, falling in the silence between us. He's close enough that I can smell him. Then his fingers trail across the bare skin of my back, dancing along the lace, igniting heat wherever they touch. He hooks a hand around the fabric at my neck, his grip firm before he tugs and it comes undone. The sudden rush of air fills my lungs, and I nearly slump forward against my car, finally breathing again.

"I just need some space," I whisper.

I see the shake of his head in the reflection of my car window, that helpless, almost resigned movement that makes guilt coil tighter around me.

"You can cry, or scream, or break things if you need to. Whatever it is, you've got me to do it with. All of it," he says.

I don't move. I don't think I could if I wanted to.

When I don't speak, he drops his forehead to the back of my head so softly, I wonder if he's even there. But when his voice rumbles low, warm against the cold bite of the night, goose bumps erupt on my skin.

"Don't do this," he whispers, the warmth of his breath stirring the stillness between us. "Don't go where I can't follow."

His words hit me like a dull skate blade cutting too close to my throat.

Is this really who I've become? A person trapped inside their own mind, too high up in the tower to escape?

"I don't do this. It was never like this before. Justin never let me—"

"I'm not him."

"I know." With that I pull the door handle and slip into the car, closing the door between us. As I drive away, I avoid looking at him in my rearview.

Dylan: I took a house poll, and we've reached the consensus that Dale Thunderman is, in fact, hot.

The text makes me smile. Dylan's been sending me his random thoughts since last night, none of them having to do with the competition or my outburst. He also sends pictures of himself. I expected him to be angry or hurt—both would be valid. But he doesn't make me feel guilty in any way; he's treating me like he always does. As though I'm allowed to be the way that I am, and it won't drive him away.

There's still a pointy branch shoved into my sternum that followed me on the drive home after he practically begged me not to ice him out, but I appreciate the sentiment, even if I can't get myself to give him anything other than a half-assed emoji response.

I didn't let it sink in last night. I couldn't. The only way I could move forward was by pushing the loss aside, so I've dodged it all day. When my alarm went off this morning, I headed straight to a Pilates class in West Hartford. After that, I drowned in pop-up quizzes for forensics and kinesiology, barely having time for lunch before it was time for the university ballet class.

I chose to do a kinesiology degree because it aligned best with skating, but in my final year, it doesn't feel like it. On days when my schedule doesn't line up, I pull up Sage Beaumont's videos and follow her quick tutorials for moves that work on ice.

But today I decided to attend the class. I couldn't go back to an empty dorm and ruminate on all the mistakes I made last night.

As I stretch before the class starts, the door opens. Justin Petrov steps through, wearing tights and a long T-shirt. He looks larger than I remember. Even bigger than he looked a few weeks ago. I noticed it at the performance too. But he still feels so familiar, someone I saw nearly every day for four years, that my hand twitches to wave. But I pull back, back to the girl I've become after him.

Justin slides into the spot next to me anyway, like he still belongs there. "Hey, ice queen."

I want to tell him to stop calling me that, but I don't give him the satisfaction. He would do that a lot, try to push my buttons until I burst, then tell me I was too reactive.

"Come on, you're still not talking to me? You're better than that, Sierra."

The memories of his taunt make me tighten my fists. I breathe out, appearing unaffected. "Hi, Justin."

"How's your jock?"

The question catches me off guard. It's the first time he's shown any interest in Dylan. Justin's always so proper, so polite, that the jab at my partner makes the corner of my lip lift.

"Great," I reply.

"Sorry about last night. But what did you expect from a stoner hockey player? He chuckles dryly as the class settles in. "At least it seems like he's going back to his roots. Though it's only matter of time before he fucks that up just like your performance."

His words sting. Dylan *saved* our performance. He's the only reason we made it onto that podium. A fierce protectiveness sears through me like fire.

Fuck being the bigger person. I step closer, eyes locked on his. "Talk about *my* partner again, and you're going to regret ever opening your mouth," I sneer. "I never want to speak to you again, Justin. It'll only make it harder for me to pretend you're not a fucking coward." My voice cracks, and this time I don't care if he hears it.

"You don't mean that, Sierra. I care about you. We're each other's anchor __"

I grab my bag and walk right out of the class. A part of me hates to give him the satisfaction, but I can't do it today. And even as I tell myself not to think about his words, something still pulls me to the arena.

Hockey practice is loud and in full swing, and I spot him instantly. Maybe because I've memorized how his body moves on skates. Or how Dylan's presence fills the whole space, larger than the arena itself. He's fast, ruthless on the ice, maneuvering around the cones with the puck glued to his stick, slamming into defenders, firing shots into the net.

He looks happy. Exactly where he belongs, doing another thing he's great at. All I have is skating, and that means I've let him into every aspect of my life. The thought of doing it without him makes my chest burn.

Sometimes there's a rare occurrence where you're lucky enough to achieve the thing you've dreamed of. But even if I take the accident out of the equation, it's hard to pinpoint whether I've achieved my dream or if I'm still trying to find it. It feels like I have to choose between being happy and my dream, when all this time, I thought they were the same thing.

The weight of the loss hits me then. I have to be better on my own. And there's only one way I know how to do that.

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THIRTY

SIERRA

SHIN SPLINTS SUCK.

Sacrificing everything you have to a sport so unforgiving it leaves you battered and bruised also sucks. I walked to the rink, just a few minutes past campus. It's poorly maintained, but with Dalton's strict rules, it's the only community rink open at this hour, and I couldn't just sit and keep *thinking*. It's exhausting hearing my constant worries, insecurities, and flashbacks coil together and spring out in different directions. Skating is starting to become an extinguished flame. A match you try to keep alight only for a gust of wind to leave you with blackened smoke.

I push myself to feel the burn in my muscles as I speed into a jump I shouldn't even be attempting. A Lutz, clean and crisp, but when I land on the uneven surface, I stumble and crash onto my knees. It's cold enough that my skin is numb, so I barely feel it.

A sick part of me enjoys reminding my body that I'm in control. It can't just give up on me one day and decide it's over. When I attempt another jump, I fall again, releasing a frustrated sound when I stand on shaky legs.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

The deep voice cuts through the sound of my skates. I stop in the center, turning to find Dylan standing on the edge, watching me. His hair curls at the bottom from the rain, his cheeks are a little pink from the cold, and he's wearing a hoodie and black joggers, straight out of practice. He looks pissed.

I realize I've never seen him angry before. He's all jokes and pickup lines, but right now, he's angry, so angry I can feel it thrumming off him from all the way over here.

“Do you need me to speak slower?” he asks like a condescending asshole. “What the fuck are you doing?”

“Skating. Have you heard of it?” I barely manage to say through a ragged breath.

“It’s barely holding together. And you’re doing jumps like it’s Olympic-grade ice. What are you thinking?”

I’m not.

“You gonna stand there until you trip on a divot and sprain your ankle? I’ll take you to a real rink and let you fuck up all your joints. Step off. Now, Sierra.”

I hate how irritating and right he is. I also hate how hot he looks when he’s angry.

“I need to practice,” I mutter.

His gaze turns steely. “How to be an idiot? Because you don’t need to, you’re nailing it.”

I glare. “I never asked for you to come here, Dylan.”

“Too fucking bad, Sierra. Because there are people who care about you. Like Scarlett, who was at the rink looking for you. Lidia, who said you didn’t pick up her calls. *Me*. So, no, you’re not allowed to just go off and skate when you should be resting.”

“Resting from what? I sucked last night!”

“So you’re going to punish yourself?” His eyes narrow. “You think coming here and skating on bad ice while you’re not warmed up, without your coach, without your *partner*, is going to help?”

“I’ve done this alone plenty of times before.”

“I don’t give a fuck about before. You don’t get to do this. Not with me.”

Shame and embarrassment take a bite right out of my resolve. I’m doing exactly what I’d been doing a year ago. Pushing people away, trying to do it on my own. It wasn’t fair to anyone.

I drop my gaze to the not-so-solid ice. “I need the practice. I’ve got to be doing something.”

“You’re definitely pissing me off.”

“Then at least I’ve accomplished one thing today.”

He stares at me dead on. Clearly not in the mood to be fucked with. “Come here and say that again.”

I think I’m smirking, but my face is too numb to tell. “Come and get me.”

“You sure about that?” Dylan asks. “Because if I come there, Sierra, you’re leaving with your ass in the air.”

My heart races more than it already was. Dylan’s walking before I even get the words out of my mouth. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Have you even met me?”

My legs are so exhausted, I can’t move fast enough. “Don’t come near me.”

“If I can’t follow you into your head, I’m going to follow you everywhere else,” he says, and then he leans in, right by my ear, until I feel a shiver run down my spine. “Don’t run from me.”

My breath hitches and my words are stuttered. “I—I will cut you. Don’t touch me.”

“Do your worst, Romanova,” is all he says before he’s got an arm wrapped around my waist and I’m thrown over his shoulder. The scream that leaves me is high-pitched and breathless. My abs ache from the exertion, and from his shoulder digging into my stomach.

My clothes are nearly soaking wet. My hands are so cold, I can’t feel them, not even when I try to scratch his back. He doesn’t even react.

“Asshole,” I mutter.

“Brat,” he says.

I’ve given up on plotting how to cause him bodily harm by the time we get to his car outside. He opens the door and drops me on the seat, harder than necessary. When I hiss in pain, probably from the bruises forming on my ass, his gaze still flickers with a flash of worry.

But then he crouches and undoes my skates. He’s gentle, so much gentler than the hard expression on his face. My heart slows, and the regret comes crashing in too.

“I’m s—”

His glare is sharp enough that I shut my mouth. He unlaces both skates and places them on the side of the footwell. He moves my entire body with one push so I’m facing forward.

“Dylan—”

He shuts the door. We drive in silence. It’s only when we pass Iona House that I glance over at his unreadable expression, my voice barely a whisper. “You missed my dorm.”

“I know,” he says, his voice low.

“Then where are you taking me?”

He sighs, giving me a sidelong glance. “I’m taking you home, Sierra.”
“Where is home?” I ask.
“With me.”

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THIRTY-ONE

DYLAN

SIERRA LIKES TO punish herself. And not in the good kind of way that I can help with.

I noticed it in the way she never goes out, or how she never packs a snack to practice. Like she doesn't deserve even the simple pleasure of a protein bar or a plain sandwich. Now, seeing her standing there, in the middle of my bathroom, makes me so inexplicably angry, I can barely look at her.

When I went to her dorm to check on her, Scarlett was already heading out to do the same thing. She thought Sierra was at the rink because she never misses dinner. My heart was in a vise until I found her.

"Here." I hand her a towel, but she doesn't take it. Her gaze warms my face, but I don't look. I *can't*. If I see her soaked, trembling frame, there is no guarantee I won't find Justin Petrov and bash his fucking face in. Everything she said to me while she stood on that ice made it clear that her mindset is a culmination of all the shitty things she learned while skating with him. That she's only as valuable as her performance on the ice. It's bullshit.

And I know my anger is heightened because I watched the fucking video. I didn't want to see her like that, but when Kian played it, I watched a few seconds before nearly breaking his phone.

Justin had dropped her. She shouldn't have had to get hurt like that and spend months rectifying it when everyone else just gets to move on.

"Take it, Sierra. You need to shower, or you'll get sick."

"H-here?" Her voice is raspier than usual, frayed by the frustrated scream she let out on the ice.

“Yeah, in my shower.” I don’t wait for her to respond. Instead, I move toward it and turn the temperature high enough for her. The silence stretches between us, thick and tense.

“Why aren’t you looking at me?” Sierra’s voice trembles with an edge of hurt.

I swallow hard, keeping my gaze fixed on the faucet. “Because I don’t want to say the wrong thing and watch you retreat into your head. I want you here.”

What I don’t expect is Sierra grabbing my shoulder, yanking me to face her. Her eyes blaze with irritation. “Is that what you think of me? That I’m some head case?” she demands. “I didn’t ask for your help, Dylan.”

A sort of emptiness sweeps across her grass-colored eyes like toxic gas, choking the fire they usually hold.

“You should have,” I say roughly. “Because when I told you I’m here for you, Sierra, you chose to do it alone instead. You chose skating on crappy ice over me.”

She sighs, absently playing with the wet hem of her sweater, the weight of my words hanging in the air. “I—I just—” She deflates, like she’s letting down a wall. “If I’m not perfect, all of it will be for nothing,” she says quietly. “All the medical bills, the years of training, the Olympics. It means every broken, crumbling, rotten part of me will be worth *nothing*.”

She breaks into a sob, her shoulders shaking from the force of it. I don’t ask this time. I pull her right into my arms, and she clutches my T-shirt. The wetness of her tears warms my shirt, and my chest splits wide open.

I rub her back. “Let it out. I’ve got you.”

She sniffles. “How do you go from having your health, your career, and your people, to losing it all within minutes? My body isn’t even there for me anymore. I can’t even count on *myself*. I was at the peak of my career, and now I can’t step on that ice without feeling my body break.” Her voice cracks on the last word.

“I’ve loved this sport for so long, Dylan, but I’m starting to hate it. I hate what it’s done to my body, I hate what it’s done to my head, and I hate the person it’s made me. I always thought winning gold would mean something. And when it didn’t, I tried again. But when my head hit the ice, I lost everything. Then I watched it replayed online, because no one had the decency to delete the videos. All I am is a curse.” She can barely speak

through her sobs. “Sometimes, I feel like the old me is so far from who I am now, that if I ever got the chance to return, I wouldn’t recognize her.”

I pull back to cup her face. “You didn’t deserve any of that, Sierra. I’m sorry you went through it alone.”

Sierra shakes her head. “But I wasn’t alone—”

“I’m sorry you thought the people closest to you wouldn’t understand,” I rectify.

Her lips tremble, and then her body shakes so uncontrollably my arms aren’t enough to stop it. I feel so fucking useless, desperate to make her laugh, to make her feel better. But when she slumps forward and leans on me, I know she trusts me to hold her together.

“You’re still here, Sierra,” I whisper. “Doing it all again with everything you have. And I know you’ve spent your career thinking it’s easier to bear it all yourself, but you don’t have to anymore. Not when I’m here.”

She doesn’t pull away as I gently wipe the tears from her face. “I hate crying.”

“You shouldn’t,” I say softly, my thumb brushing the wetness away, my heart aching for her. “You’re not supposed to have one emotion at all times. You can cry, it doesn’t make you weak. Took me a while to realize that letting it out isn’t a bad thing.”

“You thought it was a bad thing too?” She peers at me through wet lashes.

“When I was younger, my mom would hide her tears from me. So I thought it was a secret, something bad that wasn’t for others to see. But I know now that’s not true. You don’t need to hide from me.”

“I don’t want you to think I’m weak.”

It catches me off guard, because I can’t understand how she doesn’t see how brave she is. “I could never think that. You’re the strongest person I know.”

Her green eyes are a forest after rainfall. Stormy. “I started to hate Justin, you know. I’d be on bed rest just thinking about how I wished it was him that fell. And I know that’s terrible to think, but everything felt so unbearable, inside and out. I wanted him to understand for one second what it felt like.”

“I’ll happily make him understand what pain feels like. Just say the word.”

She lets out a watery laugh. I don't think she realizes how serious I am. All she would need to say is yes, and everyone would know exactly how *physical* I can be.

"I can't have my partner getting arrested. We still have another competition."

"After that, then?"

Her smile falters as her gaze locks on mine, a devastating realization settling in. "We *have* to win, Dylan."

There's a lead weight in my throat. "We will."

She nods like she's trying to believe me over her head this time.

"So, the next time you want to skate like a crazy person, tell me, and I'll join you."

"It's not like you were free," she mutters, pulling back.

Shit. I should've told her about hockey. I've been allowed back with the team, but after placing third, I couldn't celebrate that with her when I knew she was hurting.

"You don't owe me an explanation," she says quickly. "I know hockey is important to you."

"You're important to me."

She studies me intently as though trying to detect a lie or figure out whether she's heard me wrong. Neither of us speaks—her because she's grappling with the meaning of those words, and me because I want them to sink in to her stubborn brain.

She smiles then. It nearly kills me. There she is again. The girl with the soft, bruised heart.

When another shiver racks through her, I let go so she can shower. But before I can head out, her hand catches my wrist.

The delicate column of her throat moves. "Don't you need to shower?"

If my heart hadn't already stopped, it would right now. Is she offering? *Fuck*. I don't think I can refuse. But I try my hardest to think with my actual head, and not the one that stands to attention, blood rushing south, leaving me blinking.

"I do." I decide not to mention the four other showers in the house.

"Take it with me?" Sierra steps closer to placing her head on my chest. "I don't want to be alone."

The words create painful fissures all over my heart, and I stop breathing for a moment. She's been trying to figure it all out herself this entire time,

but now she wants *me*.

"I need you, Dylan," she whispers.

There's a pang that lodges itself in my chest. No one has ever meant that the way she does—no one who has ever needed me for me. I've heard those words in moments of desperation, lost in the pleasure of an orgasm, but never like this. Never with such vulnerability and certainty.

With one swift move, Sierra yanks off her soaked sweater, letting it hit the floor with a wet thud. Her white tank clings to her as she peels off her leggings, leaving only her panties. She stands there, in the middle of my bathroom, half naked, as if daring me to look.

My throat feels like I've swallowed chalk. I've had naked girls in my bed before, but never here, in the solitude of my bathroom, where everything feels too real and intimate. And never Sierra.

Then her gaze drops to my jeans, and something takes over. Something much smarter. I unbutton them, let them fall with my shirt, leaving me in a pair of boxers. When I reach for her tank top, she stops me. I know it's because of her scars, and I wish I could make her see how beautiful she is, inside and out. Instead, I guide her under the shower. She sighs in contentment when the warmth hits her skin.

I'm soaked, and her tank top and panties are too, but I don't let myself look. For long. Just seeing her here, in my shower, a place where no one else has been, leaves me raw. When her hands press against my chest, it's almost like she tries to soothe the burn that's been living there. Like she can see it without me telling her.

Sierra's fingers trail down, testing the boundaries of where she can touch me. I'd let her touch me however she wants, with just one word. But that isn't what she needs right now.

The water cascades over us, drumming softly against the tiles, but it feels distant compared to the thundering pulse in my ears. When I look at her, I can feel my heart trying to pry out of my chest.

"Why did you come find me?" she suddenly asks.

Because I'm incapable of leaving you alone, even though I probably should. "Because we're partners."

HOURS LATER, I let her change as I rummage through the fridge. The guys walk in with pizza just as Sierra emerges from my room, drowning in my

shirt and sweats, the waistband rolled at least four times to fit.

Summer walks in, halting next to Kian just as Cole and Sebastian wave to Sierra and take a box to the dining table. Summer and Kian nudge each other, and I roll my eyes.

“Sierra,” they both say.

Kian’s staring at Sierra in my clothes, and Summer smiles like she’s figured it all out.

“You know, I have clothes upstairs. Let me know if you need to borrow anything,” Summer offers. Then she mouths, *Tell me everything*, before heading upstairs to Aiden’s room.

“I was just at your dorm,” Kian says to Sierra.

“You were?” we both ask. Why the hell was he there?

“I’m in Scarlett’s study group,” he says cryptically. “What were you two doing?”

Sierra glances at me, so I take the pizza boxes from Kian. “We were watching tapes.”

He hums in acknowledgment. “Isn’t it crazy that when I met Dylan, he’d scrape his knee in street hockey, and just lay there and cry until his mom came?”

Sierra pouts at me in fake sympathy.

“Isn’t it crazy that I met you when you still called our teachers ‘Mommy’?” I shoot back.

“Ms. Marple was hot. I meant to call her ‘Mommy.’” Kian shrugs, completely unfazed.

I nudge him out of the way and put the plates on the dining table. Summer and Aiden come downstairs too, finding their spots at the table. We’re still used to eating together ever since Eli ingrained it into us.

Sierra comes to sit beside me, and Kian sits on the opposite side of her. Even as he tells her another one of my embarrassing stories, I can only focus on her unrestrained laugh. And the fact that I’ll do anything to get her that win.

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THIRTY-TWO

SIERRA

WE'VE GOT A week until our second competition. Lidia's allowed us a shorter day today since Dylan and I nailed both programs without a hitch. Since we've hit the lifts clean in competition, she wants to push our momentum. If we're lucky we could get into the Grand Prix final based on our Senior B competition scores.

Dylan's been alternating between hockey and training with me, and he's exhausted, though he'd never admit it. He jokes less, doesn't let his hand "slip" from my waist to my ass or tease Lidia about who she's texting. I thought he might be getting sick since after he took me home from the rink. Things have shifted since our shower. I expected him to see me as fragile now, but Dylan just meets me with steady skill and certainty.

So, when he invited me over after practice today, insisting he makes the best grilled cheese and that I *had* to eat it fresh off the pan, I couldn't say no. From my perch on the kitchen counter, I watched him cut the sandwich diagonally, then lean back with that smug-ass grin while I devoured the whole thing.

"You can admit it was good. I won't gloat. Promise," Dylan says as he dries the dishes.

"I've had better," I say, rolling my neck with a sigh.

"Always so damn stubborn." Dylan glances at me. "Sore?"

"My shoulders are killing me. And I didn't expect my ankles to still ache like this."

"I don't think that ever goes away." Dylan tosses the tea towel on the counter. "How do you feel about getting wet?"

An unfamiliar heat pools in my stomach. “If you’re going to spray me with the sink hose, I will hit you with that pan.” I point to the cast iron on the stovetop. “And if that was a dirty joke, I will still hit you with the pan.”

He shakes his head. “I meant in the hot tub.”

I glance around as if someone might walk in. “You and me?” I ask in nearly a whisper.

“No one else is here. Are you wearing anything under that?” His tone is so casual it makes my pulse trip.

I follow his gaze down to my loose, cropped sweater and my gray yoga pants. His gaze lingers, and I hate that I know exactly what he’s thinking.

“Uh, yeah, I am, *Mom*,” I say, ignoring the heat crawling up my neck. “I don’t make a habit of going commando.”

“That makes one of us.”

I scrunch my face. “Ew. I am not going in your hot tub.”

He laughs. “I’m kidding. Come on, it’ll help the soreness.”

He’s already walking away, leaving me no room to argue. When he grabs us two towels and I follow him out the sliding doors, I see it. The hot tub’s got Aiden Crawford’s face all over it, with his Slink drink ad that I’ve seen in convenience stores.

My blood runs molten when Dylan pulls off his T-shirt, leaving him in the shortest shorts I’ve ever seen him wear. I let myself watch him, but when his eyes meet mine, I pivot. I shimmy out of my yoga pants, glad I wore matching underwear today. Instinctively, I try to cover my scars with my arm, but Dylan’s not looking at me, so I quickly climb over the edge, and I nearly moan when I sink into the water, inch by inch.

“Feels good?” Dylan asks.

I throw my head back, arms resting on the edge. “So good.”

The only sounds between us are the bubbles and my occasional sigh of pleasure when the jets hit my calves or my glutes just right.

“Why are you all the way over there? You scared of me, Romanova?” he challenges.

I raise a brow. “Are *you*?”

“Terrified.” He smirks, his searing gaze slipping to my chest.

A surge of confidence washes over me. I wade closer, until my knees touch his, and he watches me with unwavering intensity, his arms resting against the edge as he sits there like a fucking king.

The cool air prickles my skin, and I'm hyper-aware of his roaming eyes, taking in my red bra, the bare stretch of my stomach, and every part of me that I usually try to hide. His gaze doesn't falter, but it doesn't feel invasive. It's reverent. Like he's committing me to memory, inch by agonizing inch.

I want to lick the droplets off his chest. The thought almost makes me retreat completely, but I think the look in his eyes is to blame for whatever hypnosis makes me straddle him.

Dylan stills, then adjusts his hips before leaning even farther back with me on his lap. His gaze drops to my chest, then back up, so nonchalantly you wouldn't think he's got a half-naked girl sitting on his dick.

"Nice outfit," he says.

I try to pretend his words don't affect me, but the blush creeping up my neck betrays me. When I look at him again, he's still watching me like I'm the only thing that matters. And that doesn't scare me as much as it should.

"Didn't know there was a dress code for your hot tub invite."

"I'd prefer fully nude, but I don't want to give the neighbors a free show."

I glance around at the trees surrounding the yard. There's no way anyone could see us. When I turn back to him, his eyes are on me, steady and intense, like he can read my thoughts.

He swallows, his voice thick. "You seem to be a fan of my lap."

My lips hover over his. "Something like that."

The steam from the hot tub coats our skin in a layer of moisture. Condensation drips down my chest and his, and I feel a heat building inside me. A hunger.

"What are you doing, Sierra?"

He's going to make me say it, I just know it. But he doesn't know me if he thinks I'd give in so easily. Stubborn. That's what he calls me, isn't it?

"Enjoying a dip in your hot tub," I say casually.

His gaze drops between us. "Enjoying anything else?"

"Can't tell. It feels like I'm sitting on a damn statue."

Dylan bites down his smile. "Up to you to bring it to life, baby."

Frustrated, I drop all my weight into his lap and grind slowly. Dylan's chest heaves, and a low rumble sounds in his throat. He only watches, his hot breath falling on my skin. I can't take this self-inflicted torture anymore.

"Dylan?" I whisper.

He takes several seconds to reply. "Hmm?"

“I don’t want it to be just one kiss.”

He groans so loudly, it vibrates against my skin. “Fucking finally.”

Dylan’s hand collars my throat, and he drags my mouth to his.

“You tricked me.” I pant the accusation between hungry kisses.

It takes him a second to respond—if he even hears me—because his hands are everywhere. Warm and sure as they skim over me, brushing over my bra, then sliding down my back. Every nerve I have lights up under his touch, and when he squeezes my ass, it fits in the palm of his hands like I was made for him.

“Did I?” he murmurs, though his focus is somewhere else entirely.

“Yeah,” I manage, though my words break off into moan when he licks my throat, sending a ripple of heat through me. “I only came over for your grilled cheese.”

“Good. You ate, now it’s my turn.” With that he snaps open my bra and slides it off my shoulders. I don’t comment on how effortlessly he took it off, but somewhere, from a much pettier side of me, there’s a lance of jealousy. A quiet envy for the girls who had him like this before me, who knew the weight of his hands, the way he takes, the way he possesses.

“Have you done this before?” The words boil out of me. *Shut up, Sierra.*

His gaze lifts to mine under furrowed brows. “Yeah, in my car. You were there.”

I roll my eyes. “I mean in here. With other girls.”

Dylan slows, running a soft hand over my cheek. “It’s only been you.” Then he blinks like he realizes something. “I’m clean. I get tested often. There’s been no one since y—I’d never put you in a vulnerable position. I can show y—”

I kiss him then. I already know Dylan wouldn’t do that to me. It makes my heart hurt a little that he sees himself that way. “I know,” I whisper. “I just—will you touch me now?”

My misplaced jealousy puffs away into the steam around us.

He hesitates a second, but then he’s palming my breasts. “I wanna fuck these first. Made me wait to see them, didn’t you?”

“Then what are you waiting for?”

He chuckles to himself, running a hand over my cheek. “You’re so pretty.”

“Stop calling me pretty.”

“Can’t.”

Flustered, I reach between us, into his shorts to feel his hardened length. But then his phone lights up on the edge of the tub, and the sound of car doors slamming reaches us.

He mutters a curse. “The guys are here.”

My eyes widen and I look down at my wet, half-naked state. Dylan does too, because his eyes darken with a possessiveness that makes him pull me out of the tub. I’m still in his arms when he wraps me in a towel and walks us past the living room, dripping wet, just as we hear the front doorknob rattling. The moment we’re in his bedroom and he locks the door, Dylan presses me against it. He kisses me until I’m nothing but breathless moans and dripping need.

I slap a hand over my mouth, only removing it when Dylan gives me a look. “Your friends are going to hear us,” I say.

“As long as they can’t see you, I don’t give a fuck what they hear,” he says. “And you’re not holding back on me. I’m gonna make you scream, baby.”

Dylan slides my panties to the side and presses his thumb right over my swollen clit. “Fucking soaked,” he murmurs before pulling away and slipping the finger right in his mouth.

My head falls softly against the door. “Do that again.”

But instead, he slips his finger into *my* mouth. I slide my tongue over his thick finger. He lifts me higher with just one hand under my ass. Then, in one fluid motion, he pushes two fingers inside me. He kisses me slowly, as if he’s not moving fast between my legs, so deep his knuckles press against me. I come so hard, I scream loud enough for the entire block to hear.

“Sorry,” I blurt on instinct.

He smacks me between the legs, and I yelp. I try to glare, but it doesn’t hold up, because my eyes still droop from the orgasm.

“Fine. I’m not sorry.”

“Yeah? Then get on your knees and show me how not sorry you are. Or when I finally fill up your pussy, I won’t let you come until *I’m* satisfied.”

I roll my eyes. “Wanna bet?”

“Roll your eyes again, Sierra, but this time with my cock in your mouth.”

I sink to my knees, staring up at him innocently before tugging his shorts down. He’s thick, long, and curved. One teasing flick of my tongue, and Dylan knots my hair, tilting my head back with a low curse. “Open wide,” he whispers, and when I do, he spits in my mouth. I slide my tongue up his

shaft to where precome beads at the tip. But instead of using my mouth, I push him back so he's sitting on the bed. I press my tits together and slide him right between them. Dylan chokes, or groans, I'm not sure which, but the look on his face brings a mischievous smile to my own. But before I can fully enjoy it, he stands and taps the head of his cock against my tongue before easing between my lips. I swirl my tongue over the tip, then all the way down to lick the underside of his shaft, making him groan my name.

"When I come, it's going to be inside you while you're looking in my eyes. No sooner."

Heat coils in my stomach when he pulls me to stand and backs me toward his bed. When Dylan slides my panties down, his gaze catches on my anklet. We both still. Maybe it's the lust or the clarity, but I say, "Take it off."

Dylan hesitates. But the anklet doesn't belong to me. The only luck I need is my talent, and my partner. I nudge his chest with my ankle. He unclasps it and tosses it carelessly onto his bedside table. Like he's been waiting to do that.

He gives no warning before burying his face between my legs. He devours me like it's my reward. My legs shake so uncontrollably, he grips them to keep them from closing. I come so hard I see stars.

Then the drawer opening, the crinkling of a foil wrapper, and Dylan slipping on the condom happens so fast, I stiffen. It's been so long, I don't know how my body will react.

My first time was weird, a little awkward, and … a relief when it was over. With Justin, it was mechanical. No touching or teasing, just simple and devoid of pleasure. I thought that's how it was supposed to be, or I just sucked at it. Which is a possibility, since I've only had sex with two people. Dylan is so experienced, and I've felt more from his one kiss than I ever have during sex with anyone else. I'm terrified that I won't be nearly as good as what he's already had. And I need to be good enough for him.

"You okay?" Dylan asks, studying me carefully.

"I haven't done this with lights on before." It's the only thing I can think to say, and it's the truth. No one has ever seen me so completely *bare*.

"Never?"

"Didn't think there was anything worth looking at."

Dylan smiles. "You're worth framing, baby."

I flush, and I'm sure he sees the red splotches on my body. "It's just—go slow, okay?" I feel like a prude, but he nods sweetly.

"You call the shots."

"Don't I already do that?" I tease.

"This fucking mouth." He kisses me hard and pulls back to press the tip of his cock right against my slick core. Then slowly, slower than I'm sure he would have gone otherwise, Dylan slides into me. With his hands on my hips, he eases into each thrust, and the sting simmers to a needy heat. I meet his thrusts, clutching his comforter and tightening my legs around him.

"Good?" he asks in a voice that makes my brain short-circuit.

My body begs for him. "*Faster*."

He hesitates until I ask again. Then he drops his face to my neck and fucks me so hard, I can't catch my breath.

"Fuck, you're so good at this," I bite out.

"Bet you're wishing I fucked you sooner, huh?"

"Bet you're wishing I *let* you fuck me sooner," I retort.

Dylan thrusts into me even harder, bringing a loud moan to the surface. I quell it with a hand over my mouth, but he steals my wrists and pins them above my head. "Keep them there."

I oblige, watching him run his hands all over me. He pays extra attention to my scars, and I can't take it. My hand comes down to cover them, and he furrows his brow. In one quick move, Dylan lifts me and pulls me close, until I'm sitting on his lap, and my back is flush against his front. He positions us on the edge of his bed, and when I look up, we're in front of his closet mirror. I gasp, seeing my flushed face and his body wrapped around mine.

"Suck," he orders when his fingers tap my lips. He slides them into my mouth, and I do my best, hoping he doesn't notice how I'm trembling. He pulls them out slowly and drops his fists to his cock. Then, without warning, he lifts me a bit and buries himself as far as he can. The wet friction makes my core contract. "Come on, all of it, Sierra."

"I—*fuck*, I c-can't." There's no way I can take all of him in this position.

"You can. We're not quitters." He nips my jaw. "Touch yourself. Show me how you get off while you're pulsing around my cock."

Of course he wants that. Only I would go from an inexperienced girl to fucking Dylan Donovan in front of a mirror. I hesitate, feeling the heat on my cheeks, until he guides my hand between my legs. "Look at yourself,

baby. You're the prettiest thing I've ever seen, and you're taking all of me so well." He kisses my neck. "My sweet girl."

My heart nearly stops. No one has ever called me *sweet*. It makes me squeeze around him even more, and Dylan lets out a guttural groan. He moves me up and down on his erection, as I make slow circles over my clit until my head falls back onto his shoulder.

Dylan collars a hand around my throat, forcing me to look forward again. "I said watch yourself, Sierra. I want you to see what I see. Look at how beautiful you are."

"*Dylan*," I moan, unable to take the way his hands squeeze my breasts as he thrusts harder. I'm too sensitive, too far gone, I can't even think, and that's never happened before.

"Say it. Say you're beautiful, baby."

The words stick to my throat, refusing to come up for a moment. "I'm beautiful."

"Good girl. Again."

In the mirror, my legs are pinned open by his, Dylan's heavy hand caresses my scars, and his brown eyes watch me with a look that sets my heart alight. It's hard to deny it when he looks at me like *that*. "I'm beautiful," I say. "And I feel it the most when I'm with you."

He thrusts and this time, he lets my head tilt back to capture each of my soft cries into his mouth.

"That's it. Now show me what a dirty fucking girl you can be."

I try to meet his movements, leaning forward so my hands are on his knees. He seems to enjoy the sounds of him filling me so completely. I whisper that I'm coming, and before I can take a full breath, he twists me around to face him. It's rough but he knows I can take it. He knows I'm not weak or fragile.

"The only time you get to come is when your eyes are on me. You're going to know that it's me who makes you feel this way."

My hands tighten on the muscles of his shoulders. "Please. I need to—I *can't*—"

"You like winning, don't you, Sierra?" Dylan rasps. "Ride me like a winner, baby."

I take that like it's a challenge; he knew I would. I roll my hips, feeling his abs and his grip tighten, and I swear he whimpers. Dylan takes control

then, and he angles me up, hitting my G-spot like he'd been waiting for this, and it's no surprise I come so hard, my ears are ringing.

I collapse into him, and he holds me tight.

Ba-dum. Ba-dum. Ba-dum.

"I dream about you," he whispers, and it hits me like a rush of cold air.

The seconds stretch on, endless and heavy, before I finally pull back, still breathless. Dylan looks like he didn't mean to say it out loud, but that doesn't deter him.

"It's a lot of the pretty sounds you just made," he says. "But mostly, it's this. When I get to hold you after."

My heart tries to burst out of my chest and into his arms. "Dylan …"

"Don't say anything," he says quickly. "I know who I am, what everyone thinks of me. And I'm okay with it, if it means I get you like this. So fucking okay."

"But—"

"We're partners, I know. That's all you want, and it's what I want too. No strings. Nothing's going to stand in the way of your win. I promise."

It sounds all wrong when he says it. Like we're throwing pieces of cooked pasta against the wall in hopes that one will stick. But even as I tell myself that, I know he's right. I gave myself to Justin only to lose him and everything I loved that night. I want so badly for this to be different that I can't repeat the past. Dylan and I are uncomplicated. Our goals revolve around what we need from each other, and we won't stray from that.

Dylan pulls out of me slowly, leaving a hollow ache in his absence, as if he's taken a piece of me with him. My body is spent, every inch of me is humming with the aftershocks, and the way I feel right now is so unfamiliar, it unsettles me.

I've been in control my whole life. Then, the second I hit that ice, I lost my grip. Even looking in the mirror—something I can hardly do—used to feel wrong because I didn't recognize the girl staring back. All this time, I've been so desperate to reclaim the old me that accepting the new one feels like a betrayal. And then something completely mortifying happens.

I start crying.

Dylan looks panicked as he hurriedly discards the condom, then lays me on the bed. "Tell me what I can do," he says immediately.

"I'm fine. I—God, this is embarrassing. I don't even know why I'm crying." I hiccup.

“Hey, it’s okay. I told you, you don’t need to be embarrassed with me, ever.” He kisses my nose. “It’s normal. Sex can bring up a lot of emotions, and it probably hit you all at once. You’ll be okay.”

“I don’t normally react like this,” I murmur into his chest.

Dylan chuckles. “You’re allowed to feel, Sierra. Good or bad, I’ve got you.”

When he turns off the single light, I panic for a split second, and he must feel me jerk, because he flips the lamp back on.

“I haven’t been able to sleep in the dark since—”

“We’ll leave it on then.”

“But it’s annoying. I can call an Uber, it’s not a big deal,” I say, already turning away to get my phone. It feels so much heavier to stay.

“Shh.” Dylan pulls me close like the light doesn’t bother him.

It feels like this was the reason humans were given skin. To be consumed by this achingly desperate touch and the sensation that sparks up my spine. What terrifies me most is that it makes me feel like I could stay. To sleep wrapped in his arms and nothing else.

But I haven’t fallen asleep with anyone, ever. I don’t know if I’ll wake up to a panic attack or my brain will find something else to set me off. I’ve become so unpredictable, even to myself, it’s fucking terrifying. It makes me realize what Dylan and I just shared and what’s at stake.

Sleep never comes, but I don’t move until I’m sure Dylan’s asleep.

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THIRTY-THREE

DYLAN

I WAKE UP with a smile. A real one. It's been a long fucking while since that's happened.

Sierra's green eyes burned like embers, alight with something I'd never seen before. She even took off that stupid anklet Justin gave her. I hated that thing because she never needed a good luck charm. It's all her, and I'm glad she's realized that.

We've been close before, closer than most people are on a daily basis, but this time, everything shifted. I've memorized her warmth, her softness, the delicate way she fits in my arms and on my lap. I needed her in every way I could have her. And now I can't drive away the hole that dug deeper in my chest as I gave her what she needed. What *I* needed.

But as I open my eyes, the smile melts clean off my face. There's a raw ache of emptiness, like a cave wall that's been eroded by the constant drip of water. Gray, hollow, abandoned.

My bed is empty, save for the lingering scent of cherry on my pillow. The new pillows. The ones that don't even smell like me yet hold on to her scent like it's their fucking job.

It nearly guts me to think she got up before me and the first thing she wanted to do was leave. It makes me think of all the times I've been relieved to find myself alone after a night with a girl, or when I'd leave their dorms because that's what they wanted. That's what they always wanted. No one wants to stick around, and I'd never ask them to. So, why does *this* feel so different?

I grab my phone from the dresser and find an email from Lidia about the Lake Placid competition next weekend, along with texts about another

party. Sorority girls, my frat, Sampson—I ignored all of them yesterday because none of it mattered. I used to answer those texts, be where everyone else was, hearing the chants of *Double D!* and fading into who they wanted me to be, until the alcohol lost its taste.

I head to the bathroom, but the roughness in my throat doesn't ebb even after I brush my teeth. The house is empty because Aiden left for Toronto this morning, and Summer's at Iona.

Kian's got class all day, so he's going straight to the rink for practice. It's a shorter one, but that doesn't mean I'll be any less exhausted from the jumps for skating later. But that's a nonissue. I'm going to do both, and I won't let anything stop me. Not even the way I'm sweating before I even get to the rink.

Cole slaps a hand on my back. "You doing okay, Mini Cap?"

"Mini Cap?"

"Right, you don't know about that." He laughs. "We've been calling you Mini Cap since the whole captaincy thing, you know, 'cause it was a small amount of time, therefore, *mini*."

I knock him aside with my shoulder, and he feigns an injury on the side of the rink. But his words stay with me, even as everyone else shows up. There's a dynamic here that I've missed, like coming home for the holidays only to find your room was turned into a home gym.

"What's Kilner's first name?" one of the guys asks, signing a birthday card.

"I thought it was Coach," Kian says, scratching his head.

"Donovan, I got good news for you." Coach approaches us on the ice. "You're back for one game next week against Yale. We'll need to bring our A-game and rein in the emotions we have for them."

What he means is, *Don't lose your shit*. Before this summer, I never stepped foot in Yale without wearing a garlic necklace. Any girls I know from there came back to our place or stayed as hookups at Myth. After they trashed our campus at the beginning of this year, our rivalry has gotten worse. I got ejected for roughhousing and unsportsmanlike conduct. Bullshit, if you ask me. I couldn't care less, because that day I was waiting on a call from my mom. To hear her say she left, and we didn't need to deal with my dad anymore.

It never came.

“Will do, Coach,” I say, my strained voice making me cough. Everyone looks at me.

“Are you sick?” Kian asks, and the entire team is backing up. None of us can afford to be sick, not with the ECAC games coming up. I’m exhausted, but I’d never admit that, or that, for the first time, I’m not excited about a rivalry game.

“I’m fine,” I mutter, giving Kian a look that shuts him up. Coach doesn’t say anything. He blows his whistle and we’re off doing drills.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Kian asks, reaching to touch my forehead. I slap his hand away.

“Just tired. I had a long night.”

Kian snorts. “Yeah, I heard. You should have seen my jaw on the floor when I bumped into Sierra as she was leaving. I didn’t know the girl could blush like that.”

I didn’t either. Not until I was buried so deep, she hid her face in my neck.

We’re half an hour in when my vision blurs. I’m swaying, leaning on my stick more than my skates. The whistle blows again, and I think my head’s going to explode.

I see Kilner’s shoes before I hear his voice. “You’re sick.”

“It’s probably allergies. I’m fine.” It hurts to blink.

“You don’t have allergies. And you can barely lift your fucking head,” he barks.

I force myself to stand tall, but Coach watches with that unimpressed look, seeing right through my act. The man’s a wizard.

“Get off my ice and get some rest. Or I’m taking you off the first line for the Yale game.”

“*No*,” I say quickly. “I’ll go. I just need to tell Lidia before—”

“I’ll tell her. Just leave before you get my rookies sick. They aren’t built like you idiots were.”

That’s true. Freshman year was not for the weak, mostly because of Kian and me.

Kian slides up beside me. “Coach, I should go with Dylan to take care of him. So, I can’t do the laundry today.”

Kilner watches him. “Fine, you both are done for the day. Go home.”

“Actually, Coach, you can keep him—” The rest of my sentence is muffled in Kian’s palm as he shoves me off the ice.

WHY ARE GOOD people like me punished for our good deeds?

Though even if I had an answer to the question, I would still repeat everything that happened yesterday. More than a few times.

Kian walks into my room. “I made you soup. Summer said it was disgusting, but I threw a bunch of hot sauce in it, so you won’t even taste anything else.” He’s carrying a tray with a vase and a a sunflower, like he’s my mother.

“It’s bright green,” I say, staring at Kian’s bowl of soup.

“The broccoli and spinach really dominated the color. And taste. And smell.”

“Thanks. Now do me a favor and toss it out the window.”

Kian scoffs. “I busted my ass in that kitchen for you, and this is the thanks I get?”

“If you love it so much, drink it yourself.”

He makes a face, then puts the tray on my bedside table. “Yeah, no, it tastes like spicy sewer water.” Kian sits on the edge of my bed. “How’s Sierra?”

I’m sure he knows about yesterday. It’s not like we were being quiet. But he isn’t being invasive, as usual. He watches me with sympathy.

My head is pounding, and my bedsheets feel like the warmth of her. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“’Cause she’s not here.”

I shrug. “I don’t usually have girls stay over. You know that.” Even putting her in that category feels wrong.

“It’s okay, buddy, you still have me,” he says, fluffing my pillow.

I must have a bad cold because I say, “Yeah, at least I have you.”

Kian beams. “Want to have a movie marathon? I’ve got the director’s cut,” he suggests. Kian’s ritual when he’s sick, aside from complaining about it, is watching *Twilight: Extended Edition* or *Shrek 2* in the living room, where everyone can see him act like he’s dying.

“I should sleep,” I say, and he nods before clicking my door shut behind him.

Hours later, my eyes open from a soft touch on my forehead. That’s when I see her, like a dream. Barefaced, hair in a braid, wearing one of her scarves.

My heart stops. “Hey.”

Sierra runs a palm over my cheek, almost guilty. “Did I get you sick?”

“Took one for the team,” I say, and she just stares, probably thinking our extra training or our shower the other night has something to do with it. It might’ve, but I’d never say that to her. “You didn’t do anything, Sierra.”

“Lidia said practice was canceled. I thought after last night you regret—”

“*Sierra*,” I cut her off, knowing if she finished, I wouldn’t be able to handle it. “There is nothing about last night that I regret. You would have known that if you stayed.”

I don’t mean for it to sound accusatory, but it does, and it makes her green eyes go wide.

“I should have told you I was leaving. But we’re not—”

“It’s fine. I’m used to it,” I say, brushing it off. “But I am sorry that I fucked up our training schedule.”

Sierra’s hand drops from my face. “You think that’s what I care about? I’ve seen how hard you push yourself. It’s ridiculous what you’re putting yourself through. You need the rest.”

“I want to do it.” I sound defensive. “Coach got me on first line for the Yale game.”

She smiles faintly. “You deserve it.”

“You should come. It’s a home game,” I say. “Practically your duty as my partner.”

Sierra raises a brow. “Yeah? Some unwritten rule for figure skater–hockey player duos?”

“Exactly,” I say. “I think you have to wear my jersey or something too.”

She nods. “Guess so. I’ll even call you Captain from my rinkside seats.”

I deadpan, tackling her onto my bed. Sierra bursts into laughter. I squeeze her sides until she begs me to stop. When I finally do, we’re both breathing hard, inches apart. I want to kiss her.

But I won’t get her sick. And I know if I kiss her, I won’t be able to stop. So, instead of feeling her lips against mine, I press a kiss to her forehead.

We sit up again, and the air grows awkward. But then, Sierra straightens, like she’s just decided on something. “Well, get better. Lidia’s not going to show mercy when you’re back,” she says. “See you on the ice, partner.”

Then she’s gone so fast, I’m left blinking in her absence

My cold feels worse by the time I drag myself out of bed to drink water. I’m in the kitchen when the doorbell rings. I don’t answer it, but everyone in the house seems to have the same intention.

Wrapped in my blanket, shuffling to the door in Kian's *Freudian slip* slippers, I open the door to no one. Better not be those damn kids playing Ding-Dong Ditch. Kian and I will have to scare them again.

As I start to close it, a black car speeding off catches my eye. My gaze drops to a white bag on the step. I bring it inside and extract a container of chicken noodle soup with a note taped to it with neat handwriting.

It's from a can. Don't flatter yourself.

I bark out a laugh, and when I'm about to put aside the brown bag, I notice something else inside. It's a scarf.

This one's from scratch. Made it with my feet. ;)

Instantly, I pull out my phone to text her.

Dylan: Not at all flattered. Thank you for the care package.
Sierra: No idea what you're talking about. Time to get that brain checked grandpa.

Then, two whole minutes later:

Sierra: You're welcome.

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THIRTY-FOUR

SIERRA

"OKAY, NOW DO it," Scarlett says.

She's sitting on my suitcase as I try to pinch the zipper closed. She scrolls through her phone and reads off the names of all the pair skaters attending the competition. We're headed to Lake Placid for the Senior B competition.

Even with all my energy on zipping my overstuffed suitcase, my thoughts trail off. I can still feel the phantom movements of Dylan's tongue on my clit. The sound of the gasp that left me when he slipped inside me. It all felt like too much and not enough at the same time. Then when the morning light slipped through the curtains, I watched him sleep. So calm and angelic—completely opposite to the very non-angelic things he did to me just hours earlier.

I feel renewed and somehow more like myself. It's as though I hadn't known I've been trapped in the ivory tower of my own making. It's when Dylan came along and broke me out that I realized how much I miss out on because of my thoughts. For some reason, the way he kissed me made it feel like I broke a shackle.

"These skaters have to be part-time models. Look at the Russian team." Scarlett shoves her phone in my face. The couple were ahead of Justin and me at the Olympics and completed their long program to perfection. I wasn't worried, but the moment I felt the loss of Justin's hand in mine, I knew we'd lost it.

They won gold. I won a lifetime of pain.

Scarlett seems to realize that a little too late but still tosses her phone on the bed like it never happened. "So, what did you pack in here? Bricks to toss at the other skaters?"

With one final tug, the suitcase closes, and I slump beside it in relief. Scarlett stands and tries to lift it but fails miserably. She chooses to strengthen her mind muscle rather than any of the ones on her arms. “We’re gone for two nights. Lidia said to pack everything I’ll need.”

Her brows quirk. “You need knitting needles and yarn?”

“Knitting helps me relax.”

“You and my grandmother would be great friends.” Scarlett pauses. “If she were alive.”

“You weren’t complaining when I knit you that cardigan.”

She drags the suitcase to an upright position. “That was for a concert, and I love you for it, but will you really have time to knit?”

I shrug. “What else am I going to do for hours in the hotel room?”

“I’ve got that all figured out for you. There’s a gift in your suitcase. You’ll thank me later.” I narrow my eyes, but she gives me a mischievous look, knowing I can’t open the suitcase and check right now. “Or you can do whatever Dylan is doing. I bet he never gets bored.”

“Your interest in his personal life needs to be studied.”

She snorts. “The guy is like a disco ball. It’s hard to look away from him. But you two together? Impossible.”

“Hotter than your Russian team?”

“Way.” She beams, helping me up from my slumped position on the floor. “Besides, I doubt any of these skaters started their partnership with a hot make-out on the crash mats.”

We carry my suitcase and gym bag with my skates and costume to the front door. It’s only when I get into Lidia’s car that she tells me Dylan has hockey practice, so he’s driving himself to the arena in Lake Placid later.

“I’M HERE,” DYLAN says as soon as he bursts through the doors to the waiting area, just as I counted thirty-two whole minutes since I’ve been here, laced up and ready to go. All the skaters turn to look at him, and he doesn’t bother even smiling at anyone. He looks exhausted.

His hair is disheveled when he brushes it back and pulls on his backward baseball cap, and he’s got on a crewneck and sweats. He drops his skate bag with a thud, then slumps on the bench beside me.

Before the performance we get Friday to familiarize ourselves with the arena and practice one last time before the show. Here, we do both our short

and long program, and we get a score for each individually, before they're combined to show our final standing. The free skate—or long program—is what I'm stressing about. If we do well on that, it's where we'll rack up the major points.

"Relax." Dylan bumps my shoulder with his.

"I am," I mutter. He was late. We could have tweaked so much in our programs.

"Your level four shaking is making everyone question whether there's an earthquake."

"And your scowl is putting them at ease? I think you scared some of the kids."

"Are you pissed at me or something?"

"What? No. I'm just … nervous." This is our last shot to even be considered for a bigger competition, so I'm a little irritable. Dylan quietly puts something on my thigh, and when I look down, it's a Reese's peanut butter cup. The gesture squeezes the crap out of my heart.

"I didn't mean to be late, Sierra."

"I know," I say. "I said I'm not pissed at you."

"You blink twice when you lie," he says simply, finishing lacing his skates. "And your nose twitches a little, like Pinocchio."

"You—"

"Stop it," Lidia scolds. "We all just got here. How are you arguing already?"

"We're not arguing," I say.

Dylan leans into me and places a hand on my tense shoulder, as though we're best friends. His hand is warm on my cold skin, and I pretend that's the reason goose bumps start to rise. I glance up to see him wearing a wide smile, and I mirror it for Lidia, who remains unmoved by our forced display of camaraderie.

"I'm going to sign you two in. Go find some place to warm up."

She walks through the double doors to the administration desk, and I watch her descent until she's completely out of view. I discreetly pull out my pill bottle, the one with the pink knitted sleeve.

"Anxious?" Dylan asks.

I've been taking them quickly before some practices, though I don't need them as often. He'd only know that if he'd been watching me. "It's a crutch, I know," I admit. "Sometimes it feels like I'm cheating."

He frowns. “Cheating?”

“Like I’m taking the easy way out. I used to be able to do this without a pill. So many athletes do it every day without help.” I’m rambling.

“That’s not cheating, Sierra,” Dylan says. “Doing what you need to do to function. To perform. You think taking care of yourself is a shortcut?”

I swallow hard. “You know what I mean. It’s not the same.”

“I don’t,” Dylan says. “Think of it like hockey. I couldn’t play without five other guys on the ice. Doesn’t mean I’m not pulling my weight. Or like skating—we can’t do this without each other. Your medication isn’t doing the work for you. It’s just one piece of the team helping you perform at your best.”

I stare at him. Dylan makes it sound so simple, doesn’t even let me dwell on it.

Dylan holds his hand out to me, and we head to the rink. That’s when I notice what he’s wearing.

“Where did you get that?” My question comes out accusatory, and my face feels like it’s on fire.

My partner follows my gaze to the jacket he’s just slipped on. It’s the Team USA windbreaker customized with my last name on the back. It’s a little tight on him, but of course it still looks good.

“You left it in my car,” he says casually.

“And you kept it? Why the hell would you wear my jacket around like that?” He’s wearing that windbreaker like a medal. Almost like he would wear his own jersey. Full of pride.

“What? Can’t a guy rep his favorite figure skater?”

I deadpan, “You don’t know any other figure skaters.”

“Don’t need to. You’re the only one worth paying attention to.” Dylan pulls me along, and I’m still caught on how my name looks on him when his grip tightens.

“There’s your boy toy.” Justin walks by with a plastic smile. “Since when does he do these competitions?” Dylan asks.

“Since they didn’t get invited to the Grand Prix last year.”

Dylan snorts. “Probably regrets leaving you now.”

“I doubt it. He didn’t look back, just up and left and told my parents he felt terrible, but his parents forced him to decide because they were funding his skating.”

“He didn’t try to talk to you after?”

“He did, but I didn’t care to hear what he had to say. But I’m sure he sees how much I’m struggling. Probably glad he left me. Sometimes, I want to tell him off.”

“He doesn’t deserve a word from you. Not a single breath. Next time he comes up to you, I want you to tell me.”

I nod. “Do you think I deserve this?” I ask without much thought.

“Why does that matter? Do you want it?”

“So badly.”

“Then it’s yours,” he says easily, like it’s the truth.

Once we’re on the ice, it’s like all the nerves that plagued my mind and body just moments earlier disappear. But we’re surrounded by a dozen other skaters who blatantly stare at me. They see me as either an Olympian or the dead girl walking.

“Don’t look at them. Look at me,” Dylan says.

I try to, but then I hear it. *No way she’ll make a comeback with the hockey player. Poor thing. They call her the jinx. I heard Petrov was forced to get a new partner.*

“What gets you out of your head?” Dylan asks suddenly, pulling me back.

I can’t think, only hear the whispers around me. “It used to be skating. But I don’t know anymore.”

He nods quietly. Then we’re in motion, and boundaries that may have existed on the mats are no longer in place. On the ice, we leave everything in each other’s hands, with complete trust. At least, we try to.

I look at him this time, and I take a breath before Lidia’s calling us over. The only words out of her mouth for the next hour are *again* and the frustrated Russian variation, *snova*.

Sierra: Seriously? You packed a vibrator in my suitcase?
Scarlett: You’re welcome. Put it to good use. There’s no better place than a hotel room.

I suppose she’s right. I’ve been bored, steaming my skating dresses over and over. Both the Rapunzel one and my favorite black and crimson one for our short program. Now, in the bathroom, I stare at my reflection, and I let myself look. When I see my scars, I remember the hot sensation of Dylan’s mouth on my skin. But more than that, I see them for what they are. A new beginning.

I've barely read the instructions when I'm about to flick the vibrator on, but a knock on my door startles me. I panic, quickly throw on my clothes, and shove the toy in my suitcase. My heart races, the sense of relief immediate. I wouldn't have been able to go through with it anyway. My brain won't let me.

I check the peephole, and Dylan's there, running a hand through his hair in a white tank, gray sweats, and glasses.

We practiced our routines countless times before Lidia was satisfied and let us go back to the hotel. We didn't talk the entire way, and I appreciated the comfortable silence. But now, as I'm standing in a long T-shirt and Care Bears shorts, with a damn vibrator hidden in my suitcase, I hesitate.

"If you've had your fill of me through the peephole, can you open the door?"

I snap my eyes away as though he can actually see me. I open it slowly, and blink at him with sleepy eyes. He raises his brows, leaning against the door frame.

"Nice pj's," he says.

"Nice sweats," I reply.

Dylan doesn't wait for my permission and pushes past me to sit on my bed. The TV is playing The Weather Channel when he grabs the remote.

"Sure, make yourself at home," I mutter, plopping down on the other side of the bed.

"I just saw the Russian skaters going down to the gym. Fucking try-hards."

We continue to watch TV, but the silence is eating me up. "Why are you wearing glasses?" I blurt.

He glances at me. "I was reading a book Summer let me borrow until Kian called and spoiled the end," he says, sounding irritated.

That explanation does nothing to tame my overactive brain or fluttering ovaries. Reading? *God*.

The hockey game is in the last period, but Dylan's barely watching. He's on his phone, but he groans and tosses it on the bed.

"What's wrong?"

"The guys are planning a Halloween party."

"Isn't that the devil's favorite day?" I suppress a chuckle.

He gives me a blank stare. "It's my birthday."

“On *Halloween*? Oh my God, that makes so much sense. I should have guessed.” Even as I joke, he doesn’t seem like he’s in the mood, and it confuses me. “Shouldn’t you be excited?”

“I’ve always hated celebrating my birthday.” Dylan settles deeper into the bed. “It got better since I’ve been at Dalton ’cause all we did was get drunk, but since the drug test, it feels different. I’m dreading it, but I’d never tell them that.”

“But it was a mistake, wasn’t it? Sure, you smoked weed, but that isn’t something you do on the regular.”

He runs a hand through his hair. “It’s not. I’ve never even cared to smoke, but that night I needed something to help me escape. I didn’t want to see my mom’s face or hear my fucking dad’s voice. I was sick of it.”

“Sick of what?” He keeps his words tightly wound up, but the longer he sits here, it seems to pull at the binding.

“My dad’s been cheating on my mom for years. I was five the first time I found out because we got a call from the hospital asking for my dad. My mom and I arrived to find his mistress, who had just given birth to Ada.”

Oh my God. “She’s not …?”

He shakes his head. “But that’s never mattered to us. She’s my sister, and I’ve loved her since the first day I saw her. We were lucky we went there because her biological mom was in a tough spot. Apparently, when she got pregnant, my dad stopped answering her calls. She didn’t have money, and she never wanted kids, so we adopted Ada. My dad was livid, but so was my mom. That was the first time I wished she’d leave him.”

“I’m so sorry, Dylan. You were just a kid.”

“I’m just glad Ada didn’t witness any of those fights. And she left for school when I came to Dalton. Freshman year was the worst though. I didn’t answer any of their calls. I just got drunk every other night and tried to forget it all. Until my mom showed up at the house. She’d make us food, stock the fridge. She told me she wanted to leave him, and I felt like a weight was lifted. But then, every year, I’d have the same useless conversation with her. Nothing ever changed.

“And that’s when I messed up. I got high because the two people in my life who showed me relationships are messy and complicated called to say things were different now, and our family would be whole again when it never was in the first place. I thought they were calling because they were

getting divorced. I finally thought it was over. But they're getting married. Again."

We've unconsciously moved closer to each other. So close that he seems to distract himself by playing with the hem of my shirt.

"It's not fair that you got caught up in that," I say, and before I can stop myself, I hug him. With my hands around his neck and me kneeling on the bed, I hold him tight.

I think he smiles against my cheek. "Didn't take you as a hugger, Romanova."

"I'm not. But you're annoyingly persuasive."

He chuckles. "I don't recall asking you to hug me."

"You're the only person I've ever wanted to hug," I say quietly.

Dylan wraps his arms around my waist and pulls me in, so I'm on his lap. "I appreciate it."

I don't know how long we stay like that, because I'm hyper-aware of his hand on my thigh, lifting the hem of my tiny shorts and stroking the bare skin. Then his phone dings again, and I see his lockscreen picture.

"Is that you?" I pull away but not too far. It's a picture from some tournament, but Dylan's brown locks are gone; all that's left is a bright pink buzz cut. "When was that?"

"Last year. The hat of consequences has no mercy. It's our version of a punishment that we started in freshman year. The guys knew I would do anything without complaint, except buzz my hair. That was painful. Probably more than his piercing."

"Whose piercing?"

He ignores me and instead shows me more pictures from that time. I'm convinced he's the only man who could look that good with pink hair. He shows me a picture from Halloween, when they dressed up as Snow White and her dwarfs.

When our gazes meet and our noses brush, my heart somersaults.

"I'm starving," he says after a beat, switching the channel back. "I'm going to grab some food. I'll get you something." Dylan kisses the crown of my head where my scar is, then pauses for the briefest moment, like he didn't mean to do that. "Don't watch too much of The Weather Channel without me."

I roll my eyes when he throws me a wink over his shoulder and walks out. My heart flutters a little. Okay, fine, a lot.

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THIRTY-FIVE

DYLAN

JUSTIN PETROV'S FACE is fucking irritating. How Sierra managed to skate with him for four years blows my mind, but at least now she gets to look at me all day. I said that to her after our short program earlier, and she just rolled her eyes and told me to wear a bag over my head.

Justin must not notice the way I practically sneered at him earlier, because when he sees me in the bathroom, he says, "Good luck out there."

"Don't need it," I reply.

His face changes so quickly, it's amusing. "I'm guessing she told you her sob story?"

There's so much I'd rather do than respond. Like bash his fucking face in.

"Are you really going to pretend like you're the good guy? You drop her and run, then try to make it seem like you're not a piece of shit. You're a fucking coward, Petrov."

"I didn't run. I made a choice. A smart one. Unlike you, I know how to protect my career. She hit the ground; I wasn't going to follow her."

Fuck, what I'd do to land one hit. That side of me itches to break free, but I know I can't. I'd never ruin Sierra's chances here.

I step right up to him, towering over him by a few inches. "The next time you even look at my girl, you're going to find out exactly how much it hurts to hit the ground."

He blinks, eyes wide with fear. *Good*.

With that I head back out, seeing Sierra pacing again. I smile.

When I came back with snacks from the kitchen last night, she asked if I've watched *Tangled*. When I said no, she was adamant it was a crime for

us to dance in our costumes while I had no clue what the movie was about. So, for an entire hour and forty minutes, I was hooked. It wasn't until the credits rolled and I nearly shed a tear that I looked down to see Sierra, fast asleep with her head on my shoulder. I don't know how long I looked at her, but eventually, I fell asleep too.

This morning, she was already in the shower when I woke up, and I had to sneak back to my room before Lidia saw me. Neither of us brought it up.

And now Sierra replays our short program on Lidia's phone for the third time. Måneskin's "I Wanna Be Your Slave" plays on a loop. Sierra's in a black and crimson dress with a lace-up back, and I'm in a black button-up. It's the technical part of our program, the two minutes and forty seconds where we have to hit all the required lifts, jumps, and spirals to rack up the points with the judges. Short programs are all about setting the level of difficulty, while free skates let us get creative to tell a story.

Irritated, I snatch the phone from her grasp. When she tries to reach for it, I notice the darkened smiley face on her hand. She retraced it.

"I was just checking if we're coordinated," she says.

"We are. You don't need a video to tell you that."

"Fine," she says, playing with the gems on her dress.

"Look at me," I urge. "You know what we have that these people don't? Each other. They might have years of experience, but you and I, Sierra, we have natural chemistry. It pours out of us—enough to make Lidia uncomfortable. So, we're going to show them exactly that. Got it?"

Just as she nods, our names are called. But before we go, Sierra stops me. She takes my hand and places it over her heart, then takes hers and places it on mine. "Ready?" she says.

I smile. "Ready."

It's four minutes and thirty seconds of pure focus and strength. This performance is point heavy. That means performing a throw triple Lutz where I toss Sierra in the air to spin three times, followed by a side-by-side axel, and a death spiral where she's low, almost flat on the ice in an arc position. Finally, a modified lasso per Lidia's orders.

She still wants us to practice the real one, the one where Sierra fell, a million more times. Sierra wasn't happy about that, but I agreed.

At the last jump we're both smiling wide going into a sit spin, and we close out our sequence back-to-back, and when we face each other again,

she’s nearly bursting. There’s a split second where I almost kiss her, but I hold her tight against me to stop myself.

As we impatiently wait for the scores in the kiss-and-cry, Sierra’s beaming. It’s the first time she’s done that without even having the scores in front of her.

ROMANOVA & DONOVAN shoots through the list, with the highest cumulative score.

“Holy shit,” we say in unison.

“I FEEL LIKE I’m high,” Sierra says, then glances at me. “Sorry.”

I roll my eyes.

She giggles, and I realize I’ve never seen this version of her before. She’s damn near floating. We’re headed back up to our rooms. Since it’s dark, we’re staying the night and heading out in the morning because I have an early hockey practice. I know I’ll be fucking exhausted and barely make it through Kilner’s drills, but it doesn’t matter. I’d never miss this.

We get off the elevator, but Lidia stays back. “I’ve got something to do. You two rest.”

“You think she’s getting laid?” I ask when the elevator doors close.

“Definitely.”

“Maybe she’ll go easy on us now.”

Sierra turns to walk down the hall. “Sixteen years with her and not once has she gone easy on me. But she did make me *Ponchiki*—Russian doughnuts—after a competition once.”

Sierra’s room is first, so we slow as we get to her door. The memory of us falling asleep together echoes. Memories of when she lay flat on her back and let me feel every inch of her body come crashing into me like a wave.

I clear my throat. “We did good today, Romanova.”

“We did.” Sierra smiles as we reach her door. “You wanna come in? We can watch something like yesterday,” she offers. “I’m hopped up on adrenaline, and I kind of hate being alone in hotel rooms.”

I nod and slip into her room. Because she asked me to.

I close the door, and when I turn, Sierra’s standing so close, she jumps in surprise, bumping into her suitcase. It tips over, spilling its contents across the floor. She gasps, and I’m about to ask her if she’s okay, but then I see it.

There’s a vibrator on the floor, buzzing softly. I bite back a laugh as I step closer, my hands landing on her shoulders. Sierra’s gone red all the way to her hairline.

“I’m the last person you need to be embarrassed in front of,” I manage to say.

“It’s not mine,” she blurts.

“You steal other people’s vibrators?”

She sighs. “I mean, technically it’s mine, but I didn’t use it last night. Scarlett bought it for me since I never …”

Last night? Sierra was going to fuck herself on the other side of the wall if I hadn’t knocked on her door. I don’t know whether to be happy about that or irritated. Then it hits me that she’d told me she hasn’t been able to masturbate, not since her accident. Who was she going to use it with?

“I can go,” I say, turning to the door.

“No,” she says, grabbing my wrist. “I’m not going to do that. It’s stupid. I can’t get there by myself anyway.”

“It’s not stupid. You should be able to love your body and express that in every way that you can. There’s nothing shameful about it.”

We’re close, too close. Talking about her fucking vibrator. This is torture.

“I almost made myself come once,” she whispers. “After the first time we skated together.”

She’s touched herself thinking about me? Back when she was much more eager to cut me with her skate blade? Fuck, that’s hot. The information feels entirely too much to handle.

I swallow. “Yeah?”

She nods, making no move to back away.

“Then show me.”

“What?”

“Spread your legs, lie on your back, and fuck yourself while I watch.”

Her mouth opens, then closes before she finally says, “Y-you want to watch me?”

I want to taste you. “You said you wanted to feel good, didn’t you? Don’t think you can do it?”

“I can do it,” she says, almost like she’s defying me.

I walk her backward until her ass hits the bed. “Strip.”

Her eyes widen and she scoots up on the bed, quickly pulling off her clothes. She looks at herself, and that’s when her usual confidence withers.

I tip her chin up. “Show me.” I hand her the vibrator, but instead she drops her head in her hands.

“I can’t.” Sierra peeks up at me, her green eyes barely visible. “I’m a grown woman and you’re teaching me how to masturbate. It’s pathetic.”

“Hey.” I sit on the bed. “We’re partners, remember? And you did so well the other night.”

She glows pink. “Why can’t you just …” She waves at my hands and crotch.

Fucking hell. If I wasn’t thinking, I’d strip and have her underneath me in seconds. But even though I’ve thought of that night every night for the past few days, this is for her.

“Because this is all you.” I cup her face. “Get out of your head, baby.”

“I don’t know how to do that anymore.”

I smile. “We’ll figure it out. Together.”

She takes the vibrator, flicks it on, and it whirs to life. Her eyes widen, then I see it, the same look she gets when she nails a difficult jump. Like she’s thrilled to be conquering something.

“Can you take your shirt off?” she asks.

I pull it over my head and wait for whatever else she wants. “Sweats?” I ask. She nods, and I drop my sweats, tossing them aside. “Good?”

Then, as if she’s afraid she’ll lose whatever’s driving her, she scrambles to lie back.

I bite my knuckle, staying still, almost regretting not letting her just use me instead of the damn vibrator. She lets one hand travel up her shirt to touch her nipples, while the other moves the happily whirring device down, down, down until I can’t fucking breathe.

“*Oh my God*,” she gasps, arching her back. It’s a sight I burn onto my brain. Fucking engrave it there for eternity. I want to see this before I die.

She looks at me again, holding the vibrator over her clit. “I want to see you,” she says. “But only if you want me to,” she adds quickly.

Her words hit me harder than I expected. I’ve masturbated in front of women before, but none who were trying to pleasure themselves for the first time. It feels intimate, vulnerable, yet even in the heat of her own impending orgasm, she wants to see me—*if* I want to show her. It intensifies the sensation in my chest. I want to give her whatever she needs from me. She could *take*, *take*, *take*, and I’d *give*, *give*, *give* like a fucking madman.

“You want us to come together, Sierra? Just from watching each other?”

She moans so loud, if Lidia were in the next room, she’d hear it.

I pull my cock out of my boxers, stroking it, giving in to it all, everything I’ve imagined. Her toes curl and her lips part, eyes glued to my hand.

“Tell me what you’re thinking about,” I say.

“How you feel inside me.”

Fucking hell this girl is going to be the death of me. “Spread your thighs wider, Sierra. Show me how much you need this.”

When she does, I almost come right there. But I grip the base of my dick to slow myself down. I *need* to see Sierra come first, so I try to think of anything but the girl moaning my name as she touches her dripping pussy to the sight of me. When her knees fall together again, I can’t take it.

I hold her legs open as I kneel between them, watching her shake uncontrollably. “*Dylan*. I can’t,” she cries out.

“I know, baby,” I whisper, pumping my cock. “You’re doing so good.”

“Touch me,” she whispers. “*Please*.”

I didn’t plan on it, but I’m not an idiot. A woman tells you to do something in a voice like that, you do it. I slide my hands up her inner thighs to her tits, cupping each one in my hands, running my thumbs over her nipples, and watch the patchwork of red on her body. Those are the only marks I want her thinking about. Where I’ve touched and teased her, leaving reminders she’ll see for days. Until I get to give her new ones.

“You don’t have to say please, Sierra,” I say, taking her nipple into my mouth. “Not when you’re with me.”

“I’m coming,” she breathes. I pull back and stroke myself just as her face contorts. She moans before I see her pleasure crest then implode all at once, just as mine does.

The whirring stops, and she goes limp, staring up at the ceiling. “What the hell is that thing?”

“That good?” I ask, pulling up my boxers.

She barely nods, then drags me to her lips. Her skin is hot, and each breath she takes makes her chest brush against mine. “I’ve never done that before.” She moves to sit up. “Why haven’t I done that before? I feel like I’m floating.”

“You just needed me all along,” I say.

“That had nothing to do with you. It was all me.” She sounds so fucking cocky, I love it.

I kiss her again, unable to resist. “You’re right. It was all you.”

I go to the bathroom to clean up and bring a wet towel for her. Her legs still shake as I clean the insides of her thighs. I discard the towel, and when I come back, she’s already got her shorts on. I pull up my sweats and notice that she’s avoiding eye contact.

That dark hole in my chest gets bigger. *She wants me to leave.*

“Dylan,” she starts, but I can’t hear it. I don’t think I’d survive. I agreed to do this with her, to teach her how to make herself feel good. That doesn’t mean I’d take advantage of that just to soothe my own aches. I won’t overstep. This is just sex, and I’m good at that.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” I say, going over to kiss her forehead. “Night, Sierra.”

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THIRTY-SIX

DYLAN

I NEVER THOUGHT I'd miss the smell of the locker room, but tonight as the team gets ready for the game, it soothes something in my chest.

We got back from Lake Placid a few days ago, so Lidia gave us some rest days since I'm playing in my first game of the season. We head onto the rink, and the applause gets louder when I make my round. I expected everyone to hate me after I left the team stranded. Despite that, I give them a show for the warm-up. I turn on the inside edge of my blade and land a triple Lutz, smiling at the crowd when they erupt. Coach doesn't glare at me this time. Instead, he looks proud. I have a feeling it's because Sierra and I placed second at the competition. But none of this applause makes me feel like it's deserved when she's not by my side.

Out here, I expected to find that missing puzzle piece, but it doesn't fit. When I glide past the plexi, a hand with a smiley face on the palm is pressed against it. I skate to the boards to find Sierra sitting next to Scarlett, who's wearing Ishida's number seventy-six jersey.

"You better be wearing my jersey, Romanova," I say loudly, mouthing the words for her when I tap the glass.

"You wish, Donovan." But then she smiles, and when she uncrosses her arms, I see it. Number twenty. My number.

The game seems to fly by quickly. I'm faster on the ice, stay for longer shifts, maneuver around the players easily. But even with all that, right after I slide a puck into the net and we're back on the faceoff, I don't move quick enough to dodge Yale's left-winger.

The impact of his body knocks off my helmet, and his high stick hits my chin. I feel the cut before I see the blood spill onto my jersey. My breathing

slows, and anger rises. When I push the left-winger out of my way, hoping the blood stops, their defender comes at me.

When he drops his gloves, I drop mine too. He gets a good hit on my jaw, but I'm smirking when I've got him pinned in seconds. I throw a single punch, hard enough that he's disoriented.

It's almost like he waits for another hit, something he expects. It's a known fact I don't go down easy, and if someone's coming at me, they better have enough stamina, because even the refs can't pull me away. But today, it doesn't feel worth it. That's not me anymore.

The ref blows a whistle and announces the penalty. The Yale player gets a game misconduct for high-sticking, the defender gets five minutes for roughing, and I get ejected from the game. Of course I fucking do.

MY HEAD IS in my hands when Kilner and Hank, our team medic, exit the locker room. Even though the hit was aimed at me, I've been given the infraction. Coach told me it isn't on me, but this is a terrible outcome for my first probationary game back. I'm pretty sure Reed and Dean Hutchins are in the box tonight.

The referees have always hated me. Freshman year, I was out for blood, and that reputation stuck. Half my penalties are bullshit, but I'm expected to keep playing and try not to get provoked enough to be *physical*.

I know the team will decimate Yale, but I don't care. I wasn't mentally in the game, and now I think I know why. My phone dings from inside my locker, but when I stand up to grab it, I notice the blood staining my chest and abs.

BUNNY PATROL

Aiden Crawford: We just saw that on TV. Kilner should've challenged that.
Eli Westbrook: Yale always gets away with it.
Sunny: I've never seen a worse call. What a joke. Let us know if you're okay. Everyone's worried.

My first thought is Sierra having to see all that. I'm worried she finally made it to one of my games only to see the bloody ice and be reminded of her accident. Just as I'm going to call Sierra, the locker room door swings open and in walks an angry dark-haired girl. She's wearing my jersey and a

pair of light-wash jeans that hug her so perfectly, they steal my attention for much longer than I intend.

It's when I finally realize that she's here, in this locker room, walking up to a bloodied version of me, that I turn away. "You shouldn't be here."

I hear the retort before she speaks. "Don't tell me where I shouldn't be."

Causing her any type of pain or messing with her head makes me feel sick, and I can't have her see me like this when I know everything she's been through. "You don't need to see me like this, Sierra."

"I don't care," she says quickly. Her hand rests on my bare shoulder, urging me to turn around.

"There's a lot of blood," I warn her. "Let me take a shower first."

"I don't care, Dylan," she repeats. I'm not sure if she even realizes what she's saying. "I want to see you. I want to know you're okay. Can you do that for me? Please?"

This time her pull is stronger, and when I turn, her gaze snaps to my face, and I see her concern between her pinched brows. Her mouth is set in a pout as she lets out a strangled breath. The next thing she does is what knocks the breath out of me. Sierra wraps her arms around my torso and plants the side of her face right against my chest. Where the blood stains my skin. She saw the blood and she didn't even flinch.

"Tell me you're okay."

"I'm okay," I whisper.

Sierra tightens her hold on me like she can keep me together.

"Are you out?" she asks softly.

Indignation bleeds into my words. "Yeah, those refs hate me."

"I'm sorry. I know how much this game means to you."

Not as much as you do. "I'm used to it."

She pulls away, and the trace of blood that transferred onto her fair skin forces my hand to wipe it away. She smiles before rising on her tiptoes to kiss me. The dull throb of the cut fades into nothingness as her lips find mine. I'm holding back, and she knows it. Her hands roam over every inch of my bare skin, tempting me to take over like she knows I would. The rough scrape of her nails as she drags them along my scalp and down to the nape of my neck sends a spark up my spine. There's not one part of my body that isn't focused on her every move.

"Sierra," I warn.

She ignores me like I expect, pulling away, as she kisses just to the side of the cut, then lower to my neck, sliding down my body, pressing her hips into me as she goes, trailing all the way down until she drops to her knees.

"What are you doing?"

"I want to make you feel better. You played a good game, so you deserve a reward," she says. "Can I touch you, Dylan?"

I don't think anyone's ever asked permission before. "You can always touch me," I say. "I'm all yours."

Sierra shakes her head as she steps closer. "I'm talking about right now. You can say no."

Fuck. "Yes, you can touch me. Touch me however you like."

"I think," she says, "I want to touch you how you like."

My heart stutters. She's in my jersey, on her knees in the locker room, asking to make me feel better. There's so much I want to do right now, but with the blood on my skin, I pull myself out of the heady rush. Of course, my dick doesn't get the memo, and Sierra notices.

She smirks like I expect, then she gives a tentative lick above the waistband of my boxers. *Oh fuck.* Sierra pushes me so my back is against one of the lockers, and rubs me through my boxers.

I'm about to stop her again, but she gives me a look that tells me to shut up.

"Your heart's beating fast," she whispers.

"Yeah," I breathe, looking down at her. "I wonder why."

There's a faint smear of red on her hands as she slides them down my navel. It's the hottest thing I've ever seen. Maybe that's fucked up, but I can't think straight when it comes to Sierra Romanova.

She chuckles quietly as she looks up at me. "Didn't think you'd be so passive while getting a blow job."

This is something out of my fantasies, and I'm afraid if I watch her touch me, she'll disappear, or I'll pass out. She pulls the elastic of my boxers and my dick springs out, already at full mast, curving upward. Her green eyes go wide, and I bite back a groan.

When she wraps her fist tightly around my shaft, I feel the pressure build, and every ounce of blood shoots straight to my cock. Sierra doesn't take her eyes off me as she licks a bead of precome. Like I'm not on the verge of grabbing a fistful of her hair and fucking her mouth like I want to. I know then that she's going to regret making that passive comment.

“This is what you want?” I rasp. “Want me to fuck your pretty face?”

She cups my balls and drags her tongue all the way from the base of my cock to the tip, not once breaking eye contact. “What do you think?”

I yank her head back. “You sure?”

“Why? Want me to beg?” she mocks.

“Actually, yeah.”

I’m sure she could have me begging right now, and I would. No hesitation. Then, without warning, the hot suction of her mouth wraps around me, and I find myself prying my eyes open to find hers. The earthy green of hers settles on me when she cups my balls again.

“Look at me while you suck my cock, Sierra.” A tremor takes over, and I’m barely hanging on when she slides me so far back, she chokes on it. That’s my fucking girl.

My head hits the locker wall. This is everything. Unpracticed, hungry, desperate.

“Gonna come,” I say, pulling her hair to get her attention. “You want it in your mouth?”

She hums, and the vibration makes me see stars. My abdomen tightens, and I thrust in deeper as each drop fills her mouth. She pulls back, her tongue circling the head to lick it clean, and when she sweetly kisses the tip, I swear I’m hard again.

In an instant my mouth is on her. She tastes like me, and I know nothing can rival this.

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THIRTY-SEVEN

SIERRA

COLLEGE IS DREADFUL when lectures are three hours long and you spend them daydreaming about a six-foot-four hockey player. Because Dylan Donovan's dick is the nicest I've ever seen. Not that I've seen many, but good God the man is beautiful. Between Lake Placid and the locker room, my thoughts have been indecent this whole week of classes and practice. I think he's rubbing off on me.

Despite all that, it's the look he gave me the night he left my hotel room that hits me the hardest. I know that sex is different in college, and Dylan has had a ton of it. From what I've gathered from Scarlett's sleuthing, he's never slept with the same girl twice. For some reason, he's letting me have more, but I refuse to make him regret it by letting my head get the better of me. I'm inexperienced, not stupid. So, I promised myself I wouldn't repeat what happened with Justin. I could have fun, and I don't need to put everything on the line for that.

My phone buzzes, and his name flashes on my screen as if he knows I'm thinking about him.

Dylan: Dale Thunderman is here.
Sierra: What?! How? He just posted that he's storm chasing in Oklahoma.
Dylan: Jesus. I only said that so you'd come over. Do you actually follow him?
Sierra: Only for the scenic imagery.
Dylan: … he only posts himself.
Sierra: Exactly.
Dylan: Keep it in your pants, Romanova. The man is married. And if you want pictures, come over and you can take as many as you want of me.
Sierra: You already send me a shirtless picture every morning. I'll pass.
Dylan: I'll make you food.
Sierra: Fine.

Dylan already had sandwiches made by the time I got to the house. We had practice earlier, so the exhaustion is palpable between us. It got worse when Kian made us scroll through hundreds of kittens to help him choose the one he's adopting. I think he's lonely.

But once we got to Dylan's room, he pulled me into his bathroom. After my accident, I barely looked at myself in the mirror. Now, he likes to watch me come undone in front of it. In the shower, my back hits the tile, and he drops to his knees, kisses my scars, and whispers sweet words against my skin. Goose bumps trail after his lips, and it feels like my body is rejoicing in the love I never give it. I didn't know it could get better, but with him my body sings, and I want to stay long after the water runs cold.

We exit the bathroom, and I can't help but watch him. Dylan Donovan's back is my undoing. The water droplets glide over his tan skin, tracing a slow path down his back until they disappear into the towel wrapped around his waist.

But my attention drifts as he pulls out a pair of shorts. A lavender envelope slips from beneath the fabric, fluttering to the floor by his feet. I slide off the bed, his oversize T-shirt brushing against my thighs as I crouch down to pick it up. When I straighten, Dylan steps aside, his gaze following the letter now suspended between my fingers.

"You dropped this," I say.

The relaxed expression on his face that settled there after our shower disappears completely. I want to retreat into the shower again to put the smile back on his face.

"What's wrong?"

He cups my face and kisses the crown of my head. "Nothing for you to worry about."

"Dylan."

"It's nothing, Sierra."

"Then why do you look so upset?"

His thumb moves in a back-and-forth motion against my jawline. "It's a letter from my mom. My dad gave it to me the day he came to visit. I haven't opened it."

That breaks my heart. I can feel his guilt when he talks about her. It hurts him to watch her be treated like that.

"You don't care to know what she wrote? I'm sure it's just everything she wants you to know before they have their ceremony."

“I’m not going. There’s no point in reading it.” He moves to sit on his bed, still clutching the letter. “If I open this, I know I’m going to feel guilty enough that it’ll make me go to that hoax they’re throwing.”

“If you read this letter and you think you need to be there to support her, then that’s what you’ll do. Because despite anything anyone says, you’re a *good* son and a good *person*. Even if that means putting yourself first and not going. Either way, you have me right here with you.”

I sit beside him, watching the hard contours of his face fall into something softer. “Do you want me to read it?” I ask.

His throat bobs, and he hands the letter to me.

I pull the paper from the envelope and unfold it to reveal the neat cursive of his mom’s handwriting. There’s a faint smell of roses that floats away from the paper, and that’s when Dylan takes my empty hand and intertwines our fingers in his lap.

Then I read it aloud.

Kuzum,

I know it’s probably taken a lot of strength for you to even open this letter, and I want to thank you for giving me a chance, something I know I don’t deserve after what I’ve put you through. Your father and I have been together since we were fifteen, and when you’ve spent more of your life with another person than you have alone, lines start to blur. He’s done bad things, Dylan, but that still doesn’t make him a bad person. I love him. I love you. You are both a part of my soul, and I can’t just break away a piece of it and continue living. I may be naive for this, but he’s all I know, this life is all I know. I still remember him as the man I married, and who I vowed to stand next to. You may not understand this yet, but loving someone sometimes means loving all of them. Every broken, frustrating, dark part of them.

Know that as much as I’d like for you to be present, I understand if you can’t be.

Love, Mama

Dylan blinks repeatedly, his eyes glistening as he fights to hold back tears. The sight of his vulnerability tugs at something deep within me, and I

let the letter slip from my fingers onto the bed. Without hesitation, he reaches out, wrapping his arms around my waist to pull me into the space between his legs. His head rests against my stomach, and I hold him tightly, as if it could somehow keep him from crumbling.

"I hate him," he rasps, the words raw and frayed.

I run my fingers through his hair, offering the only comfort I can. "I know," I whisper.

"I won't go." His voice is muffled against my T-shirt.

Somehow my hold on him grows tighter, like if I press hard enough, I can squeeze out all the pain in his voice. "You don't have to," I assure. "But I'll be right there with you if you do."

He lifts his head. "You'd go with me?"

"I'd go anywhere with you."

Dylan's eyes are drained of the light I'm so used to seeing. This isn't the Dylan everyone thinks they know. It's the one he keeps hidden behind closed doors and beneath the spray of water in his secluded shower.

"Will you stay here tonight?" he asks.

I run the pads of my thumbs over the tired lines under his eyes. "I wasn't planning on leaving."

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THIRTY-EIGHT

DYLAN

LIKE EVERY YEAR, we're only a few hours into our Halloween party and everyone is hammered. And unlike every year, I'm completely sober on my own birthday.

I'm stopped at a red light as a family dressed as pumpkins crosses the street. Earlier, Kian started complaining about having to drive to West Hartford to get Summer's and my cake. I grabbed my keys and cut off his whining. Truthfully, my eagerness had little to do with helping and everything to do with escaping the crowded chaos. I needed space, just a little time to breathe, before slipping into the guy I haven't been for months. Not since I've been with her.

It's been days since Sierra stayed with me all night. I expected to wake up to an empty bed again, but this time she was sitting at the edge of my mattress, poking my cheek. She was wearing one of my crewnecks, her hair a tangled mess from where I'd run my fingers through it all night, a delicate smile on her lips.

She was leaving but woke me up to tell me. That was a first. So was the quick, awkward kiss she left on the tip of my nose before she slipped out the door. Pure bliss. We spent the next few days alternating between our places but never sleeping the night. I knew then that the next time I had her, I wanted to wake up to her. I wouldn't be satisfied until I could have that.

I drive down Main Street, cake secured with a seat belt. No one at the cake shop even batted an eye at my costume, but I didn't put much effort in this year. Kian tried getting me to be Darth Vader because he's Anakin Skywalker. I opted for a basic Ghostface mask and black jeans. The radio drones on with some country songs, a leftover trace of when Summer

picked up Aiden, Eli, and Sage from the airport this morning. They all made it down for my birthday, and I was excited to see them, but it didn't fill the hollowness in my chest.

When I hit another red light, I tighten my palm around the steering wheel. The irritation gnawing at me has nothing to do with the melting ice-cream cake and everything to do with a girl.

We had practice yesterday, but we were so winded from the brutal session that we didn't talk. Sierra, of course, decided it was the perfect time to try a lasso lift. Lidia gave in, so we turned into the move, her hand in mine, and I hoisted her overhead as she stretched into an effortless split. Lidia wasn't satisfied, though. She made us do our entire program with the lift, nineteen times. *Nineteen*. Sierra refused to complain, so we kept going.

Finally, parked in the garage, I take the cake from the back seat and make my way up the steps. The party is just starting to shift from a casual gathering into something raucous. Years of attending college parties have honed my ability to predict their trajectory. This one is going to leave me with a headache, I can guarantee that much.

I take a breath before I enter the house, immediately hearing my name chanted. I weave through the sea of inebriated college students who wish me a happy birthday as I slip into the kitchen. There, I put the cake into the freezer. My gaze flicks to the bottles of alcohol lining the counter. I don't reach for one.

"Damn it," Amara Evans, Summer's best friend, says. We've been friends since earlier this year, and a few weeks ago, she used her computer skills to help me take down all the videos of Sierra's accident that were still online.

She bites into a carrot with a loud crunch, prompting me to glance in her direction. Clad in a black latex costume with cat ears perched atop her head, she's dressed as Catwoman.

"She's even hotter in person," Amara says, gaze fixed on the front door.

I follow her gaze as Eli and Sage, dressed as a firefighter and the fire, finally enter. Apparently, they all had some last-minute errands to run. "Sage?" I ask, my curiosity piqued.

Amara nods, offering me celery, but I refuse. "Why? Do you have a thing for Eli?"

"I have a thing for both of them now, apparently," she mutters.

"Fair," I say. "But aren't you and Sampson—"

The rest of my sentence is muffled by her hand. “We do not speak of that. *Ever*.”

I pry her black-latex-covered hand away. “Still haven’t told Summer?”

“Don’t need to, because it doesn’t mean anything,” Amara replies with a dismissive shrug, though her nonchalance doesn’t quite mask the unease in her eyes.

“I don’t know, Amara, it seemed pretty meaningful when you two were in the storage closet at Porter’s.”

She purses her lips. “What about you? Still pining over your skating partner?”

Before I can answer, she mutters a curse, shoots me a rushed “Happy birthday,” and swipes the vegetable platter and vanishes into the chaos of the hallway. Tyler Sampson strolls in wearing a gladiator costume, waving a bottle of Clase Azul tequila. Because of course he would bring top-shelf tequila to a college party.

“Was that Amara?” he asks, eyeing the trail of her departure.

“Not sure.”

“Well, congrats, man,” he says, slapping my back. He takes a swig directly from the bottle and clinks it against the can of seltzer I’m nursing. The dull clink of our drinks offends him. “This is how you’re celebrating your birthday and getting back on the team?”

Though he’s hammered, Sampson manages to hold himself together. That’s why I appreciated having him around this summer; we’re both heavyweights, and neither of us had to drag the other home. Those days of amateur drinking are behind us, though sometimes I still end up taking care of a trashed Kian.

“Not really my thing anymore,” I say.

“Is this because of that hot figure skater you’re always with?”

Suddenly I want to punch him in the face. “Her name’s Sierra.”

Sampson grins. “Sore spot?”

His attention shifts, and he’s already walking away before I can respond. From the look on his face, I know he’s spotted Amara in her Catwoman costume.

I haven’t seen Kian yet, and I don’t know if that’s a good thing. I notice Aiden leaning against a wall and sipping on what’s probably water. His girlfriend is on the dance floor, and he watches her with careful focus.

Aiden’s got on gladiator chest armor and a red cape, while Summer’s got purple fabric draped around her lavender dress. They’re Hercules and Megara. Of course they are.

“Don’t you hate dressing up?” I ask him.

“You made me go as Snow White last year. I think we both know I don’t care,” he says just as Summer barrels into him. “Besides, it’s my girl’s birthday. She gets whatever she wants.”

Summer spins on her heels and crushes me in a hug. “Happy birthday!”

I squeeze her back. “Happy birthday, Sunny.”

“Do you like it?” She beams proudly. The party is extravagant, nothing we’ve done before. She’s brought in a whole stage, speakers, tables, everything. It’s a lot, and she deserves it; I’m just not so sure that I do.

“Yeah, I love it,” I say anyway.

She watches me carefully, but she smiles like she’s got some secret. “By the way, there’s probably more seltzer than actual alcohol. I wanted this to be a sober event, but your frat brothers clearly had other ideas.” She gestures to the kegs lining the wall.

I laugh. “I appreciate the effort.”

She tilts her head as she looks at my costume. “You’re … Magic Mike?”

“Ghostface.” I show her the mask I left on the table.

She appraises my costume again. “I’m pretty sure he was wearing a shirt in the movies.”

“I think it’d be a shame to hide all this.” I run a hand over my abs. “My knife—”

“Don’t you dare make a dick joke,” she warns. “I’m surprised you didn’t go all out this year.”

I shrug. Throughout the years, I’ve been the one adamant we all dress up. It’s always a fun time, but I couldn’t bring myself to care this year. I just want this day to be over.

“Well, I have a feeling this’ll be your best birthday yet.” She beams like she knows something I don’t. When she hears her favorite song, she rushes to the dance floor again, and Aiden’s gaze follows her, a lazy smile on his lips.

Man, he is sickly in love with her. It’s sweet.

Sweet? I take a swig of my seltzer. I never thought seeing my friends in happy relationships would make me yearn for it. To have someone to do all of it with. I’ve been so caught up in going through the motions, I didn’t

realize how deeply Sierra's settled into my chest. And I don't want her to leave. If anything, I want her closer. More permanent.

I am so fucked.

I turn back to Aiden, shaking the thought. "It's my birthday too. What do I get?"

"You used your wish on the Snow White costume."

"That was last year. You probably got Summer something."

Aiden raises a brow. "Why? Are you vying for the present I'm giving her?"

"Nah, I don't think your dick would make a very memorable gift."

He rolls his eyes. "What do you want?"

"You are awfully snippy lately. I think your girlfriend is rubbing off on you." He gives me the finger.

I'm laughing when my skin lights with an innate awareness when the front door opens, and more people enter. My gaze catches on a girl by the drinks table, her back to me, but I know that body. I've mapped every inch of it, tasted even more, dreamed about her in less. She's got on a black corset top, her matching skirt shorter than anything I've seen her in, and stockings. I put my mask on and gravitate toward her like a magnet.

My hands find the curve of her waist, and she stiffens until I pull her to me, her back flush against my front. "Didn't think you'd show," I whisper, pressing my lips to her ear.

I watch the swell of her breasts lift with a sharp inhale. She smells maddening, and I hate that we're not alone.

"Why not?" Sierra says, voice muffled under her mask, barely audible over music drowning the house.

"Can't seem to pin you down. I might need to use rope next time."

She spins in my arms, pulling off her Ghostface mask, then doing the same to mine. Sierra raises a brow like she's annoyed. "What if I was another girl?"

Finally, *finally*, green eyes are on me. "You're not."

"You couldn't have known that."

"I'd know you anywhere, Sierra," I say. "Every. Fucking. Inch of you."

The delicate column of her throat twitches. Something close to a smile lifts her lips before she frowns, her gaze roaming my half-assed costume.

"Did you plan this?" she asks, holding up her Ghostface mask.

"I'm just as surprised as you."

Scarlett spots me and wishes me a happy birthday. Sierra looks at her best friend, wearing a Padmé costume. “You were in on this?”

“Kian asked if I’d do him a favor. He’s quite persuasive,” she admits.

“Of course he is.”

Scarlett’s smile gets brighter when Kian comes over, slinging his arm around me as his lightsaber digs into my side. “Whoa. What a coincidence!”

We deadpan. Except for Scarlett, who only smiles at him.

“Did you show him?” Kian asks Sierra, and her eyes go wide, her cheeks a little pink.

“Show me what?” I ask.

“Nothing,” they all say. Kian quickly takes Scarlett’s hand and pulls her along.

Then we’re alone again. Well, aside from the fifteen hundred—possibly more—people at this party. Sierra relaxes as she stands with me, but the longer we stay there, the more tension seeps into her posture. She moves to dodge the people bumping into her. I solve her problem by pressing her against the wall, caged between my arms.

We’re both looking at each other like we’re recalling that night. When her soft moans and whimpers fell on my skin, and how my groans felt right against her pussy. My gaze rests on her lips, red of course, and I know they taste that way too. Hot and irresistible.

“Don’t you have a party to host?” she says.

There’s another bout of “Happy Birthday” and pats on the back sent my way when Kian says something over the speaker. My focus doesn’t waver because my racing heart pulls all my attention to the person it’s trying to pry out of my chest for. “Not my priority right now.”

“You sure? There are a lot of people here,” she says.

“I only care about one.”

I watch the goose bumps rise on her skin and how her throat moves when she swallows.

Then my name is called in a drunken slur over the loudspeaker again, and even as the screech of the mic forces an audible groan from the crowd, I don’t turn around. If Kian’s finding me, he’s going to have to drag me away from this, from *her*.

“You’re being summoned,” Sierra says.

“Then let’s go somewhere quiet.”

“You want to ditch your own party?” Her gaze darts past me.

When my chest brushes against her, igniting a path straight down, her hand shoots up. She flattens her palm against my pecs, and I let her push me just an inch.

“You’re not thinking straight,” she blurts out as some sort of last-ditch effort.

“Everything could be a blur, and I’d still see you clearly,” I say.

Her chest heaves, and I can’t help but let my gaze drop to her outfit. Short as hell, all black, all mine. I can’t hold back from taking her hand and placing it over my heart. Her eyes darken, and her tongue darts out to lick her red lips. *Fuck*, she’s perfection.

Then some drunk dude dressed as Patrick Bateman bumps into us. He apologizes profusely before picking himself off the floor and stumbling into the crowd.

“Your choice, Romanova,” I say, dropping my forehead to hers. “Wanna be my getaway?”

Sierra nods, taking my hand and leading me down the hall toward my room.

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THIRTY-NINE

SIERRA

I'M NERVOUS. LIKE sweaty hands, heart pounding, legs weak kind of nervous.

It has nothing to do with the way his gaze melts every bit of my composure like hot wax. It's because I have a surprise for him. A part of me was stalling because I don't know if I'm crossing some casual, partners-who-have-sex line, but Dylan's my friend, and I care about him.

As we head down the hallway, partygoers erupt in cheers and hands clap his back. But when I glance over my shoulder, his posture is stiff, his face unreadable. He doesn't acknowledge anyone.

As soon as we enter his room and he shuts the door behind us, Dylan freezes at the sight before him.

I wait for some sign that he either likes or hates it. But his expression is unreadable. The kind of blank slate that makes my stomach twist. His gaze darts around the room, snagging on the photos dangling from the ceiling, each with a note on the back. There are at least fifty of them. There are pictures of him and Kilner, some with the guys at last year's Halloween, where they dressed as Snow White and the seven dwarfs, a few with Summer and Kian hiking or at the carnival.

And then there's our picture. He looks at that one the longest.

I hadn't even known Lidia took that picture. A balloon lies by his feet as he steps farther into the room, and he looks at it like he's trying to figure out if it's real. His fingers hover over the edge of the paper, brushing it gently as he flips it to read the note I scribbled on the back.

It's a picture of me sitting on the rink bench while he ties my skates. From my furrowed brows and his smile, I realized we were probably arguing. Likely because he said I did something wrong, and I begged to

differ. All that while I held out his gloves for him and he tied my skates. Lidia said it was her favorite picture of us because no matter how much we argue, we still unconsciously take care of each other.

Dylan looks at me now. Just as I open my mouth to explain or bolt from his room, the confusion in his expression softens, shifting into something that looks like realization.

"You did this?" he asks.

I still can't tell whether he's happy or not. I'm so used to reading his face, to assessing every move of his body so I can bounce off it, but none of those learned cues help right now.

I swallow hard. "Your friends helped."

"But it was your idea?"

I nod, trying for a casual shrug. Kian was over studying with Scarlett last week, and I ran it by him, regretting it as soon as he started singing playground kissing rhymes. He and Scarlett must be closer than I've realized, because she only looked at him and he agreed to help. That's why Kian sent Dylan to pick up the cake earlier. This whole setup was a team effort, but the idea had been mine. Because I wanted Dylan to see how much everyone cares about him, not just when he's drinking or being the life of the party, but for the person he is in between too.

"You said you hate celebrating your birthday. I thought we could create a new memory. A better one."

"Why?" His voice drops, quiet and rough in a way I've never heard before, like it's wrapped in something fragile. He looks like a little boy again. All soft hope and wonder on his face. There's something so raw and unguarded about the way he looks at me that it nearly breaks me.

"Because you deserve to have a good birthday. It's a special day, no matter what you've made yourself think."

"But I am celebrating. There's a party right out there." He points to the door where the bass of "The Spins" by Mac Miller thumps against the bedroom door. But all I can focus on is how he's trying to convince himself he doesn't deserve this.

"And it's great. Your friends really love and care about you, but I can tell that's not you, at least, not anymore. They know that too, so they wanted you to have this. They wanted something just for you."

"They?" He steps closer, and a black balloon nudges against my leg.

"We," I correct softly.

“And the pictures. Whose idea was that?”

“Mine,” I admit, meeting his gaze. “Everyone sent me their favorite pictures they had with you,” I explain. “Lidia gave me the one with us when she heard.”

This time, when he steps forward, the tips of his shoes graze mine. The air between us tightens, charged with something that feels far too big for this room.

“You make this so fucking hard,” he says, his voice low and edged with defeat.

My heart stumbles, then flips over itself.

“How am I supposed to show you that you’re different for me,” he continues, his eyes burning into mine, “when you go and do things that make me want to bring out that side of me? The one that wouldn’t be satisfied until he had you in every position he’s ever dreamed of.”

A pulse starts low in my stomach. “You’re trying to be different for me?”

“Look around, Sierra. Everything in this room is new. There’s not a single place in here I could take you on that’s been occupied by another person. I even painted the fucking walls. My shower? You’re the first person who has ever been in there with me.” He laughs, but there’s no humor in it. “And today? I know I could have drunk, but I didn’t, because I hoped you’d be here. And I don’t want to miss a thing when it comes to you.”

No one has ever equated my presence with something so vital. He avoids my gaze. It’s as though he’s bracing himself, unsure if he’s said too much.

“Look at me.” I cup his face in my hands, but he still won’t meet my eyes. Instead, he rests his forehead against mine, and I suppress the choked sound rising in my throat. “Please?”

He does. His amber brown eyes lift slowly, long lashes fanning like delicate curtains.

“You are not your past. And even if you were, it’s not something to be ashamed of.”

“It is—”

“It’s not,” I say firmly. “You’re so much more than that. Kind, gentle, and so generous it makes me a little jealous. You’re not just someone to lust after or settle for. You’re a complete person who deserves every ounce of respect.”

His lips quirk into a small smile. “You might be the only one who thinks that.”

“You know what I think?” I say, my voice steady. “I think people think that you only care about yourself and your pleasure, because that’s the version you’ve chosen to show them. But deep down, you are the most selfless person I’ve ever known. And I think the people who truly know and love you know that’s the truth.”

He exhales a soft chuckle. “This is pretty sappy for you, Romanova.”

“You can joke all you want, but I see you, Dylan.” I reach for his hand, intertwining our fingers. “I couldn’t before, or I never allowed myself to. But now that I have, I can’t stand by and let you think of yourself that way.”

His brown eyes shimmer. “I see you too, Sierra.”

My body moves on its own, wrapping my arms around his bare torso and pressing my lips to his warm chest. “I don’t need you to be different for me. I like you as you are. Old you, new you, I just want *you*.”

Three beats of silence stretch between us, thick and heavy.

He cups my face, tender and possessive. “So, if I stripped you naked, licked every inch of your body, and stuffed you full of my cock, you wouldn’t think of me differently?”

Oh. “D-differently, yes. But badly, no.”

He smirks, leaning in, his lips brushing my ear as he asks, “And if I kissed you like this?”

Dylan tilts my head, capturing my lips as his tongue moves hot and slow in my mouth, exploring and in complete control. I rise to my tiptoes, at his mercy, feeling my stomach flutter before he pulls back.

“You wouldn’t see me differently?”

I grip his shoulders, pulling him closer until our noses touch. “Kiss me like that again, and I won’t stop until you see *me* differently.”

“Get on the bed.” I don’t hesitate. Not when he’s looking at me like *that.* “This fucking skirt. You thought you could come to my party dressed like this and I would last a second out there?”

“I’ve heard you take costumes seriously. And I wanted to satisfy the birthday boy.”

His chuckle vibrating against my skin. “So, there is a world where Sierra Romanova wants to satisfy me?”

“We must be in an alternate universe,” I say.

“That’s okay, baby,” he whispers against my stomach. “I’ll satisfy you in every universe.” Dylan unzips my skirt and then takes off my boots before I scoot back onto the mattress. He follows, coming on top of me like a magnet. He grips my thighs, slapping them roughly before pressing his hips down.

Dylan kisses me like he’s starved. Each glide of his tongue feels like gasoline poured over a raging fire. I ache to feel more. I’m desperate to have him grind into me, to bruise my thighs with his grip, *anything*.

When I hook my fingers onto his belt, Dylan pulls a fistful of my hair, yanking me back. His expression is tender as he runs the pad of his thumb under my eyes, so delicately I’m convinced my skin is porcelain. Then he presses a whisper of a kiss onto my eyes.

“This is different, Sierra,” he says, his voice rough, almost pleading.

“I know,” I breathe.

“Do you?” His eyes darken to coal. “I mean it. There is no one else. No one else I want to taste, no one else I want to fuck. No one else I want as my partner. You’re the one I want to get it right with.”

I’m barely holding back from rocking my hips, but Dylan’s hands are firm on my waist. The music is still thumping against the walls outside. I’m pretty sure I hear Kian and Summer singing a duet. But I focus on how Dylan’s heart beats fast against mine.

“So greedy,” I tease.

“Only when it comes to you,” he whispers. “Be my girlfriend.”

My heart stops. “I think that’s supposed to be a question.”

His thumb settles on the erratic pulse point on my neck. “There’s no question about how I feel with you. Tonight, when I fuck you, Sierra, it’s going to be as my girlfriend. I want to hold you in my arms and know you’re mine to keep.”

Something bursts in my chest, lights me up like the sun. “You want to keep me?” I ask.

“I’m not letting you go.”

“Okay,” I whisper. “I’ll be your girlfriend.”

A loud rumbling groan of satisfaction leaves him, and he buries it in the crook of my neck. When he pulls back, he eases my thighs to my stomach, stretching me so far the air touches the most sensitive parts of me. But his burning gaze warms me to an unbearable degree.

“You gonna stare all night?” I tease.

“Might.”

I exhale a laugh, feeling so completely exposed. He strips out of his pants, leaving on his boxers. My hand slides into his hair, clutching the brown locks. I clamp a hand over my mouth, hoping nobody hears me.

Dylan shakes his head, pressing his tongue flat on my clit in a warning. “Let me hear you, Sierra. You know I want to hear you. We don’t hold back when we’re together, yeah?”

When I don’t remove my hands, Dylan reaches into his drawer, and I nearly whine at the loss of his touch. But he quickly realizes whatever he’s looking for isn’t there anymore. Instead, he takes my discarded panties from the floor, lifts my arms, and ties them above my head to his bed frame. With my underwear. *Oh my God.*

“Don’t. Move,” he orders.

“O-okay.” I whimper through the word until he goes back to do that thing with his tongue that makes me see spots and pulls a string of *yeses* from me as I come when he asks me to. When he reaches for a condom, I stop him. From one look—he knows. His hands tremble, almost imperceptibly.

“I’ve never …” He trails off.

“Me neither. Maybe it can be our first time. Together. Is that okay?”

Amber brown eyes grow soft. “Yeah, I’d like that. Our first time.”

“Can I touch you now? *Please?*” He must prefer it that way too, because with one tug, my arms are released.

He gives me no warning before sliding right into me. All the way to the hilt.

“*Fuck*, I missed you,” he says, sliding all the way out, then in again.

When I clutch his wrist, he slows to let me adjust to his size. “Take your time. I’ll give it to you nice and slow.”

And he does. He thrusts at an agonizingly slow and perfect angle, and the sound of us together hits my ears; my eyes close from pure pleasure. He kisses me with a nudge.

“Eyes on me,” he orders. “I want you to keep looking at me.”

He holds my gaze captive, moving faster and watching every single one of my reactions to having him inside me. I’m so desperate for his touch, I start to undo the hooks on the front of my corset. Dylan stops my fumbling hands and does it easily. I’m not wearing a bra, so the second it comes off, Dylan makes a low sound of approval and seals his mouth over my nipple.

Having him like this, without an inch of space, feels so right, I can hardly breathe.

When I beg him to go faster, he places his palm between the crown of my head and the bed frame, fucking me so hard I can't catch my breath. "You like that, Sierra? You like it when I'm all you can feel?" He thrusts into me deeper, rolling his hips. "All you can taste. All you can touch."

"*Yes.*"

"I like you like this. Saying yes to me." He leans back, watching me take him, legs in his grip as he moves fast. "You should do it more often. I might reward you for being so nice."

I still manage to glare at him even though my eyes try to roll back. "I'm not nice."

"You can be a good girl when you want to be." Then he presses on my abdomen, and everything tightens. "You wanna be a good girl and come while I'm inside you, Sierra?"

"*Please*," I whimper. "*Please*, *Dylan.*"

"You didn't think I wasn't going to make you work for it, did you, princess?"

I groan. "Go faster."

"Ask nicely."

"I hate you."

"I don't believe you." Dylan looks between us. "And that's not nice. Bad girls don't get to come, baby."

I grip his hair and yank him right to my mouth. "But you like when I'm bad."

He's full-on grinning. "I do. I like you exactly as you are. Too much sometimes."

Then something on his face changes, and he watches me like I'll disappear.

"When I'm done ruining this pretty pussy, what are you going to do?" he demands.

My eyes squeeze shut, and my mouth parts in pleasure. I barely process what he's saying, I just need him to relieve the pressure. "*God*, keep doing that."

He grips my chin and forces me to look at him. "What are you going to do, Sierra?"

"What?" I ask breathlessly.

“When I’m done fucking you, what are you going to do?”

My brain stopped working when he started doing that thing with his tongue a while back, so it takes several seconds for me to understand what he’s saying. But that look in his eyes is there again, and I want it to go away. I believed him when he said this was different. I want him to know that.

He’s worried I’ll leave. The thought spears my chest because Dylan never asks for anything.

I swallow. “I—I’m going to stay.”

If humans could glow, that’s how I would describe the look on his face. *Glowing*.

“Good,” he says. “You’re going to let me clean you up, then you’re going to fall asleep in my arms without second-guessing this. Yeah?”

“Yes, Dylan,” I pant. “I want to stay.”

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FORTY

DYLAN

I'M A CONFIDENT guy. Some may say cocky. But getting Sierra Romanova to be my girlfriend is pure luck. Then managing to get her to stay the whole night to wake up to her sleeping soundly felt like winning the lottery.

Now, *my girlfriend* is straddling me, completely naked. She finds my hand and presses her palm to mine, measuring the difference. Her bottom lip is caught between her teeth, head tilted as she sees how much bigger mine is. Then she looks at me, catches my gaze on her, and I swear she blushes a pale pink. She just fucked me like a porn star, but one look from me, and the girl's gone shy.

"Do you have a pen?" she asks.

I reach over to my bedside table and grab a pen. My hands rest on her waist, my thumb brushing over her scar. She doesn't flinch or stiffen when I do that anymore.

"Palm," Sierra orders, clicking the pen open.

Focused as ever, like with everything she does, Sierra draws a circle, two dots, and a swipe.

"What do you think?"

I find what I expect. A smiley face on my palm. It causes something to thaw in my chest. With the same hand on the back of her head, I pull her down to my lips. "I love it, baby."

Her laugh is light, and prettier than anything else I'll ever hear.

Sierra trails a finger over my jaw. "What's this from?" she asks, touching the faded scar.

"Junior year. Qualifiers against Boston College. I got a major."

She trails lower until she's touching my navel, looking at me like I'm something new and not used. "I'm patient, but not that patient, Sierra."

"What? I just wanted to know about your scars."

I flip her under me, and she gasps. "I'm sure. That's why I could feel how wet you are right on my stomach."

Her cheeks pinken, but I don't let her get shy on me. I slide down her stomach and press featherlight kisses on her core. But just as she starts moaning my name, her phone rings.

"Don't answer," I rasp. And when I push her thighs apart and press my face there, she doesn't protest. "Give me another one."

She shakes uncontrollably. "I can't—"

My phone dings with a text, but I squeeze Sierra's thighs to keep her attention on me. "Dylan," she says, but I barely hear it over the taste of her. "Your phone."

"Ignore it."

She sinks her fingers into my hair, yanks my head up. She drags my name across her tongue in a stern voice.

I sigh, reaching for my phone. "It's Lidia."

We've been expecting word on if we got the Grand Prix host pick. With our scores and media attention, we have a shot. Sierra springs up out of bed and grabs her phone. She takes the crewneck I left discarded on my bed frame and tugs it on.

She calls Lidia back, and each ring that punctures the air feels like we're closer to the edge of a cliff.

"*Devushka*." Lidia's voice filters through the speaker. Sierra deflates and falls into me, like she can tell just from the sound of her coach's voice. "You two were amazing. Everything was near perfection, and you should be so proud of that.

"You didn't make it this time, but we still have the whole year. You've got a long career ahead of you, Sierra."

Sierra just sits there, speechless. I take her phone.

"Thanks for letting us know, Lidia," I say, my voice calm, even though my chest feels like it's being stung.

"Who got it?" Sierra asks with a shaky voice.

The line is silent for so long, we already know the answer before Lidia says, "Justin and Julia."

A choked sound escapes Sierra.

When I assure Lidia we'll be fine and hang up, I turn to my partner. Gently, I pull her down to lie with me. My fingers trace the tiny bump on her skull.

"I thought it would hurt more. I mean, it does, it burns, but nothing like it used to," she whispers, her voice barely above a murmur. "I think it's because you're here."

I slide my hand down her back. "I'll always be here, baby."

Her laugh is soft, barely a sound, but it melts right into me. "At least now you can finally focus on hockey and the draft. You deserve every single string Kilner pulled for you, Dylan."

"I'm not thinking about that right now," I say.

"But I want you to. Because for the first time in years, I fell in love with skating again. It feels like it used to, like home. You helped me get there. I used to feel so guilty about not being good enough for my partner to stay, but you never make me feel like a burden. For the first time I haven't tied my worth to my scores. So, I mean it when I say you should do what you poured your entire life into. If anyone gets it, it's me."

When I glance down, she's already looking at me, her face painted with something raw and unspoken.

"You trust me?" I murmur, lifting her chin, holding her there, so close I can feel the words on her lips.

"So much."

The need to keep her, to hold her in my arms, shifts into a gnawing, obsessive type of possession. I want her to need me. Not just for this, but for everything.

I would keep this girl forever if she let me.

I'M QUITTING HOCKEY.

That's not a thought I've ever had, but something changed last night and this morning. I want to do it now, when Sierra knows it's not impulsive. Missing the Grand Prix means I can practice harder for nationals. I'd get her on that first-place podium no matter what.

"You're sure about this?" Kilner asks me after practice for a third time. When I said I'd play one last game, he stared at me for so long, I noticed the brown flecks in his blue eyes.

I love this sport, but it doesn't even come close to the feeling I get when I skate with Sierra. I've had this pull to be on the ice my whole life, and I've always thought it was for hockey, but the moment my hand finds the warmth of hers, it's all I care about. Winning feels useless if I'm not doing it with her.

"I am."

Kian sniffles beside me. "Like really, really sure?" I told him on the way to practice, which I regretted, because he won't leave my side. In Coach's office, he hugged me for an entire seven minutes and didn't stop until Kilner told him he'd be on bag skates.

"Yes, Kian, I'm sure. I've thought this through, and I love hockey, but this is my future. It's where I'm meant to be."

Kilner smiles, and it doesn't freak us out this time. "I'm proud of you, son." Then he stands and I do too, because he hugs me. The man's getting sentimental. It's weird.

Kian doesn't ask to join the hug, he just does. When we exit the arena, he's already on his phone, filling everyone in. My phone blows up, but I only check Sierra's text. She tells me she's been studying all day and she's going to sleep early. I don't bother checking the rest of the messages from the team. Kian and I head home, where everyone's watching the game.

Aiden's on the couch icing his calf when he sees me. Since he hasn't been cleared to play, he stuck around after my birthday. "Heard you made a decision."

I nod, plopping on the cushion beside him. "If you're going to talk me out of it—"

"I'm not. I think it's the right thing. I'm proud of you, D."

A weight lifts off my shoulders, and I can tell from the way he says it that he's been waiting years to say those words. I'm just glad I finally feel proud of myself too.

"Thanks," I say. "It fucking feels like it. Like things are finally right, aside from all the bullshit with my parents." The guys go eerily still. Like it's a shock to hear me bring up anything about myself. Then it happens; I spill everything. I tell them how my dad is still cheating, about the vow renewal call from them a few months back, the weed, and the failed drug test.

My friends blink at me like they've never seen me before. "Their vow renewal? Is that what that invitation was?" Kian asks. "Why didn't you tell

us?”

“I don’t want to be the friend that burdens you with my shit. We all have our own lives, and friends are supposed to make life easier, not harder.”

Aiden’s brows knit together. “You think you’re not allowed to have problems because you’re … you? We’ve all relied on each other, that’s how we’ve gotten through our shit.”

“I’m supposed to be the one who doesn’t take anything serious. Not the one unloading his family drama. No one wants that kind of person around.”

“But we do,” Aiden says. “Hiding it doesn’t mean we didn’t know you were struggling. I hope you know that we’d listen, whether it’s the carefree you or the one struggling to talk about your parents.”

Cole and Sebastian peel their gaze away from the TV. “Us too, Double D.”

Kian nods. “You’ve been there for us, more times than I can count. It’s only right that we get to do the same. That’s how this friendship works.”

The vulnerability feels raw, like an open wound that I haven’t shown anyone but Sierra. For this first time, it doesn’t feel like I’m leaving something behind, it feels like I’ve gained so much more.

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FORTY-ONE

SIERRA

SLEEPING IN DYLAN'S arms was the first time in over a year that I woke up feeling completely safe. Aside from the time in the hospital when my mom slept with me, that was it. Right there with Dylan.

"Out of respect for your relationship, I won't ask any details, but just give me a crumb," Scarlett says when we're in the kitchen warming up the lunch we brought up from the dining hall. Yesterday's hungover Scarlett told me she needed to know everything, but only after her head stopped feeling like a marching band was parading through it. So, since she's returned from the dead today, I told her how Dylan reacted to the surprise everyone helped with and then how I became his girlfriend. I've never been anyone's girlfriend, but I'm glad I get to be his.

"He uses ice sometimes."

Scarlett chokes on her croissant. "I said a *crumb*, and you gave me the entire loaf. Wow, now I'm going to be thinking about that every time you and Dylan are together."

"Thinking about what when we're together?" We both turn to find Dylan. Everyone on the first floor leaves their door open during midterms, probably for moral support. Dylan comes to me, whispers, "Hi, baby," and I start blushing. I'm falling for him, and I don't question whether he'll catch me.

He's in a navy suit and tie, his hair long and wavy. I don't even notice when he steals bacon off my plate and kisses me while I'm still chewing.

"Ice," Scarlett says. I glare at her, but she laughs, and so does Dylan. "I'll be in my room, so you two feel free to do whatever. There's an ice machine down the hall."

I groan. “My best friend is for sale. You want her?”

“Nah, I’ve got too many.” Dylan follows me to my room. “I just came by to check if you need a ride.”

Today is Dylan’s second game. Coach got the dean to agree that the penalty was uncalled-for and that the ejection shouldn’t factor into his reinstatement. He’d never say it, but he’s exhausted. And although he knows he should give something up, he won’t do it. And I’m too selfish to ask him to.

“Summer’s picking me up. But is this a perk of being your girlfriend? Unlimited rides?”

“You can ride me anytime you want, Romanova.” He looks at me like his eyes are holding the image of my naked body behind them.

I shake my head as I rummage through my closet for something decent to wear to the game. I look in the mirror, trying to decide on bottoms. Dylan comes up behind me, snaking his arms around my waist.

“You’re making it hard for me to want to leave. You’re trouble.”

I chuckle. “But you like that about me.”

“I do,” he says. “I love that about you.”

If I weren’t tangled in his embrace, my knees would buckle. How do you think that you’re worthy of someone’s love if you can’t even love yourself?

“Don’t wear that,” he says, cutting through my thoughts.

He sighs and rests his head on my shoulder. I smile at him in the mirror. “Why not?”

“Because I’m trying to stay focused while I play, and won’t be if I know this”—he pulls the miniskirt from my hands—“is what you’re wearing.”

“What about this?” I show him a pair of yoga pants.

“Are you trying to kill me, woman?”

I push him away. He plops on the bed and hooks his hands behind his head as he watches me change.

I spin to show him my jeans. “I’m wearing these, take it or leave it.”

“Taking it. Always taking it,” he says. “But spin around. I don’t know if that’s the right wash for you.”

“Yeah?” I twirl, slowing down as he whistles.

“Come a little closer so I can inspect in detail.”

“You’re going to be late for your game.” I saunter over to him anyway. He looks way too hot in his suit for me to ignore him.

He pulls me on top of him, grabbing a handful of my ass. “It’s for good luck.”

“Good luck ass grab?”

He hums and flips us over so I’m under him. “Good luck kiss too.”

“Oh!” I pull away from him to reach into my desk drawer. “Can you put this on me?”

Dylan shifts, taking the lavender box from me. He opens it, his fingers brushing over the gold-plated bracelet. The dainty smiley face catches the light, and when he turns it over, he sees our initials engraved on the back. His lips part then curve into the sweetest smile. He clasps it on my wrist, brushing his lips on the skin. “I would have bought it for you, baby.”

“I know, but I wanted something for me. As a reminder of how far I’ve come. With your help, but also all on my own.” I never thought I’d ever get to a place where I wasn’t just surviving but choosing to live. “I got you one too.”

I give him his identical bracelet. “I don’t need a good luck charm, Sierra. I already have you.”

My eyes prick as I clasp it on his wrist. “It’s not for good luck. It’s for us. Always partners, even if we’re not skating together.”

His hesitates but presses his lips on mine, as he whispers, “No matter what.”

I see stars with how thoroughly he kisses me. It makes me squirm under him. Even as he holds his hips away from me, I want to feel him.

“Don’t even think about it, Sierra,” he reprimands when my hand reaches for his belt. “I’ve only got so much self-control, and it’s practically nonexistent when it comes to you.”

“Since when did you become such a buzzkill?”

He bites my lip. “Get this fine ass to my game so I can hear you scream my name.”

“I already do that,” I say. “I’ll do it even louder when you win.”

Dylan quickly jumps off the bed. “Won’t work, baby.”

“It already has.” I shoot him a pointed look just as he opens my bedroom door. “Enjoy your cold locker room shower.”

He groans and then I hear the front door close. My smile makes my face hurt.

An hour later, Summer’s parked out front, and Scarlett and I hop in to head to the arena. Amara decided to join at the last minute, so the car is

packed, and the energy is crackling.

They blasted music for the first half of the ride, and now the latter half consists of random topics of conversation. Though the current one makes my palms a little sweaty.

"I have to say, Sierra, I've never seen Dylan like this," says Summer. "He's been smiling a lot, and not that dumb smirk he always wears. It's real. The guy's never been in a relationship, but with you he's an expert."

"I got lucky, I guess. Or for once embarrassing myself worked out." I scratch the back of my neck. "Is that bad? Who mauls their skating partner on day one of practice?" For some reason, opening up to them doesn't feel scary.

"Not at all. I had sex with my research partner," Summer says. She must mean with Aiden, of course. "And our friend Cassie had sex with my research partner's best friend."

That takes me a minute to track. Kian, I'm assuming.

"And I had sex with my best friend's best friend," says Amara, and I'm officially lost.

The car halts abruptly, and we jolt. "What?!" Summer says.

All heads turn to Amara, who slaps a palm over her mouth. She mutters a curse.

"You—you had sex with Sampson?" Summer asks. "And you didn't tell me? What the hell, Amara! You hate each other."

"Still do," Amara replies. "But *God*, he does this thing with his tongue —" She slaps her palm over her mouth again. "Never. And I mean never tell him I said that."

Summer's still blinking. "Yeah, we have to talk about this."

"You sure you need to know more?" Scarlett chimes in. "'Cause that look on her face is saying a lot."

The car is quiet after that. Mostly because Amara refuses to speak.

The game starts soon after we arrive, and when Dylan taps the glass where we sit, he winks at me, and then all the girls in our section squeal. I roll my eyes, and that's when he smiles.

By the third period, Dalton's got an easy win, and Dylan's on a breakaway for the tiebreaker. With his helmet, I can't see his face, but the way he moves like lightning down the ice is unforgettable. I'm holding my breath, unclenching my fists when I remember the tiny smiley face on my palm. Instead, I fiddle with my new bracelet. Then he sends the puck flying,

and the buzzer echoes through the arena. He flies past us in a celebration, holding his hand up to his ear as the crowd goes crazy. I'm right up against the glass, chanting his name like some crazed hockey fan. Damn it, I might actually enjoy this sport.

"Kind of sad that it's his last one," Amara says as she passes me the bag of popcorn.

She must see my brow quirk, because she points ahead to where Dylan whizzes past us.

"Dylan," she clarifies. "It's his last game, right?"

My mind is a tangled mess. I've been bracing myself for our last skate, so I wouldn't do or say something stupid. Like ask him to stay.

"Sampson said Coach Kilner told him he would finally be reinstated and still get to play for New York next year, but Dylan said no," Amara explains.

My heart bottoms out. "He said no?"

"Flat out. Just up and quit," she says. "That's what Sampson told me. But I thought you knew."

I want to press her with more questions to settle the confusion in my chest, but the words won't come. Summer holds out a churro, and in my foggy confusion, I don't even recall eating the whole thing and crushing the white sugar-covered wrapper in my fist.

Though they definitely notice. "You okay?" Summer asks.

I only nod. Then the last seconds of the final period trickle on and Dalton wins. I feel a ball in my throat that I can't swallow. I need to get out of here.

"I'm going to just—" I hike my thumb to the exit, and before they can ask anything else, I'm out of the arena. The buzzer signaling the end of the game wraps around the building, and I can hear it in my ears even as I'm halfway across the parking lot running toward absolutely nothing.

I'VE GOT THE Weather Channel loud in my dorm room. But this time, Dale Thunderman doesn't calm my nerves. My phone buzzes beside me. It's Scarlett. Forgot my keys. Open the door for me?

When I open the door, Dylan's standing there. His face does devastating damage to my heart. Scarlett and Kian are behind him, but they bolt down the hall, and she shouts something about him being too persuasive.

“I swear I saw you at the game earlier, but I must’ve been mistaken,” he says. I close the door behind him when he moves past me without an invitation.

“You quit.” The words sound almost accusatory. “You love hockey.”

“I know what I love, Sierra,” he says, his voice rough. All the air is sucked out of the room and my lungs. One look at him and his irritatingly handsome face, and I can’t take a proper breath.

“You’ve seen me. I’ve been juggling these two sports and classes and being on my best behavior. I’ve finally found something I enjoy, *with* someone I enjoy. Is that so wrong?”

“But you’ve worked so hard for hockey. You still get to play for New York.”

“Barely,” he mutters. “They’ll put me on a developmental team. I can be the best player out there, but I’ve been in too many fights. I’m too reckless, too physical, too everything.”

“So, you’re choosing figure skating?”

“I’m choosing to figure skate with *you*.”

My throat dries like I’ve swallowed dirt.

“The closer I got to reinstatement, the less I wanted it. My whole life I’ve been playing this part, to be someone, to prove my dad wrong, to just get to the next day. But when I’m on that ice with you, I don’t want it to end. I wake up every morning happy because I know we get to do it all over again together.”

I shake my head. “But this partnership was supposed to be temporary.”

He runs a hand through his hair, closing the small space between us. “If you think any of what happened between us is temporary, Sierra, then this is me showing you that it’s not. Not a single fucking thing I did with you was *temporary*.”

My heart beats outside of my chest. It all feels like too much. Too fast. Too familiar.

“What if you regret it? This sport isn’t fun when you lose, Dylan, and I’ve been on that side before. I can’t do that again. Not with you.”

“Do I look like I regret this?” he asks. “I’ve been doing this with you for months. I don’t care if we have to try again and again as long as it’s with you.”

“You will,” I say. “Trust me, that’s what Justin—”

“Don’t compare me to him.”

I swallow. “But I’m—”

“Stop.” He cups my face gently. When he communicates, even in his most frustrated moments, he never yells. I can tell he’s angry, but he only approaches me with patience because he knows it’s what I respond to.

“Tell me why you’re so scared of this. Why can’t you just trust that I made this decision of my own free will? Why don’t you believe that I’d want to stay with you?”

“Because it doesn’t work like that.” Not for me, at least. I know Dylan’s not Justin, and our partnership is nothing like it was with him, but he said these things too. He said them over and over until I believed him. Until I’d decided that was it, but then I wasn’t enough. Again.

“You really think I could just leave? As if that’s ever been an option for me.”

“I don’t have expectations for anyone—”

“I don’t give a fuck what you expect from other people. But I do care about what you expect from me, because I’ll do everything in my power to give you that and ten times more.”

“Nobody wants to put in that much effort.”

“I’m standing here, telling you that I do.”

I shake my head. “I just don’t want you jumping into something you don’t know. I can’t give you some happy, carefree version you’re used to with girls. I have insecurities and I’ve been hurt before. And it’s not your responsibility to have to prove any of them wrong.”

“You don’t have to ask me to prove it. I want to,” he says. “I’m here for all of you. All the parts that you think are broken are just more for me to love.”

You’re going to ruin him. Take all his good years and leave him nothing. Just like you did to Justin. “You have this entire sport and people who love you. You don’t need me.”

“I don’t go a day without thinking about where you are or what you’re doing. I want you, I need—God, I’m fucking nothing without you. Don’t you see that?”

I swallow the lump in my throat, unable to process his words. Or not allowing myself to.

“I love you, Sierra. On your darkest days, the good days, and all the ones in between. Show me your worst, baby, and I’ll show you just how far my heart can stretch for you.”

I love you, ice queen. My brain feels like it doesn't work, like it's reverted to the last time I heard those words. My heart gives a near-fatal squeeze.

How did I trick him into thinking I'm worth loving?

Dylan's eyes plead with mine. "I'm not asking you to say it back. But I need you to know that I love you and I love skating with you. Those are facts, but neither influenced my decision. I'm skating because I want to. I quit hockey because I want to. Because if I'm being honest, it's never fulfilled me the way skating has these past few months. I won't take that for granted."

My eyes start to sting, and Dylan must see it, because he pulls me into his arms like I'm meant to be there. Like I haven't been running from this exact place. He holds me like all those ugly parts of me fit seamlessly in the space he creates. The parts that never feel like me when they come out, that so many people hate me for. Dylan doesn't do that. Dylan doesn't hate me for anything.

I pull away, but I already miss him. That scares the shit out of me. A panic sets in. I just need a second—just *something* to clear my messed-up head. "You've given up so much for me. I feel like I haven't done anything for you."

"That's not what this relationship is," he says roughly. "Just tell me what you need, and I'll be that for you."

"You're perfect, Dylan." *I just don't know if I am*. He became the exact partner I needed. How much more can I take from him? "We should slow down," I finally say.

He tries to hide it, but I see the rejection rooting its place inside him. I hate myself for it. "You want to break up?"

"No!" I reach for him. "I would never want that. I just think we've been together for every second of this semester, and I can't seem to think straight when I'm with you."

"Tell me what you're thinking, and I'll sort it all out for you."

There's a fire in my chest. "It's not only about me. I want you to get to be *just* Dylan. We've gotten so tangled up in each other, I'd hate for either of us to lose any part of ourselves." *Like hockey.* It's an out; I'm letting him cut his losses early. He deserves that much.

Dylan swallows, his voice thick with emotion. "For you, I'll go at any pace you need. I'll match you stride for stride, baby. You can take your

time, but when you're done, I'll still be right here, waiting for you to fall back into my arms. Because there's no part of me I want to get back, if I'm losing the most important one."

He kisses my forehead and reluctantly lets me go. There's still something harder that lingers behind his eyes, but he doesn't stay long enough for me to see it. When the door clicks shut behind him, I take my propranolol, just in case, and I crawl back into bed. It's only when Scarlett comes home minutes later, and gets into bed with me, that I realize I'm crying. She doesn't ask what happened, and I know Dylan asked her to stay with me. Though I'm sure she was already planning on it because she hands me a family-size bag of Reese's peanut butter cups.

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FORTY-TWO

SIERRA

Dylan: I miss you, baby.
Dylan: Am I allowed to say that?

It's been three days since my conversation with Dylan when Scarlett tells me he stopped by the dorm while I was out. My boyfriend clearly doesn't know what taking it slow means. But as much as I'd love to forget everything and jump back into my his arms, I know this space is good for us. He probably thinks I'm being stubborn—that taking things slow after everything we've been through is pointless—but it's the only way I know to make him really think about what he's doing. About what he's losing.

"Ms. Romanova?" The receptionist calls my name.

I booked an appointment with Dr. Toor after Scarlett urged me that it was finally time. Shaking out my hands, I fight the need to clench them and follow the receptionist down the hall into the room with the lavender couch. I've been here countless times, but today is different.

She'll ask about skating. She always does. But that's not why I'm here today.

"Sierra." Dr. Toor greets me with a warm smile. "It's very nice to see you after our last session. I understand you've been skating again?"

She's always been like this, getting into the meat of the issue before I can even think to suppress it. "Yeah. I've been competing for a few months now."

"That's great to hear. I remember how badly you wanted to get back on the ice. But I imagine returning to competition is bringing up some strong feelings, and since I've been away, you haven't visited the therapist I referred to you."

Dr. Toor has seen me through the worst moments of my life. My parents wanted me to have someone to talk to, so they started bringing me here when I was a kid. I'd show up every few weeks, unloading my frustrations over missed jumps and failed rotations. I'm pretty sure she's witnessed every meltdown I've ever had over this sport. So, after she left for maternity leave, I didn't want to go back to square one with a new therapist.

"I think I'm handling it as best I can," I say. "Between propranolol, breathing techniques, and my skating partner—my boyfriend—it's helped a lot in handling it."

I know what I need to talk about. And for once, it's not skating.

"I'm glad to hear that," she says, crossing one leg over the other. "This is the first time I'm hearing about a relationship from you. Is that something you want to touch on? Balancing a professional and personal relationship with the same person?"

I want to back out. To pretend I'm fine, like I did during those last few sessions after the accident. "Pretty good," I murmur.

"Why pretty good? Why not great? Or just okay?" she prods.

I exhale. "Because I'm scared." The words come out quiet. "Dylan is taking this massive step by deciding to leave hockey to skate with me, and I worry he'll regret it."

"And has Dylan expressed regret? Has he ever made you feel like he's second-guessing his choice?"

"No," I say immediately. "But we've only been doing this for a few months. I know what it's like to be trapped in the cycle of winning and losing. People grow resentful. I'd hate for him to wake up one day and realize I made him give up hockey."

She tilts her head. "As a hockey player I'm sure he knows a thing or two about winning and losing. But is that a quality you think he possesses? To blame you?"

I shake my head. "Never. He's always reassuring me, supporting me, never letting me doubt him. He says he doesn't care about the scores. He just wants to skate with *me*."

Her lips curve. "And yet earlier, you said *he decided* to leave hockey. But now you're saying he'll resent *you* for *making* him. Why put that pressure on yourself? If he made this choice on his own, wouldn't he be the one responsible for it?"

I hate when she makes sense. “Dylan’s making this huge decision to skate with me, and I think he’s only doing it because he thinks I need him to. But I’m worried that if he pours his entire self into this—into me—I won’t be enough.” I hesitate before adding, “Like he’s water pouring into my glass, only to find out it’s cracked in a dozen places.”

“I can understand that your past can make you feel unsteady. But what makes you feel like you’re not enough? That you possess all these *cracks*?”

I swallow down the lump in my throat. “I don’t know. Every time I think about it, I feel like I’m too much and not enough at the same time. The accident changed me. Dylan’s going to have to deal with so much more than he signed up for. If my ex-partner could barely handle the old me, the new one is ten times harder. Nobody wants to constantly cater to someone’s anxiety and PTSD—especially when I’m surrounded by my triggers every day.”

Dr. Toor jots something down. “Okay. Let’s unpack this. But first, your fears aren’t irrational, Sierra. After everything you’ve been through, it’s commendable how much you’ve overcome. But humans are complex. Our brains are complex. We spend a lifetime trying to understand ourselves. So why do you think someone wouldn’t want to take the time to know you?”

“Because people don’t want to do that.”

“What people?”

“Everyone,” I say with a sigh. “*Justin*. I wasn’t enough for him to stay, and since he left, he’s doing great. He and his new partner made it to the Grand Prix. Dylan and I didn’t.”

“So, you think Justin removing you from his life helped him achieve his goals? Didn’t you two make it to the Grand Prix together a few years back?”

“We won twice. But that was before—” I tap my temple.

“Before the accident,” she finishes gently. “And because of the accident—because of what you’ve been through—you think you’re less worthy? That you became … a burden?”

The word stings. “My body betrayed me. My brain betrayed me. And now I have to work twice as hard to be half as good. Meanwhile, Justin moved on. Maybe he was right to leave. Maybe I was too much.”

She tilts her head. “You say your body betrayed you. That your brain betrayed you. But think about that for a second. You suffered a traumatic

injury, and yet, here you are. You're skating again. Competing again. In a loving relationship. Living your life."

"Barely," I murmur.

"No," she says, firmer now. "Not *barely*. You made the decision to train again. To push through the fear. If anything, your body and brain have been working *for* you, not against you."

I frown. "It doesn't feel like that. My body locks up when I don't want it to. My brain sends me into spirals I can't stop."

"But would you say it's gotten easier? Recognizing the triggers?"

I hesitate. "Yeah. I barely notice some of the ones that used to give me panic attacks."

"Yet you talk about your brain and body like they're separate from you—like they're against you. They're not trying to hurt you. They just don't always know what's safe until you allow yourself to believe it."

Something heavy settles in my chest.

"You don't need to fight yourself," she continues. "You need to tell your brain and body that you're safe now. That stepping on the ice isn't the same as falling. That letting Dylan in isn't the same as being abandoned. That trusting yourself won't always lead to pain."

I exhale, slow and shaky. The rest of the session makes me confront everything I've shoved down for months. She tells me to restart my old journal, just to see the contrast in what I may write now. When Scarlett picks me up after, I know I'm not magically fixed. But for the first time in a long time, I think maybe I don't have to be. Maybe I just need to trust that I can be okay.

Sierra: I miss you too, Dylan.

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FORTY-THREE

DYLAN

I'VE NEVER HAD a girlfriend before, but it's been three days without her, and I feel like I can't breathe. She said it's not a breakup, but it damn near feels like one. Now I understand why people reconnect with nature after getting dumped. I've been on two hikes with Summer, who went easy on me this time because she felt bad.

But even if Sierra had wanted to break up, I'd never let her do it so easily. Especially over something like this. She stays behind the wall of her past like it'll keep her safe, but she doesn't know that I'd break through anything to get to her. It's us or nothing, and I don't give a fuck if that sounds possessive. She's mine, every goddamn inch of her.

If she wants to be.

In the spirit of taking things slow, I dropped an entire box of Reese's peanut butter cups; a *Tangled* Lego flower; and a framed, signed picture of me and Dale Thunderman. Yeah, I chased the man down.

Kian and I went to the news station yesterday and waited six hours to see him. I promised Kian that we'd visit the animal shelter after to find him a cat. When we finally arrived, Dale Thunderman was all styled hair, gleaming white teeth, and a voice I'm sure would narrate one of Summer's romance novels. Is that why Sierra watches him? Am I jealous of a middle-aged weatherman? Much to my dismay, the man was charming as hell. When I told him my girlfriend is a fan, he said he gets that all the time and happily took a picture. I'm pretty sure Kian has a crush on him now. That's why he got a picture for himself and then asked to record a video.

I don't know if Sierra's seen it yet, because she texted that she was going to her parents' house. It took everything in me not to drive straight there,

but her mom texted that she was okay.

On top of all that, tonight is the vow renewal. The tuxedo my dad delivered during his visit lies on my bed, patiently awaiting my decision.

My hair is still damp from the shower, so I run a towel through it. It's long now, curling at the ends even as I try to push it back. The length reminds me of my dad's. My mom would joke about it being the perfect leash and he'd bow his head to her level, gladly letting her lead the way to whatever corner of the house she wanted him to fix something in. If I wasn't so jaded, I'd probably still believe that he built my mom our first house with his bare hands. The same house I grew up in, the one with Kian's and my heights tacked onto the bedroom door frame.

A reminder chimes on my phone that sits on the bedside table, breaking through my thoughts. I still haven't answered the text from Ada asking me if I changed my mind about tonight. I stand there, trapped in indecision, staring at my reflection in the full-length mirror. My mom's words echo in my mind, giving me the final push I need. Just as I button the crisp white shirt, a knock sounds at my door.

"Yeah?"

Kian peeks in first, his eyes sweeping the room before he pushes the door open. Aiden and Summer trail behind, dressed in their best clothes for the event but carrying an air of uncertainty. My friends don't say a word as they step inside. The three of them settle onto the edge of my bed, their figures reflected in the mirror.

"It's not a funeral," I say.

"It isn't fair that you have to go after everything he's put you guys through," Kian replies, loosening his tie with a restless hand, his eyes flicking to his phone for the third time.

"It's fine. I'm going for my mom." My voice wavers, betraying my uncertainty. Being there might only weigh heavier on my mom's already fragile heart because I know I won't be able to mask what I'm thinking.

When my parents sent out the invitations, it didn't take long for my friends to figure out why I'd been in such a dark mood. I had told my dad not to make this a big deal, but of course, Darragh Donovan doesn't do anything small. Especially when what he's trying to keep hidden is so much bigger.

"You can still bail. We'll do something else," Aiden says, his voice careful. He's giving me an out I won't allow myself to take.

“I need to do this,” I say, though I’m not sure if it’s for me or for my mom. That letter is still weighing on me, and I can almost hear her voice in my head. It’s driving me crazy, and I need it to end. I want it all to stop.

“We can grab fast food and do some karaoke,” Summer suggests.

Kian chuckles as he tucks his phone away with a more optimistic attitude. “I was going to suggest we get drunk, but Sunny’s idea is great too.”

Summer swats him with her purse, and Aiden shoots him a disapproving look. The mention of alcohol seems to have them on edge, but I know it has nothing to do with the substance and a lot to do with how I used to use it to avoid this exact thing.

“Thanks, but the sooner it’s over, the sooner I can forget about it,” I say. “And we can still drink all the champagne at the open bar.”

“Hell yeah we can,” Kian affirms with enthusiasm.

As I slide on my tux jacket, each of them gives me a reassuring pat on the back before exiting my room. The last thing on my bed is my bow tie, and I fumble with it as I attempt to fasten it around my neck and under my shirt’s collar. After two failed attempts, I stuff it in my pocket, grab the car keys, and head for the door.

My friends are still inside when I walk out the front door, busy checking on the stove and anything else left unattended as I descend the porch steps. I’m about to unlock the doors of my Range Rover, when the sight of red in the driveway catches my eye.

Sierra stands there, her black hair neatly styled in a low bun with two strands framing her face. The warmth of her complexion contrasts with the bold red of her full lips. Her matching red dress, with thin straps that show off her collarbones, hugs her body in all the right places and ends just short of her ankles. Black heels lift her a few inches, putting her almost as high as her skates usually do.

“You’re here,” I say.

“Heard you needed a date,” she replies softly.

Just then, my friends clatter down the steps. Sierra’s gaze follows them with a hint of apprehension, and although it’s subtle, I notice her slight retreat as they gather behind me.

Kian mutters “finally” under his breath before he shoves his phone back in his pocket.

“We’ll take my truck,” Aiden says, gently taking the arm Summer was using to nudge him, and ushers her to his truck.

In four slow steps, I close the distance between Sierra and me until the tips of my shoes touch hers. Her cherry scent envelopes me. “You look …” I trail off, unable to find the words.

“Easy?” Sierra jokes, her uncertainty fading a little.

A weight slips from my shoulders. “I was going to say hot.”

She raises a brow.

“And beautiful.” My eyes drag down her dress, then back to her face. “And perfect.”

Her smile makes the blush-pink apples of her cheeks rise, and I swallow hard to keep from saying something else that may be very inappropriate for our “taking it slow” phase.

“No bow tie?” she asks.

I shrug, but she must read something on my face, because her hand dips inside my pocket. The silken ends of the black bow tie slip between her fingers as she lets her hands slide up my chest to lift the collar of my shirt. Our eyes lock, and I can hear my pulse in my ears. *I miss you. Put me out of my misery. Let me be everything for you*, I want to say as she slides it around my neck, evening out the ends.

“When I was twelve,” she begins, “I did a charity showcase, and my short program was to ‘Circus’ by Britney Spears. I refused to wear a clip-on bow tie, so I got pretty good at tying these things.”

“I’d pay good money to see that.”

Sierra expertly loops the tie. “Stick around and I might show you for free.”

I graze her cheek. “I intend to.”

Her emerald gaze catches mine, and I know she’s taking the words for what they are. A promise. Then, when I can’t take the heady rush of being this close to her, I lean down to taste her red lips, but the honk of an irritating car horn stops me midway.

“What is wrong with you?” I hear an irritated Summer hiss just as the truck windows roll down. Aiden pinches the bridge of his nose, clearly trying to hold back a headache, while Kian leans into the driver’s side window, the soft country music spilling out.

“Sorry to interrupt, but we need directions. I’m starving,” Kian says.

If looks could kill, the one I’m sending him right now would do the trick, though Kian couldn’t care less. But when Sierra laughs, a real, unrestrained laugh, nothing else really matters. Her white teeth contrast with her red lips as she smiles so brightly, I can’t help but mirror her expression.

“We should go before Kian eats your friends,” she says with a slight shiver.

I pull off my coat, wrapping it around her before she can protest. I help her into the car before jogging around to the driver’s side. As I pull out, Aiden’s truck follows closely behind. I hand Sierra my phone, and she settles on the playlist I made for her all those weeks ago.

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FORTY-FOUR

SIERRA

ONE LOOK AT those amber brown eyes and the smile he reserves just for me, and I'm a goner. All the anxiety was worth it. I'd drown before I made this day about that and not Dylan. Because when I met Dylan, he didn't crawl into my mind and try to strangle my anxiety. He calmed it with the gentlest touch and treated it like any other emotion in my mind, with pure kindness.

So, when Kian called to remind me about the vow renewal and how I had to show up or I'd lose the honor of being his new cat's third godmother, I didn't argue. Though no part of me forgot the look on Dylan's face after I read his mom's letter. I wanted to be there for him as his girlfriend, no matter if I was still irritated as hell at him for quitting hockey without telling me.

When we arrive at the outdoor venue in Manhattan, set up with clear tents and fairy lights, I give Dylan's hand on my thigh a final squeeze. He exits the car, but before he can even shut it, Kian's already opening my door.

"Thanks for coming," he says as I take his hand, and he helps me out of the car.

"Thanks for the guilt trip," I say.

Kian tenses. Probably recalling how he said if I didn't come, I would make a pretty terrible skating partner. He was right. "I'm sorry if I made you feel—"

"No, you were right. I needed the reality check. I'm just surprised you had it in you."

"I've been told I'm an expert in persuasion."

Dylan rounds the car and aims an irritated look at his best friend. Kian pulls me into the tightest hug and then walks away, the gravel crunching under his shoes. I move to give Dylan back his tux jacket, but he shakes his head. I sigh, half-heartedly rolling my eyes.

"Sorry about him," Dylan says, shutting my car door and locking it.

"Don't be. I owe him. He'd do anything for you, you know? People like that don't come around often."

"I know." For a moment, his hand lifts, as if to touch me, but it falters. His fingers retreat, and the hesitation hangs in the air. As if he's remembering how we left off the last time I saw him. But his eyes betray him. Because he looks at me the way he does on the ice—awestruck.

Inside, the appetizers float around the room, and we stand by a far table. We greet Dylan's sister, Ada. She beams brightly when she sees me, and elbows Dylan, who only gives her a tight smile. His parents are a few seats down with men I assume are his uncles and parents' friends. I can't help but notice there isn't anyone here who seems to know his mom. She stands quietly by his dad like an accessory.

"You okay?" I ask Dylan, who's been nursing the same glass of champagne.

"Look at her, she's fucking miserable," he spits out, his gaze fixed on his mom. She shifts closer to her husband, only to be nudged away. The look on her face pierces my chest and has a worse effect on Dylan.

Ada touches his shoulder, but he moves away. "This was a bad idea." His hasty move makes the empty champagne glasses fall onto the table.

"Let's just go," says Aiden just as everyone else agrees. Dylan shakes his head, anger radiating off him in a way I've only seen a glimpse of at his hockey game. I step closer, my heartbeat hammering against my ribs. When I reach for his hand, I hope he knows I'd stand by him just like he does for me.

I take the final step, my hand feathering over his fist, and his tightly curled fingers loosen. His gaze is questioning, guilty, and somehow worried. But then he unfurls his hand and intertwines his fingers with mine. Relief loosens the tension in my body. The exhale that leaves my lips is unintentional, but he sees it for exactly what it is: a moment of vulnerability.

But then he looks over to where his mom watches him, and he pulls away. Ada catches my eye, and I give her a reassuring smile, but she

doesn’t buy it.

Dylan stands abruptly. He must see the look on my face, because he kisses my forehead. “I just need a second alone, babe.”

And as much as I don’t want to, I let him go. The farther he walks, the more he pulls at the string in my chest that feels connected to his, and an anxious weight tumbles into my stomach. I watch his back until he disappears, and I don’t realize how long I stare until a warm hand touches mine.

Leyla Donovan watches me with a motherly warmth.

Her white dress drapes her body like a silhouette, and its lace sleeves flare out. She’s stunning. A little frail now, but I know if we were to rewind time, she’d be hard to look away from.

“With the way my son was looking at you, I knew I had to come say hi.” She holds my hand, palm up, her gaze tracing it, and it takes a moment before I see what she’s looking at.

“It’s not a tattoo,” I blurt. “Just something Dylan drew on my hand. It’s silly.”

“No, it’s not silly.” She smiles, touching the tiny retraced smiley face on my palm. “He used to draw the same thing on my hand.”

I blink. “He did?”

“I had a habit of clenching my fists when I’d get upset. Sometimes, a little too hard and my nails left bloody indents on my palms. Dylan was young, and it must have hurt him to see someone he loved hurt themselves, so one day, he came to me with a pen and I watched him trace this smiley face on the center of my palm. He’d say, ‘It’s for the next time you forget that you’re hurting yourself by digging your nails into your palms. You’ll be hurting him too.’”

My heart feels like it’s been pierced by one of my ribs. My palm suddenly feels heavier than ever, and I have the urge to tattoo the damn thing on my palm.

I stare at her, stunned. “I had no idea.”

“You’re the figure skater, right? Sierra. I’ve seen you two on TV.”

“You watched our performance?”

She nods again, then stares into my eyes like she’s reading my soul. I don’t dare move. “Take care of him, Sierra. He’ll be good to you. I promise.”

Leyla steps away, her dress flowing behind her. She stands next to Dylan's dad, but he doesn't bother to acknowledge her as he talks to his guests.

When the time ticks closer to eight, everyone moves to the seating area by the altar. It's been eighteen minutes since Dylan left, and I'm getting more anxious by the second. But when I'm about to call his phone again, he comes to sit beside me.

Dylan's leg is shaking. When I press my palm into his, he squeezes it so tightly it kind of hurts, but I don't have the heart to tell him. Aiden, Summer, and Kian are close behind us, and every so often, they pat his shoulder in a silent show of support.

Ada's sitting on the other side of Dylan, and she seems about just as uncomfortable as him. She's been playing with the hem of her silk dress the entire time. Then, when the piano plays, we stiffen. That's when I fully see Darragh and notice that his blond hair and blue eyes are a stark contrast to Dylan's, but they're nearly identical in every other way. The man's got the same broad shoulders, strong jawline, and aquiline nose. I think his dad is just an inch or two shorter. Cold, piercing blue eyes find us, and he looks at Dylan, who's ignoring him, then at me, and I kind of want to shrink into a speck of dust, but also give him the finger.

"You okay?" I whisper when Dylan's grip tightens. "Because I may or may not have a working hand after this."

As if my voice is the only thing that penetrates his thoughts, he loosens his hold immediately. "I'm sorry, baby. I didn't realize." He kisses my hand, soothing the redness. His mother's words flutter back to me.

"I probably deserve it with how many times I've almost broken your hand in the kiss-and-cry."

Dylan exhales an amused breath, like he's trying to be present with me but can't forget where we are right now. He soothes a hand over mine, so gentle, I feel it more than when he was squeezing it. "You could never deserve any type of pain, Sierra."

"Neither could you." We watch each other for so long, I almost don't hear the piano playing again. But Dylan does, because his leg starts to shake, and when he turns to look at his mom, he freezes.

Her gaze doesn't look for her husband. She finds Dylan first. Her lips lift into an almost elated smile, but then Dylan drops his gaze back down, and it's like something hits her.

When Leyla reaches the end of the aisle, his dad smiles softly, taking her hands. She doesn't even look at him. Her eyes are locked on Dylan, but he won't meet her gaze. The seconds drag as the minister's voice drones on.

And then, without warning, Dylan lets go of my hand. Before I can react, he's walking—straight toward his dad. The guys curse behind me.

"Are you happy now?" Dylan says to his dad, cutting off the minister.

The whole place grows deafeningly silent, and the guests watch the scene like a daily soap. It irritates me that they stand there watching someone who's clearly hurting, as if he's the problem. Ada gets up from her seat to stand next to her brother.

"Dylan," his mom scolds.

"You're just like him. You both will do anything to keep up this act of being the perfect couple, yet you're living in that apartment locked away while he goes and fucks whoever he wants."

"That's enough!" his dad shouts.

"Fuck. You," Dylan spits out. That's when his friends start to reach for him, and even as he pushes them off, they don't let up. His dad starts to say things about his drinking, about his impulsiveness, but Dylan breaks out of his friends' hold

"You think you're better than me?" His dad continues with a sardonic chuckle. "Look at you. Look at your mom's, your friends', your girlfriend's faces—the fear in their eyes. You're just as bad as me—"

That's when Dylan lands a punch square on his dad's jaw.

There's a collective gasp that resonates in the tent, the loudest coming from his mom, who falls to her knees beside her husband, who's spitting blood from his busted lip.

But this time when the guys pull Dylan away, he lets them. Seeing his mom pulls him out of his anger, like he only just now realizes what he's doing.

He finds my wide-eyed stare and looks away just as quickly like he can't bear it.

I follow his friends out toward the parking lot. Ada is by his side, and he tells her he'll take her home, but she refuses, saying she needs to stay with their mom. Dylan swallows and reluctantly pulls away from their hug to let her go back inside.

"I'll drive his car," says Aiden.

The drive back to the house is tossed with a heavy mixture of sympathy and tension. As I reach over to Dylan in the passenger seat, he doesn't acknowledge the touch. He simply shifts so my hand slips off his shoulder. Summer immediately places her palm over my hand, and even as I give her a reassuring smile, something shatters in my chest.

When we pull into the driveway, we exit quickly into the cold night air, but just as Kian pulls in behind us, there's something harsh that settles in the air. When I reach out to take Dylan's hand, he pulls away.

My heart sinks to the cement.

"You should go home, Sierra."

An ache pries open my chest. *I thought I was home.*

"This isn't what you wanted. You wanted things slow, right?" he says, jaw tight. "I swore I'd never be like him. I'm trying to be different, someone better for you. But the *physical*, violent guy you saw tonight and that everyone's seen on the ice? That's who I am. That's your boyfriend."

"No, it isn't," I argue. "You're nothing like that. You're nothing like your dad. Whatever it is you think I should do, I'm saying no. I'm not leaving you." He thought I was scared of him? Even now, with his hair all mussed and his reddened eyes, he looks devastatingly young. My heart gallops, and I realize I won't be able to bear it if he doesn't want me here.

"I shouldn't have asked you to come," he says regretfully.

"You didn't. I came because I'll go wherever you go. I know the real you, and I'm staying for him." I want him to know I'm here for this version of him too. I'm here for every version.

"You want to stay?" he asks. "After you saw all that shit? My fucked-up family?"

"Last time I checked, you don't tell me what to do, Donovan. Just let me take care of you like you take care of me for once."

Something cracks in him at my words. His shoulders slump inward in a silent surrender. In the dark, his eyes hold none of the anger from earlier, just something achingly vulnerable.

"I never wanted you to see me like this," he admits.

"Listen to me," I say, holding his face in my hands. "You're the sweetest man I know, and anyone who thinks otherwise can go fuck themselves. And trust me, if you didn't put your dad in his place, I would have."

Dylan gives a tired chuckle, caressing my face so gently, a shiver racks through me. "Can I kiss you now, or are we still taking things slow?"

I sigh. “Nothing has ever been slow with you, Donovan. You pretty much made sure that was going to be impossible. But this doesn’t mean you’re off the hook. Even if you did get me that Dale Thunderman autograph.”

“I’ll grovel for as long as you want.” Dylan kisses me like he’s tasting the flavors of a rainbow. I’m pretty sure my feet leave the ground. And I realize it’s true when he’s carrying me into the house.

Inside, his friends are sitting in silence in the living room, coats thrown on the couches and ties undone. Summer is the first to hug Dylan, and then the guys surround him. I watch how he has more of a family right here than he did at that party.

He looks exhausted when he pulls back, and then with his hand outstretched toward me, I take it and follow him to his room. I help Dylan unbutton his shirt, and he helps me out of my dress.

“You’re the best thing in my life,” he whispers against my temple when we’re in bed. “And if you’re still second-guessing this, I want you to know that your dreams are as much for me as they are for you. I want to see you win, on every podium, proving that you’re everything you imagined. I am your biggest fan and your greatest supporter. You’re destined for greatness, and I want you to achieve it all with me by your side. It’s you or nothing for me. I love you more than you’ll ever know.”

All the heaviness in my brain and body has forced me to push away love when it’s the only thing I’ve craved. It’s like the chaos in my head is where I wanted to stay, even when it gets too much to bear. But I guess I always thought it was easier to stay stuck than let someone see all the cracks.

But this time, I won’t let that happen. I don’t let that instinct take over. Because the way Dylan loves me makes me want to love myself for the first time.

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FORTY-FIVE

DYLAN

LAST NIGHT FELT heavy and unbearable, but with Sierra there, it didn't crush me. I never wanted her near any of that or to see that side of me. But she stood on my driveway, stubborn as fuck, refusing to leave. I know this girl inside out, yet she still has the power to break me open so easily.

Sierra wakes, and I'm met with my personal kryptonite. It's seconds before she's pressed into the mattress and saying my name, just the way I like it. She watches me as I kiss her stomach, and her scar. An idea pops into my head—something I'd been hoping, fucking praying, to try with her if I had her under me again.

"I want you to say yes to me," I say.

Sierra tilts her head. "For what?"

"I want you to try something. Do you trust me?" Suddenly, I'm desperate to hear the answer.

"Always," she says easily. Then, as though she feels like I need it, her hand presses against my jaw. "My body doesn't feel like it's in pain when I'm with you. It's almost as if your kisses make my scars fade."

That's when I think I could love this girl forever if she let me.

I move before I can second-guess myself, going to my far drawer, and before she even sees it, I slip a blindfold over her eyes. Her breath hitches, and I swear my heart skips a beat. "If it doesn't feel right, tell me, and it's gone. No questions."

I wait for a beat, and I'm about to take it off, but then she smiles. "I like it."

The words constrict my damn airway. I've done this before with established safe words, but with Sierra I wouldn't take the chance of her not

using it just to please me. When I'm with her, all I want is to unravel her pleasure, to feel every moan and shiver beneath my touch. That's what gets me off. "If it's too much, say Dale."

She chuckles. "I know I'm safe with you, Dylan."

"But you'll use it if you need to?"

"Yes. Now, will you *please* touch me?"

"Always so polite when you need me, huh?" I kiss her then and drop to my knees, caressing her strong legs along the way.

"W-what are you doing?" she asks, moving back on the mattress.

"I've been bad." My voice rumbles against her soft skin. "And I want to prove to you that I can be good."

"Dylan," she practically moans, chest heaving, but I'm already lifting up her T-shirt. Her black panties are barely a scrap, and I have the urge to rip them with my teeth. But I'm being good right now.

"Will you let me be good for you, baby? Please?"

Sierra makes a breathy noise. "Yes."

I pull down the wet scrap of underwear. "Tell me what to do."

She only breathes at first, and when I tighten my grip on her legs, she gasps. "I want you to make me come."

I kiss the inside of her thigh. "Anything else?"

"I—" She gasps when I press my lips over her clit.

"What was that?" I ask.

"Dylan, *please*."

"I know, baby." I put one of her legs on my shoulder. "But I want you to ask for it." My breath leaves goose bumps her skin, and she shivers. I do it again.

"I want you to fuck me," she says on a gasp, clearly aroused from the faintest sensation.

"Was that so hard?" I say, and even with a blindfold, I know she's rolling her eyes.

Her tits are so close, I feel desperate to taste them. Probably fuck them too.

"Are you just gonna look, or are you going to do something?" She says it with all that fucking attitude.

I can't wait to make her beg. But then she drags her fingers up her stomach to her tits, squeezing and moaning, and I think I go unconscious.

My touch is slow, deliberate, searching. The warm center between her legs contracts when my fingers brush the wetness. The small squeak of surprise that leaves her only sends a spark down my spine. I lift her other leg over my shoulder, jerking her forward so she's right where I need her. I haven't even started, and her legs are shaking.

"Relax, baby," I whisper against her thigh, watching her shiver. Seeing her every reaction to me is my favorite thing. I don't think I've loved anything more.

With both her legs on my shoulders, and my hands on her waist, I lift her up. Sierra fists my hair so tight, it stings. She's been lifted by me so many times, but right now, she's trembling. When her back hits the wall, she gasps. I grip her thighs and taste her, right there against the wall. She throws her head back and grinds her pussy against my face, riding it, chasing the high.

I'm in heaven, I'm pretty sure.

Her heel digs into my back, and when her legs start to quiver, I know she's close. That's when I push two fingers inside her and feel her orgasm in my mouth.

It's sweet like cherries.

Back on the bed, I pull down my boxers. I tuck a pillow under her lower back and press a hand to her navel before I slide into her, slow and controlled. I watch myself fuck her, hearing her cries of pleasure and the way her hand wraps tight around my wrist.

"I need to see you," she gasps.

I lean forward, pushing in hard, slipping off the blindfold to see her pupils dilated, almost entirely black. She grabs my face before she's even oriented and kisses me. Sierra doesn't hold back. The sounds that leave her are fucking pornographic, and I barely stop myself from coming right then. I try my best to keep her moaning for me as long as possible, and by the end of it, when I come apart, I'm kissing *I love you*s into her skin.

"You still mean that?" she asks suddenly. "That you love me?"

"Always."

"You're sure?"

I almost laugh. "Let me help you understand, Sierra." Her bottom lip quivers as if the way I'm looking at her is too much.

"The first time I really saw you, it was when you were doing something you love. Seeing you on that ice, like a wisp of smoke, so quick and

confident, it was everything. When I look at you, that is what I see. The talented, determined girl who clawed her way back to where she belongs and made sure everyone knew it. You're kind, and warm, and gentle even if you don't think you are. I love you for the way you guard your heart. I love you for every time you've given me shit right back. I love you for never backing down. I love you through all the times you can't seem to catch your breath, and through every setback on the ice."

"And you want to skate with me?"

I smile. "I want to do a lot more than just skate with you, Sierra."

"You're serious? Because I'm not nice. I overthink a lot. Sometimes I can barely breathe on my own. And if I'm not skating, I spend a lot of time watching Dale Thunderman and knitting winter essentials."

"Well, you're skating with me. Let me think, so you can breathe. And I've become pretty fond of Dale and gloves. Is that all?"

"Probably not," she mutters.

"Give me everything you got, Sierra, and I'll show you how much I'd carry for you."

This time when a tear falls onto Sierra's cheek, she doesn't brush it away. "I know it may seem like I don't care the same way you do," she says in a soft voice. One I barely ever hear her speak in. I prefer when Sierra is loud and unapologetic. I like her exactly the way she is. No amendment. "But I care if you're hurt. I care if you feel like I'm pushing you away. I care a lot."

"I know, baby."

"Do you? Because I know you say you like that I can be kind of mean, but it won't make me feel good if it hurts you."

God, I love this girl. "Just you, Sierra. That's all I want."

"I know I haven't said it back. Trust me, I know that makes me a shitty girlfriend, but I promise—"

"Don't." I cup her face between my hands. "I like you exactly as you are. Guarded heart and guarded words. There's no time limit with us."

"But I'd hate for you to think that I'm not in this as much as you. I am."

"I know that. You never need to prove anything to me, Sierra. Let me be the one to take your guard down." I take her hand and press it over my beating heart. The one that's been going for her since the first moment I laid eyes on her.

To me, love isn’t something that fits into one neat box. I don’t love her the same way I love my parents. That love is complicated, broken, and tangled in old wounds, bound by unspoken conditions. The love I share with my friends is easy, unconditional, and full of care. But the love I feel for Sierra is different. It’s the rhythm of my heart, the air I breathe—it’s the love I hold closest. It’s simple, never fragmented, and it comes with only one condition: I’ll love her as long as she lets me, and probably forever after that—even if she doesn’t feel the same. This love isn’t about kisses or hand-holding or even sex. It’s something deeper, something that lives in my bones, earned through what I do, not just what I say.

Sierra curls into me like I’m something safe. “I’m afraid that this is all a dream, that soon I’ll open my eyes and you won’t be here anymore.”

I brush a soft tendril from her cheek. “If you want me to stand here every single day and tell you over and over that I care, that I’m proud of you, that I could never see you hurt, and that your dreams have become my dreams because you feel them so purely, I will. I’ll say it as loud or as gently as you want me to.” My knuckles skim her jawline. “With as many kisses as you want.” I lean in to softly press my lips to hers. “With as many hugs as you need.” I wrap her in my arms. “With every word I can think of. It’s all for you, Sierra.”

BUNNY PATROL

Aiden Crawford: You all better be headed to Summer’s carnival.
Kian Ishida: That’s today?
Dylan Donovan: Ah shit, I’m tied up.
Cole Carter: When are you not tied up is the real question.
Sebastian Hayes: Now that we’re on the topic, I would like to take Eli’s old room.
Kian Ishida: We’re not on the topic.
Dylan Donovan: Quit complaining, Seb. Our shared wall is not that thin.
Sebastian Hayes: Trust me, it is.
Eli Westbrook: Just take my room.
Kian Ishida: No way! Don’t you fucking dare touch it. Take that back, Eli!
Sebastian Hayes: Sentimental dick. 🖕
Kian Ishida: 🫶
Aiden Crawford: Hello? Summer’s carnival. Don’t fucking miss it.
Kian Ishida: Aye aye, Captain.
Dylan Donovan: We know. She already threatened us with bodily harm if we forgot.

“You’ve seriously never been on a date before?” Sierra asks.

I help her out of the car. “Never.”

“Me neither,” she says, and I give her a look. “I mean, one of the classic dates. A carnival is the perfect one. I’ll even win you one of the stuffed animals.”

“I think I’m supposed to win it for you,” I say.

“Not if I beat you.” Then Sierra points to the Ferris wheel. “We have to go on that.”

“I support that,” Summer says, walking over to us. “The Ferris wheel is good luck.”

Kian slings arm over Summer’s shoulders. “Man, I love these carnivals. Last semester’s kissing booth was great,” he says.

“We didn’t have a kissing booth last year. We’ve never had one,” Summer points out.

“Really?” He scratches his head. “Huh.”

When we walk in, the first thing we see is Tyler Sampson sitting in the dunk tank. I bark out a laugh. “How’d you manage that?” I ask Summer. It’s mid-November, so no one volunteers for the tank.

“He deserved it, but oddly enough, he volunteered.” I’m guessing she found out about Amara and Sampson. He seems to be repenting for getting with her best friend.

His gaze is so intently fixed somewhere far away, he’s barely even fazed by the cold. Then Amara shows up with a dozen baseballs in a pail, and it all makes sense.

She strikes out. Eight times. “This shit is rigged!” she shouts.

Summer laughs and takes her turn but misses too. Amara groans in frustration.

“Looks like you’ll have to see me wet another time, sweetheart,” Sampson taunts.

“You’re not following through, Amara,” I offer. “Lift your elbow and engage your core.”

Sampson gives me the finger. And just as I give it back, Amara hits the target dead center, and he’s dunked. She cheers, and when a soaked Sampson pulls himself out of the water, he’s simmering. Amara gasps before running off. Sampson chases her with the widest smile I’ve ever seen him give anyone.

“I think they’re going to kill each other,” Sierra says.

“That’s what makes it worth it,” I say, peering down at her as she holds on to my arm. We walk to a game of hoop shot. We play three rounds, and we tie every single time. At another booth we play duck hunt, where we use air rifles to shoot the moving duck target. We get so competitive, the freshman working the booth begs us to just take a stuffed animal and leave so the long line of people can have a shot.

Sierra giggles all the way to the Ferris wheel, sharing her churro with me. Then when we’re in the car, and we ascend to the top, she plays with the strings of her scarf, avoiding eye contact.

“Don’t tell me you’re scared of carnival rides.”

She laughs, her pretty green eyes glittering. “No. Well, technically, I was scared of heights until you came along.”

“Then what’s got you so quiet? You know I like hearing your voice.”

She holds on to my arm tight, taking the deepest, most contented sigh. “I’m just happy. I don’t ever want this to end.”

I smooth a palm across her face. “I can make that happen. I’ll tip the ride operator, and we can stay here as long as you want, babe.”

Sierra shakes her head with an amused smile. “I mean with you.”

“I’m keeping you forever, Sierra. You don’t need to worry about that.” I intertwine our fingers and kiss her knuckles. Then her eyes water. “Don’t cry, baby.”

She sniffles “Sorr—I mean, I’ve just never felt this. It’s like my chest is going to burst.”

“That sounds like a medical emergency, Romanova,” I note.

Sierra smacks my arm, hard. “I’m trying to say that I love you, you idiot.”

I don’t know what I thought would happen when I heard those words, but it’s definitely not losing my motor functions. I can’t speak, can’t move, can barely remember to blink.

She *loves* me.

I swallow the thickness in my throat. “Yeah?”

“So much that I’m kind of annoyed at you for making me an emotional sap. All I have to do is think of you and how much effort you put into people without expecting anything in return. You made me love myself because you make it look so easy. I want to love you just as much. I want you to know that it doesn’t have to be complicated and messy or what your

parents made you think it is. It can be this, just you and me, showing up for each other every day. No matter what."

My throat feels tight when I finally speak. "I know I don't have many firsts to give you, but I want you to be my last. No matter what. I love you too, Sierra." She turns to kiss me then, and I sink deep into the kiss.

I kiss her the entire time, long enough that the operator doesn't say a word about us staying on. I don't know how many rounds we take, but when we get off, Sierra stops suddenly. I almost knock her over. She answers her phone, and with one *okay*, she hangs up and stares at it. It's a whole three minutes before her hands shake, and she tucks the stuffed chameleon under her arm.

"What's wrong?" I ask, trying to see who called her.

"It was Lidia." She turns to me slowly. "Justin and Julia are disqualified," she says. "We just secured a wild card entry to the ISU Grand Prix."

Maybe Summer is right, the Ferris wheel is good luck.

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FORTY-SIX

SIERRA

IT'S MIDNIGHT WHEN I nudge my boyfriend awake with a pair of shears in my grip.

Dylan stirs, pats the empty space beside him, then snaps his head toward me. He blinks.

We've spent this past week training to prepare for the Grand Prix. I've barely been sleeping since we found out we're the new host pick. It turns out, both Julia and Justin were dabbling in a performance enhancer called trimetazidine. Somehow, they got away with it for the entire season, but the closer they got, the more desperate they grew. Justin had been on his high horse since I partnered with Dylan after his failed drug test, but now he's ruined his career. They've been in hiding since the news broke. But none of that matters because it's me and Dylan in their spot now, and we won't screw it up.

During our meeting with Lidia, we were surprised to see her so giddy while outlining our plan for the Grand Prix. We're performing as Rapunzel and Flynn but adjusting our final lift to boost scores. I made Dylan practice the new lift with me on a mattress at the house. That didn't last long, because he quickly pinned me to it.

"I love it when you point sharp things at me," Dylan drawls, his voice thick with sleep. "But I thought you just wanted to cuddle tonight?" The bathroom light illuminates the lazy slant of his smile, the heavy-lidded warmth in his eyes, and the way he watches me like I'm the only thing worth looking at.

How did I get so lucky that he was the one who found me?

I roll my eyes. "Do you ever think about anything else?"

“Not when you’re looking at me like that.” Dylan’s gaze roams over me, slow and shameless, as he folds his arms behind his head. “Care to explain why you’re threatening me with scissors? Or should I lay down a towel and let you have your way with me?”

“I want you to cut my hair,” I say.

Dylan sits up, the comforter pooling at his waist as he tugs me forward. I brace for hesitation, for a joke, for a *You sure about this?* Maybe even a protest that he likes it long, or that I should sleep on it.

Instead, he replies, “Okay.”

No hesitation. No questions. Just *okay*. Dylan takes the scissors and leads me to his bathroom. My gaze coasts over the broad lines of his bare back, the way his boxers hang on his hips, and the muscles in his thighs.

The bathroom is still steamy from our shower. Dylan wipes the mirror and pulls me in front of it. We’ve stood here countless times before, but now a dull feeling of anxiety swirls in my stomach. His hands rest on either side of me on the marble countertop. His breath brushes my neck, then he trails three slow kisses along my jaw.

“How short?” he asks, his warm chest pressing gently against my back.

The metal shears on the counter catch the light, their cold gleam making my fingers twitch at my sides, doubt curling in the edges of my resolve. A part of me hoped he’d talk me out of it like everyone else. The last time I wanted this, my partner said it wouldn’t look presentable to the judges.

Upstairs, Kian’s latest vinyl hums a moody love song. I stare at my reflection, at the length of my hair. It feels like dead weight now. I force out a breath, steeling myself. “Have you ever cut hair before?”

Dylan rests his chin on my shoulder. “I used to trim Ada’s hair because she hated going to the salons. She said I sucked. But for you? I’ll make sure it’s perfect. Promise.”

“Just a few inches,” I decide.

Dylan nods. “Whatever you say, baby.”

“You don’t think it’s too much?” The insecurity slips into my voice when I meet his gaze in the mirror.

“I like what you like,” he says, his voice low and husky. “Besides, it doesn’t matter how short you go as long as I can still pull it.” He fists my hair and gives it a light tug. I glare. He grins.

When he slides the hair tie down, I realize he’d do this without hesitation. Simply because I asked him to.

I spin to catch his wrist before he can make the first cut. “You’re seriously not going to stop me?” I ask, taking the scissors. “This could easily be … I don’t know, a sign of psychosis or something.”

Dylan leans forward, utterly unfazed. “Good thing I like my woman a little crazy.”

I shove at his chest. He barely moves, simply catching my wrist to pull me closer.

His gaze softens, melting like ice on a hot summer day. “You don’t make impulsive decisions. If you’re asking for this, I know it’s something you’ve wanted for a while. And even if it is impulsive, I’m proof those decisions aren’t all bad. You kissed me and look how that turned out.” His grin stretches. “Trust yourself, Sierra.”

Dylan places his hand over my heart, over the wild rhythm. Like he already knew. I press mine to his chest, syncing to his steadiness, grounding myself in him.

One deep inhale. One final look at him. I face the mirror.

“Short,” I decide. “Here.” I touch just above my shoulders before I can second-guess it.

Dylan brushes through the strands, sections them with care, slightly off-center, and then cuts right where I pointed. When he hands me the severed length of my hair, my eyes sting, and I feel a bit of pride take hold of my chest. It’s me, and it’s new. I love it even more when Dylan tips my chin up, his eyes soft and shimmering, and whispers “Beautiful” against my lips.

I’VE ALREADY MADE myself comfortable in Dylan’s bed with Kian’s new kitten—the poor stray he found outside Lola’s Diner thanks to the powers of the cat distribution system—on my chest when Dylan comes back from an evening lecture.

I went back to the dorm to check on Scarlett, but she wasn’t there. When I texted her, she promised to be back for a late dinner.

Now I’m studying in Dylan’s room, the soft glow of the lamp illuminating my textbook. I cuddle with Whiskers, but the second my boyfriend walks in, the minx bolts to the edge of the bed. Dylan scoops him up, cradling him against his chest. Whiskers purrs and licks his face. I can’t blame him. But ever since Kian’s found out about this new development, he’s been trying to win back the kitten’s affection.

“Trying to steal my girlfriend, Whiskers?”

The cat meows in response, and Dylan steps out of his room, and I hear a loud “My baby! Did he hurt you?” Before Dylan returns, locking the door behind him.

He comes to me, carefully moving my textbook off the bed before cocooning my whole body with his, and humming into my neck. He’s not as exhausted physically as he was a few weeks ago, but I can tell he’s mentally drained. He’s been worried about his mom a lot these past few days. When he finally gave up and decided to call her, she didn’t answer. He’s been on edge ever since.

“Quiet moment?” I whisper.

“Quiet moment,” he says.

We stay like that for a while. I’m pressed under his comfortable weight and he shifts so he doesn’t squish me. When he rolls us over, I’m on top of him. He tucks some of my newly shortened hair behind my ear. “Hi, baby.”

I smile like an idiot.

“How much would it cost me to make sure you’d be here, in my bed, every time I come home?” he asks.

“That’s a steep price.”

“I’m willing to pay it.”

“Not a very good negotiator,” I say. “And you’re the one getting the business degree.”

This look he gives me—the same one I’ve seen just moments after he kisses me—drills a hole in my chest. “Seems I lose my head around you.”

“Understandable. I’ll have my lawyers get back to you, then.”

Dylan plays with the ends of my hair. “Did you notice anything different?”

“About you?” I study him for a moment. “Your biceps are bigger, and you lift me even more easily than you used to.”

A smirk tugs at the corners of his lips; he’s clearly pleased. “I’m flattered you’re paying so much attention to the changes in my body, Romanova,” he says. “But I mean, did you notice anything in this room?”

I lift my head to glance around. His desk still holds the same open textbook, though now flipped to a different page. The picture of him and his sister sits in its usual spot, while another picture, the one of us, is framed and hung on his wall.

“Nothing?” he asks.

I shake my head as Dylan leans over, his arm brushing past me to flick off the lamp, plunging the room into darkness. Though there's a tiny spark of fear that flares under my ribs, having him this close makes it puff away almost instantly.

Then a faint glow appears in the darkness, growing brighter. I glance around. The blinds are closed, and our phones aren't anywhere in sight.

"What is that?" I whisper, breaking the stillness.

Dylan lies back, the mattress dipping beneath his weight, and juts his chin toward the ceiling. I follow his gaze, and my breath catches.

Above us, the ceiling is covered in smiley faces. So many of them, probably hundreds, glowing softly in a warm yellow-green hue. They shine gently, creating a quiet world just for us.

"Why'd you do that?" I ask.

"Why do you think, Sierra?"

I swallow hard. Being in this bed, in his arms, with the reminder of his thoughts when I'm not here right above me, feels like the weight of the sun. Because what I've realized about scars is that they're always there, but it doesn't have to mean they're not healed.

Dylan sits up, peeling off his hoodie and the shirt underneath in one fluid motion. I lift the comforter, and he shifts beneath it. His heavy leg drapes over mine, locking me into his embrace. "Thank you," I whisper, staring up at the glow-in-the-dark ceiling stickers.

He holds me a little tighter than usual. Like he knows I won't slip away now but still wants me this close anyway. Dylan's calloused hand slips down my spine, and under the hem of my T-shirt.

"Are these my boxers?" he asks when his finger hooks under the elastic waistband, snapping it back.

"Why? Want them back?"

He chuckles softly by my ear. "You're trouble."

I listen to the rhythm of his breathing as it slows, each exhale growing softer. But when I look up, he's still lost in thought. I reach for his hand. "You okay?"

He hums, staring up at the ceiling. "Just thinking."

"About?"

"Thanksgiving," he says.

I tilt my head. "Favorite holiday?"

"Least."

I nod. “I’m more of a Halloween girl myself.”

Dylan finally looks at me, liquor-colored eyes warm as he studies me.

He doesn’t smile, and I sit up straight. “Is Thanksgiving a big deal in your family?”

“No, it’s the first time since I moved out that my mom’s gone this long without calling or texting me. She loves Thanksgiving, and she didn’t send me an invite.”

I play with the chain around his neck. “Why don’t you give her another call?”

“Yeah, maybe I will,” he says.

From the looks of it, he won’t be doing that, but I don’t comment on his noncommittal response. “You could call your sister. I’m sure she’s going home for fall break.”

He doesn’t answer.

“Or …” I pause, planting a kiss on his chin. “You could come home with me.”

That gets his attention. “You want me to meet the parents already?”

I roll my eyes. “You already met my mom when you invited yourself to my house,” I say. “But this time, I’m inviting you.”

“That’s very nice of you. Charitable, even.”

“Anything for a good cause, and my parents were asking me if you were going to come,” I say, watching his smile bloom. “So, will you?”

“Yeah, baby, I’ll come.”

When he calls me that, it feels like everything is right in the world.

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FORTY-SEVEN

DYLAN

THANKSGIVING IS MUCH more enjoyable when you don't spend it with your family.

There used to be a service at our local church that my dad was adamant we all attend. That meant he expected us to be dressed in our formal clothes by seven a.m. sharp on a Thursday. It was exhausting back then, but I'll never forget how our whole family spent the entire day together. There wasn't one moment from morning to night that we were apart. Looking back, I realize that it was one of the only times we were together and happy.

Today, I'm not with my parents, but I feel happier than I ever am with them.

Instead of a Thanksgiving turkey, Sierra's dad made roast duck. He called it a Russian tradition, but I think he just went to the supermarket too late. Sierra told me they never do a traditional Thanksgiving, but since they found out I was coming, they wanted to impress me.

I didn't think they even liked me that much, let alone would want to make a good impression.

"You know, you're the first boyfriend Sierra's invited over," her mom says after we gather in the living room to watch highlights from the ISU Grand Prix. The one we'll be competing in pretty soon.

Sierra groans. "Mom, please don't."

"And the first boy who can make her blush," her dad adds.

"Is that right?" I look at a red-faced Sierra. She rolls her eyes and instead grabs my arms to pull me with her.

"We'll be upstairs," she says. I send an apologetic look to her parents, but they don't seem to mind.

“Babe, I don’t think we should be up here when they made us a whole dinner,” I say.

“They won’t mind.” She waves a hand. “Now tell me why you’re being so weird.”

I give her a look. “I thought you brought me up here to make out.”

“Stop trying to distract me. You’re quiet; I can tell you’re thinking about something. Is it your mom?”

It scares me when she does that sometimes. No one’s ever been able to read me so easily.

“She hasn’t picked up? Try again,” she says seriously. “I can stay here with you.”

I’m about to refuse, deny that I’m thinking about her, but I can’t. Sierra’s right. “I think I should do this on my own.” I’m going to call my dad, and I don’t want her to hear any of the shit he might say.

She nods and steps out of the room before lightly closing the door behind her.

My dad picks up on the first ring, and I’m caught off guard for a second.

“I’m sorry for how I reacted that night,” I say quickly before I’m sure it won’t come out and I’ll come to my fucking senses. The last thing he deserves is an apology, but this isn’t for him. It’s for my mom. I just can’t hold this animosity anymore. I’m so fucking tired of it. “I have my feelings about your relationship, but that didn’t solve anything. That’s not me anymore.”

The line is dead silent, and I have to check if the call is still connected.

“I appreciate that,” my father says after a long minute. “But …” He pauses like the words come with great difficulty. “You were right.”

“What?”

“I’ve screwed it all up. We had a beautiful family, and I ruined everything.” If I didn’t know better, I’d say he’s been crying. For a split second, I wonder if he’s actually changed, if my mom was right, but his next words crush all of that.

“Your mother left, Dylan. She gave me the divorce papers, and said if I couldn’t respect her, she needed to respect herself. For her kids. She left the night of the vow renewal.”

I stand from the bed, clutching the phone tightly. “What do you mean left?” I ask. “Where did she go?”

“I’m not sure, all I know is she’s gone. There isn’t a trace of her in this house anymore.”

“You’re telling me this now?” I shout. “Where the fuck is she?”

“A hotel? I don’t know, son, I just—I’m sorry. I—”

I hang up and dial my mom. I couldn’t care less what he has to say to me. If what he’s saying is true, then he’s not my problem; he’s not any of our problems.

“Where are you?” I say as soon as the call connects.

“Dyl.” It’s my sister. “I’m so happy you called.”

“Ada, why are you answering Mom’s phone? Where is she?”

“She’s with me. We’re at a hotel in West Hartford. I was going to call you, but she didn’t want me to. She said you were finally away from it, and she’d hate to drag you back.”

That’s why she didn’t call. She thought I was done with her. “I’m coming to get you,” I say when Sierra tiptoes back in with a curious gaze. She must have heard how loud I was talking.

There’s some shuffling, and I can hear Ada speaking in Turkish before my mom’s voice is on the line. “Dylan, I’m fine. Don’t ruin your Thanksgiving for me.”

“It won’t be ruined, Mom. I want to see you. I’ll come get you.”

Sierra nudges me. “They can come here. My parents won’t mind,” she whispers. Before I can even think of refusing, Sierra gives me her most serious look. The one that tells me not to defy her.

“Sierra says you’re welcome to come to her parents’ house.”

My mom’s speaking in Turkish, refusing again, saying something about not wanting to ruin my day with my girlfriend. Ada takes the phone again. “We’ll be there. But don’t come. We’ll get an Uber.”

“I’ll send you one,” I say, and I hang up before they can refuse. Ada texts me the address and in minutes I’ve got them in a car.

“She left,” I tell Sierra. “She actually left him, and she didn’t tell me.”

“I think she knew how much it hurt you,” Sierra says. “She loves you, Dylan. But you have to remember she did this for herself in her own time. Sometimes, it takes a while to finally love yourself enough. Maybe that’s what she’s been trying to do this whole time.”

I let her words sink in. When my phone buzzes with a notification, we go downstairs to tell Sierra’s parents. They’re more than happy to meet my mom. They tease Sierra about it being her future *svekrov.*

When they arrive, the sight of my mom lodges something in my throat. I hug them both, and my mom is trying not to cry. She's just left the life she tried to fix for so long. Sierra and her parents take Ada with them, leaving me and my mom alone.

"Why now?" I ask her.

My mom looks at me, and for the first time in years, I don't see the exhaustion weighing her down. Despite the tears in her eyes, there's something else, something like resolve.

"I was scared, *kuzum*," she says softly. "I was always taught to hold the family together, to weather any storm, and I tried so hard, hoping that someday it would change. That he'd regret letting himself wander and he'd come back to me," she says. "But then I saw your face at the vow renewal, and I was so angry when you hit him."

"I'm s—"

"Angry that he drove you to that. That you felt so helpless that you had to resort to physical violence. I've seen your games, Dylan. I know you'd get into fights on the ice, and I brushed it off. You never deserved that, *aşkim*." Her voice cracks, and she glances away, trying to hold it together. "You and your sister are my strength, but I needed to find my own. I'm sorry it took so long."

I exhale, and it feels like I've been holding my breath since I was a kid. "Still, you didn't have to do it alone."

"I know," she whispers. "But I think you've spent your whole life trying fix things. It was nice to see you letting someone hold you together." For a moment, we just stand there, the years of tension and silence between us cracking open.

"I'm proud of you," I finally say.

Her lip quivers, and it hits me how much she truly had to let go. She still loves him, I can see that, but just one look at her, and she appears stronger. My mom pulls me into a hug, pressing her face to my shoulder like she used to after I had my growth spurt. "Me too."

When she lets go, I glance toward the kitchen, where Sierra's and Ada's laughter echoes. My mom follows my gaze, her expression softening.

"She's good for you," she says, her voice steadier now.

I smile. "She is."

For the first time in years, I feel like the shadows don't linger. Maybe this is what starting over feels like.

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FORTY-EIGHT

DYLAN

ASKING MY GIRLFRIEND if I can hang out with my friends is not something I ever imagined myself doing. I'm not even sure if I have to, but I think it's the right thing to do. The reason I'm so hesitant, though, is that I'd much rather stay in with her.

After Thanksgiving, my mom insisted I not miss any classes. She has enough to rent a place in Hartford in our old neighborhood, and Ada and I visited earlier this week. Yesterday, Sierra was already there when I stopped by after class, and the sight of her made my heart do that near-fatal squeeze thing.

Now, Sierra is on her stomach, working on her laptop while I lean against my headboard, massaging her feet in my lap, enjoying the small sighs of pleasure she lets out. Her final exam for her forensics class is tomorrow morning, just hours before our performance. She's stressed, and I can tell, because she hasn't turned on The Weather Channel today.

After our afternoon skate session, we came back to the house and fell asleep. Now, the guys have texted that they want to play hockey on the frozen pond just outside Hartford.

I text the group chat again.

BUNNY PATROL

Dylan Donovan: What if I bail?
Kian Ishida: I won't talk to you if you do that.
Dylan Donovan: Silent treatment? Bet. I'm staying in. Have fun.
Aiden Crawford: I already left Summer's dorm. You're fucking going.

Sebastian Hayes: Cole and I have an exam tomorrow morning. I feel like this is one of those times where you look back at the decisions you should've made.
Cole Carter: We're great at making those. Anyway, see you guys in a bit.

With one squeeze to Sierra's foot, I drop it and hover over her. She's immediately suspicious, and when I kiss the back of her neck, she flips me over so fast, I barely have time to react. She straddles me, holding my arms above my head with that fiery look in her green eyes. The one she gets when she's trying to read my mind.

My gaze falls to her spandex shorts that rise up high on her thick thighs. I have dreams of being in this position at all hours of the day. Including right now, when I should be leaving.

I lift my hips on instinct, and she rolls her eyes.

"What do you want?" she asks.

Her smooth voice doesn't help draw away the fog in my mind. There's only one thing I want right now, and it's not to go hang out with my friends.

"I can't remember. But feel free to try anything to jog my memory."

"Anything?"

This time, when I meet her eyes, there's no mistaking what I see. Hot desire, dripping like morning dew. She leans in until her breath brushes my lips, her hands on my wrists. I'm about to close the distance, when she flicks me on the forehead.

I jerk back. She does it again. She fucking flicked me.

Sierra blinks innocently. "Did that help?"

"Sierra," I say, my voice low, making her squeeze her legs tighter around me.

"What? You said to try anything."

"Yeah, to kiss me, not to flick my head."

"As pretty as you are, you're not Sleeping Beauty." She pats my chest and moves off me to go back to her laptop.

I slide my hands along her body, dipping below her loose sweater. She pretends not to notice, but I can feel the way her abdomen tightens, and goose bumps rise on her skin the higher I go. I drop a kiss to the middle of her back. "You know how you wanted to stay in and watch a movie tonight?"

"Actually, *you* wanted to stay in and watch a movie," she quips.

Right, I did suggest it. The girl's got me wanting to watch chick flicks. I move higher and bury my face in her neck. "Well, the guys texted," I say,

dragging my lips over her ear. “They wanna play hockey for a few hours.”

Her eyes still don’t leave her screen. “Okay?”

“And they want me to come,” I clarify.

She finally looks at me, her brow quirked. “That’s nice, babe. I’m glad they invited you?”

I furrow my brows. “Why did you say that like a question?”

“Because I’m not sure what you want me to say.”

“Sierra, the guys want to play hockey right now, so I can’t stay to watch a movie.”

“Oh,” she squeaks, moving up to lean back against the bed frame. “You’re asking me if you can play outside with your friends?” She tries holding back a smile but then bursts into laughter. Sierra clutches her stomach and wipes nonexistent tears from her eyes.

“To play *hockey* with the *guys*,” I correct.

“Yeah, that’s what I said.” She bites down a smile. “Be back before supper. And wear a sweater, or you’ll catch a cold, honey.”

I press my fingers into her sides, and she squeals in laughter. “Okay, okay,” she says, still laughing. “I’m sorry. I just think it’s cute. But I’ll stop.”

I stop tickling her, and she finally calms down. Then, before she laughs again, she pulls me by my shirt to kiss me. Her smile is wide against my lips, and I know she is only kissing me to hide it. “I can feel you laughing,” I say in between kisses.

“Not …” Kiss. Giggle. “Laughing.”

That’s when I slip my tongue between her lips and let my hands slide under her T-shirt. Sierra’s breath hitches, and she goes lax under my touch. “You’re going to be late.”

“I don’t care,” I murmur.

“Dylan.”

“You want me to go?” I ask again, just to be sure. I’d hate for her to be alone if she wants me here. I’d do this with her forever if she wanted me to.

She runs the pad of her thumbs under my eyes. “Didn’t know I had you on such a tight leash.”

“That’s how I like it.” Then I kiss her again, pulling her lip between my teeth until she pushes me away.

“Go! I have to study. And I’m serious, wear that sweater I knit you.”

When I arrive, I park and pop open my trunk to slip on my skates. The guys pull into the lot just shortly after. The floodlights are nearly blinding as they bounce off the untouched ice. That's when I see Kian, suited up and setting up nets, each one adorned with tiny fairy lights. Aiden comes to stand by my open trunk, just as Sebastian and Cole arrive.

"What are you wearing?" Sebastian asks me.

The sweater Sierra knit me is a Christmas one with random patterns and our names stitched into the sleeve. I fucking love it. "A sweater," I reply.

"Did your grandma knit it?" Sebastian chuckles to himself, but Cole smacks his head.

Aiden's looking at me then, clearly knowing that Sierra made it and that I'd probably want to be buried with it. "His girlfriend made it," he tells him.

Sebastian deflates. "Lucky."

We're all watching Kian set up the makeshift rink. He's checking how solid it is as he goes, then he drops a puck at center ice and looks up, raising both arms.

"Welcome to Kian's rink of wonders!"

We all grab our sticks and meet him in the middle.

"What's up with the decorations?" I ask.

He grins and lifts a shoulder. "This might be the last time we all get to play hockey together. I wanted to make it special."

Seb and Cole skate up to Kian and share an awkward hug. Slowly, they huddle closer, and Aiden and I are pulled into the weird five-way hug.

Finally, when Kian taps the ice with his stick, we're off. We play rough. I steal the puck from Cole, and cut across the ice faster than I ever have, probably from the stamina I've built while figure skating.

It's when I pull back and launch the puck right at the net where Sebastian stands in as goalie that I fuck up. I don't notice Kian in my peripheral, and he doesn't stop fast enough before his shoulder slams into mine. The contact is solid, nothing I haven't felt before, but my skate catches on a rough edge, and my ankle twists. I flatten awkwardly onto the ice. A flare of heat ignites in my ankle, shooting up my leg. I grit my teeth, biting back a curse.

"What's wrong?" Aiden calls as he skates closer.

I bite down so hard, my response comes out weak. "Nothing."

"Can't handle the heat?" says Kian, circling me. "You're losing your touch, Dill Pickle." He's still laughing when he offers me a hand.

The pain is so intense, I can't think. Can't come up with a snipe, can't lift my hand to take his, and can't fucking move. I glance back up at them, but whatever they see on my face makes theirs collapse into worry.

"You're pale," they say.

Ah fuck.

THE SMELL OF antiseptic clings to the air, and the harsh fluorescents illuminate the checkerboard of pale blue and white tiles. All I hear is the *squeak*, *squeak*, *squeak* of rubber soles against the vinyl floors.

"Will you stop pacing?" I grit out.

Kian stops abruptly, his hands stuffed deep into his letterman jacket pockets, before exhaling and continuing to pace the cramped emergency room. As is if *I'm* the annoying one.

The guys are in the waiting room, but Kian insisted that he needed to come with me. He was the one who wheeled me to triage. After I have my vitals checked and get an X-ray, we're in a small room, boxed in by faded blue curtains that hang limply from metal tracks overhead.

I'm perched on the edge of the exam bed, the paper beneath me crinkling with every shift as my ankle throbs.

Kian's footsteps continue to tap out a nervous rhythm, the sound amplified in the too-quiet space. His eyes flick toward me and then away.

"It's not your fault," I remind him. I said the same thing in the car on our way to the DU hospital emergency room. He didn't respond then, and he doesn't respond now.

Kian glances at his watch. "What's taking so long?"

That's when the doctor comes in. "You know, for a hockey player, this isn't a terrible X-ray," she says. "I held my breath when I heard it was one of the Dalton boys."

"It's not?" Kian asks.

She nods. "You've got a grade two ankle sprain, nothing surgical. But the ligament being partially torn makes things tricky. It's not a clean tear, but it's enough that you're going to need rest. A lot of it. That way we avoid any long-term damage."

"How long?" Kian pipes up.

"No hockey," she clarifies. "Or any type of activity. For at least six weeks."

Her words sound muffled by a high-pitched ringing in my ears. The Grand Prix final is tomorrow, and if we don't perform, we won't have a shot to qualify for Worlds in March. It'll all be over. I'd have fucked it all up. Sierra would lose her last chance for a comeback. She wants this badly, and I promised I would help her get it.

"Can I get something for the pain?" I ask the doctor.

"You'll get painkillers, some acetaminophen will do the trick, but if it gets bad, we can prescribe Toradol."

"It's bad now," I say. "I'll need Toradol."

I can feel Kian's questioning gaze. We've had worse injuries, and none of us have ever required something strong for the pain. But right now, I'm not doing this for me.

She hesitates, glancing at the splint on my ankle. "It's not necessary if you rest. Follow RICE. I'm sure you've done that before."

I shake my head, adamant now. "This feels so much worse than any other injury. I'd rather not be in pain during my final exams."

"You can't skate." The doctor turns to Kian. "He *can't* skate."

"I won't," I say.

"Yeah, he won't," Kian chimes in hesitantly. "Our coach won't let him."

Her gaze lands on my swollen ankle, then shifts to me. I give her my most innocent look, and she sighs before saying she'll be back.

"What was that about?" Kian asks the moment she's out of earshot. "I know your pain tolerance; you would be the last person to take strong pain meds for a sprain."

I shrug. "I need it."

Kian starts pacing again. "Sierra's going to kill me," he mutters, then slumps on a chair.

"Sierra's not going to find out," I say.

His head snaps to me. "What the hell are you talking about? She's going to know the second she sees you." He points at the splint on my foot.

"She's not," I say seriously. "I'm still competing tomorrow. With or without the meds."

"Are you insane?" he hisses. "You can't skate on a fucking grade two sprain."

"I'll be fine with painkillers," I say. "Right now, you're going to help me wrap my ankle as tight as possible, and then you're going to keep your mouth shut."

“But—”

“Promise me.”

“Dylan—”

“Promise that you won’t tell anyone, Kian. Not even Summer.”

His mouth opens and closes until resignation settles. “I promise.”

I relax a bit. The things I’d do just to see Sierra’s smile are pathetic. I didn’t expected to be the kind of boyfriend who would blindly follow his girl off a cliff, but damn does it feel good. There’s nothing I wouldn’t do to make sure she’s winning, with me always by her side.

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FORTY-NINE

SIERRA

WHEN I WOKE up to a good morning text from my boyfriend, it worried me. Dylan usually sends a picture—him in bed, in the shower, or cuddling Kian's kitten. But today, he texted me a good luck for my exam, and he had a bouquet of yellow lilies delivered to my dorm. The note simply read: *I love you*. What threw me off was that he got them *delivered*, by some freshman who looked like he was forced into it. I know Dylan, and he'd never pass up on the chance to immediately reap the benefits of his romantic gesture.

So, after my forensics exam, I head up the front steps of their house with two of my favorite carb-loaded pre-performance meals in hand. But as I'm using my key to get into the house, the door's yanked open, taking my key with it. That's when I see Summer. She smiles, giving me a quick hug and a *so proud of you* before descending the steps to sprint to the truck.

Aiden bursts through the front door just seconds later. "Summer!" he yells after her. He's still in his boxers and doesn't seem to mind the bitter chill or the frost he's barefoot on. The truck roars to life, and my gaze ping-pongs between Summer's glare and his smile.

"Did she just steal your truck?" I ask, watching as she pulls out of the driveway.

"It's basically her truck now." That seems to be the only reaction he has to that. "Are you here to see Dylan?"

"Yup. Today's the big day."

"Congrats on everything. And good luck tonight, we'll be rooting for you two in the stands," Aiden says with an oddly stiff smile.

I enter Dylan's room, and that's when I step on the full-grown man on the floor.

“Ouch! Are you wearing cleats?” Kian hisses, then he stands with Whiskers in his arms, stretching with a loud yawn.

“I’m wearing socks.” I put the food on Dylan’s desk. “Why are you sleeping in here?”

“Just worried about D—” Kian stops abruptly. He glances at Dylan’s empty bed, then around the room until he hears the shower. He sighs inwardly. “W-worried about … having nightmares,” he finishes.

“You get nightmares?”

He nods. “We watched *The Ring* last night. Guaranteed nightmare-giver.”

When I notice a pair of crutches against the wall beside the bathroom, my heart plummets. Just seeing them takes me back to after my surgery, when I used crutches for a week. Seeing them brings me back to the cool air on my raw skin as the hospital gown billowed around me.

“Whose crutches are those?” I ask, my voice shaky.

The mattress squeaks when Kian drops onto it. “Mine!”

“Yours?”

“Yeah, can you pass them? My ankle hurts from all that standing.”

I hand them to him, feeling the cold metal like a distant memory under my fingers.

“I hurt my ankle after our game last night. I’ll be okay though.” Kian blinks so rapidly it kind of freaks me out. “It’s just a sprain. The doctor said he—*I*—will be fine with some rest. But he—uh, I—can’t play,” he stammers, tripping over his words.

The bathroom door opens, and Kian lets out an audible sigh. Dylan’s already dressed in a long-sleeved shirt and sweats, socks and all. It’s the first time I’ve seen him fully dressed before leaving the bathroom; he usually rummages through his closet in a towel or stark naked.

“Hi, baby.” Dylan walks over, and presses kisses to my forehead.

“You didn’t tell me Kian got injured last night,” I say.

Dylan cuts a serious look to his best friend. “Yeah, sorry, it was late when we got back from the ER. Didn’t want to worry you.”

I look back at Kian. “You think you’ll still be able to come to our performance tonight?”

“Wouldn’t miss it.” He smiles. “Even if it kills me, apparently.” He aims a glare at Dylan. The two of them seem to communicate something, but I don’t try to decipher it. Sometimes, it is just better to smile and nod when they’re together.

Then, as Whiskers tries to escape from Kian's hold to go to Dylan, I remember the tiny bag I stuffed into my purse. I pull it out and give it to Kian. "I made you and Whiskers matching hats. Thought you might like them."

Kian blinks and pulls out the tiny green one first. "You made us Shrek ears?" There's a quiver in his voice. He glances at Dylan like he's pleading, but Dylan stares blankly. Kian swallows. "Thank you, Sierra. I'm sorry."

I furrow my brow. "Sorry for what?"

"We should probably eat," Dylan interjects. "Lidia texted to meet early."

I stare at them a second longer but step away to grab our food. "I bought extra. I'll get us some plates."

And as I'm heading out the door, I hear a smack, and Kian grumbles.

WE DROVE TWO hours to the venue. My parents were already in the audience, and Dylan's sister and mom came too, because I invited them. I couldn't help but notice how Dylan wasn't acting like his usual self. He looked distracted.

"No matter what happens out there, I know that this is where I'm supposed to be, and who I'm supposed to be with," I say, more as a reminder. I'm not sure what's bothering him, but I want him to know where I stand.

Dylan raises his brows. "That's a big deal coming from you."

"Because I mean it. No matter what."

"Win or lose, Romanova, you still got me."

We're watching the skaters finish their routine to a Coldplay song when I notice a man talking in front of the light of a camera. "Dylan," I say. "Tell me that's not who I think it is."

He follows my line of sight, as I gawk at the man in a full suit and microphone. The one I've been watching on TV for months.

Dylan chuckles, sounding a bit hoarse. "Oh yeah. Surprise."

"Surprise?" I smack his arm. "You got the weatherman to host the competition?"

Dale Thunderman is talking into his mic with a camera crew in front of him. He gestures back to a group of fans, then pulls a kid to interview from the crowd. There're women in the corner fanning themselves as if we aren't near a huge slab of ice. But I get it, because I might fangirl too.

“Honestly, it didn’t take much persuasion,” Dylan says. “Weathermen aren’t really a hot commodity, babe.”

“Pfft. I bet he could pull more girls than you,” I say.

One corner of Dylan’s lip quirks. “Yeah? Does that list of girls include you?”

I roll one shoulder. “Depends.”

He narrows his eyes. “On?”

“Whether this girl is taken.”

Now he’s full-on smiling, and I relax seeing him back to how he should be. “Baby, there’s only one girl I want to pull, and after she spends the next four minutes in every angle imaginable, we’re going to do it all over again in my room.”

The mouth on this man. “Naked?”

“*So* naked.”

I lift a brow. “You sound so sure.”

“Because I am. You’re with me and only me, Sierra. There’s no one else I’d be with on or off the ice. We’re partners. Forever.”

“Sounds scary.”

He intertwines our fingers. “Sounds like us.”

I smile. “Remember when you asked me what gets me out of my head?”

“Yeah.”

“It’s you.” When my lips meet his and my hands cup his face, I feel it—his skin is cold and clammy, almost like he’s nervous. He’s behaving like I do before a performance, jittery and unsure. But ever since our last competition, my nerves have faded. With him, skating feels more like a thrill than a source of anxiety.

“Are you okay?” I ask softly, sitting beside him on the bench, waiting for our turn.

He lifts our entwined hands and presses a gentle kiss to the back of mine. “I’m perfect.”

“All right,” Lidia says, crouching in front of us. “We’ve practiced, we’ve bickered, we’ve given me migraines that get stronger each day, but we’re here. You two have been the toughest pair I’ve ever coached, but that made it worth it. Whatever happens, I’m proud of the phenomenal team you’ve become in such a short amount of time. Now go show them what you’ve worked for.”

Dylan and I glance at each other. This might be the sweetest speech she's ever made.

"If we hug you, are you going to kill us?" I ask.

"Of course not, Sierra," Dylan answers instead. "She'll just make us do our free skate nineteen times."

Lidia rolls her eyes and pulls us both in for a tight hug. Then when our names are called, she pulls back, and I swear I hear her sniffle.

We glide to center ice, me as Rapunzel, Dylan as Flynn, complete with that stray lock of hair falling over his forehead and my short hair. He rests his hand over my steady heart, and I place mine over his. To my surprise, I feel his pulse racing. Before we begin, he mouths an *I love you*.

The music starts, and each lift is strong. But when we do a synchronized spin, my smile falters because Dylan winces. I try to see what's wrong, but he hides it well under his perfect smile. Each lift is flawless on the outside, but I notice the smallest, most minuscule tremor in his hand. For the next three minutes, I push the questioning thoughts away, but a part of me wants to stop, to make sure he's okay. I know he wouldn't even bat an eye if we lost. But I wonder if he knows I'd do the same. Every part of me is in this because he's with me, but skating would never come before him. Not ever.

His smile falters when he meets my eyes, and my heart sinks. Despite that, he snaps back to focus, and when he lifts me in the exact position that I fell all that time ago, there's not an ounce of fear in me. The crowd seems to hold their breath, and Dylan hoists me up in a reverse one-armed lasso, and we execute it to perfection. Back on my skates, we descend into our closing routine, and when we're back-to-back in our end position, we're both breathing hard.

We glide off the ice, and as we move to the kiss-and-cry for our scores, I don't even care to look, but when we're ranked first, a wave of relief hits me because Dylan smiles. He holds me tight, and for a moment, I want to stay like this. Then he pulls away, and tells me he'll be right back.

I sit there, unable to stay still. Then I give up and just follow where Dylan walked through the doors. That's when I see Kian jogging to him, holding his crutches in his hand. *What the hell?*

"Do you need these?" he asks frantically. "Fuck, man, you're pale. I winced every time you jumped."

Dylan mutters something low to him and he nods. But then Kian sees me. From the way he stands, it's almost like he's about to run.

“Don’t you dare,” I warn.

They both go completely still.

“Why aren’t you using your crutches? You said you got injured last night,” I ask.

Kian’s eyes widen, then he laughs awkwardly. “It’s a miracle! The Lord has blessed—”

“Stop,” Dylan cuts him off, and finally he turns to me. And Kian’s right. Dylan’s pale, and sweat covers his forehead. He’s never looked like this after a performance.

“What’s wrong?” I ask softly, taking his hands. “You’re scaring me.”

“I’m injured,” he finally says. “Last night, it wasn’t Kian who got a sprain. It was me.”

My heart stops.

He’s hurt. Dylan’s hurt and he still skated a full program. *Because of me.* A tornado of emotions hits me, and my eyes sting so bad I have to blink.

“I’m okay,” he says immediately.

“You’re okay?” I pull away, yanking my hands out of his. “You look like you’re about to fall over!”

He cups my face. “Sierra, listen—”

“No,” I say. “Why didn’t you tell me? You should be resting right now.” Then I turn slowly to narrow my eyes at Kian. “You didn’t tell me either. What the hell, Kian?”

“I’m sorry!” he cries. “I wanted to! Ask him. I didn’t want to lie. He made me promise—”

Dylan turns me to him. “Sierra, I could have broken my fucking leg, and I’d still go out there and perform with you. You deserve this.”

“That’s not fair. I don’t care about the performance! I care about *you*.” My words tremble, caught on the edge of a sob.

“This feels like a personal moment,” Kian interjects.

We both glare at him.

Kian raises his hands in surrender. “Leaving!” He disappears down the hall.

Dylan focuses on me. “I would never let you lose this. You worked too hard.”

“So did you! It’s us or nothing, remember? Have I not made that clear?” I don’t even realize I’m crying until he wipes away a tear before it hits my cheek.

“This is important to you, and you’re important to me,” he says. “I always thought that nothing good lasts, but I don’t believe that anymore, Sierra. You’re the good, and I’d do everything I can to make sure everyone gets to see just how amazing you are.”

I shake my head. “You shouldn’t have done this. It could cause serious damage.”

“The look on your face after we got those scores? I’d do anything to see that.”

“What are you two doing?” Lidia’s voice echoes in the empty hall. “They’re calling your name. You’re first!”

I blink in shock, and Dylan only smiles like he already knew it. It’s so bright and genuine that I almost forget he’s standing on an injury.

“We’re not coming,” I tell her.

“*What?!*” Lidia shouts.

Dylan shakes his head. “We’ll be there in a second.”

Lidia’s still bewildered but she slowly backs away, uncertain.

“We’re leaving. Let’s go home,” I say, trying to pull him along.

He doesn’t move. “I love you, Sierra, and you know that I’d gladly do whatever you tell me to, but this isn’t one of those things. You made it all the way here because of your talent, and I’m going to make sure everyone knows that when they see you on that podium.”

My eyes blur. “I don’t need to go up there.”

He smiles. The smile he reserves just for me. “I know. But I want us to. You can yell at me all you want later.”

I give in, only because I know Dylan. If I don’t go up there, all the pain he just went through will be for nothing. Unless he sees me with that medal around my neck and those flowers, he won’t leave.

So we go, and everyone watches as he lifts me onto the first-place podium. My eyeliner is smudged, and he’s growing paler by the second, but the moment our names are announced together, Dylan leans down and kisses me so hard, I nearly burst.

“I’m so mad at you, but I love you,” I whisper. “I don’t think I tell you that enough.”

“Forty-seven,” he whispers back.

“What?”

“You’ve told me you love me forty-seven times today.”

I turn to look at him. “I did?”

“In all different kinds of ways.” He smiles, like this is a secret he’s kept, him counting my *I love you*s. “Like when you kiss me, and you linger for a minute to kiss the scar by my lip. Or when you retrace the smiley faces on our palms. Or when you take your thumbs”—he takes my hands and moves my thumbs under his eyes; I run my fingers under there on instinct and he sighs happily—“and do that. Or when you tell me you love me, then *show* me exactly how much.”

My cheeks feel hot, and I look up at him like I’m going to burst at the seams.

“And when you look at me like that,” he adds. “I love you too, Sierra. And I hope I do tell you enough.”

Then he lays a whisper of a kiss on my hair, and suddenly everything feels right in the world. I feel like I’ve found a place where I can land safely. Forever.

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FIFTY

DYLAN

SIERRA HASN'T LET me move in four days. Today, she's handcuffed me to the bed. Any other day, this would be my ideal situation, but right now my girlfriend is changing in front of me, and I have to sit here.

I tug on the fuzzy pink handcuffs again. She caught me making her a grilled cheese in the kitchen after she came back from soaking in the hot tub with Summer and Scarlett—and Kian, because he's got nothing better to do than mock me by joining them. She lured me back to bed with false promises that I will definitely make her follow through on later.

"Don't look at me like that, you did this to yourself," Sierra says right before pulling the string of her bikini. I can't help but feel proud of how confident she is in her body. She doesn't hide her scars anymore. After the Grand Prix, she sat with me as I elevated my leg and shopped online. She'd ask if I liked a dress or a skirt, but then she'd get quiet, and I realized she was hovering over the crop tops. I bought her every one she liked.

"What did you say? I can't hear from all the way over there. Come closer," I say.

She crosses her arms, and it doesn't help the predicament in my pants. "You really think I'd fall for that again?"

"Yes." I grin, and she gives me one of those looks I love kissing off her face. "I'm sorry," I say for the eighth time today. They gave me a boot to wear to make sure my ankle is immobilized. By skating on my sprain, I've added a few weeks to my recovery, so I'm not too happy about that, because Sierra's taken her task as my nurse very seriously. Which would be hot if she agreed to dress up. Instead, she just scolds me.

"I'll get on my knees. You liked that before."

“You did that in the middle of the doctor’s office. They probably think I torture you.”

My head falls against the headboard. “This *is* torture.”

“Good,” she says. “If you ever keep anything like that from me again, I will cut you with my skates. That’s a promise.”

“Is that supposed to deter me? You could carve my heart out and I’d still come crawling back.” Her eyes narrow to slits. “I promise, I’ll never hide anything from you. You know that.”

She nods, going back to change into the tiniest shorts I’ve ever seen.

“You’re seriously going to lock me in here, and strut around in those?”

She stares at her outfit. “What’s wrong with them?”

“Unlock these handcuffs and I’ll show you exactly what’s wrong with them.”

“Nice try,” she says. “Take this as your punish—”

I yank my hand, and the handcuffs scuff my bed frame until the chain breaks. The smile on my face turns devious, and Sierra’s mouth falls open. I spring from the bed and stalk toward her. She’s still blinking at me, staring at the broken handcuff dangling from my wrist.

“What were you saying about that punishment?”

“How did you—? Summer’s going kill me for breaking her handcuffs.”

I chuckle, “We’ll blame it on Kian.” I kiss down her chest, just the way she likes.

When I lift her, she gasps. “Your ankle! Put me down right now, Dylan!”

“Okay.” I drop her on my mattress, and she glares at me.

“You’re supposed to be resting,” she complains. “Lidia would not approve of this.”

“Lidia wouldn’t approve of anything we do in my bedroom.”

She laughs and my heart feels like it’s detached, floating somewhere higher. When I move down her torso and take the waistband of her shorts between my teeth, someone knocks.

Why do I have roommates? I immediately grab a pillow and cover Sierra, expecting them to just walk in. But we wait, and nothing happens.

“*Kuzum*? Are you in there?”

Sierra gasps, pushing me out of the way and pulling on one of my sweats. She fixes her hair and goes to open my door. “Leyla. Ada. Hi!” My mom and sister give Sierra a tight hug.

“I didn’t know you were coming over.”

“We’re only stopping by. I made a tray of *börek*, some *pide* with *sucuk*, and *köfte*. Kian’s already eating it, but there’s enough for everyone.”

All my favorites. “Mom, you didn’t have to do that.”

“We saw your fridge. Pretty sure that bread loaf has its own ecosystem now,” Ada adds. “Besides, you decided to sprain your ankle, so that’s all Mom thinks about.”

“How long is the recovery? I want to come to all your competitions when you’re better,” my mom asks Sierra. Instead of getting updates from me, my mom has decided to text Sierra, and Sierra’s mom texts me. Mom and Ada don’t stay long—Mom’s got new furniture being delivered. I offered to help, but all three of them shut me down with a synchronized glare.

“Back to bed,” Sierra commands, clapping her hands together. Both of us wince. Lidia’s claps elicit a trauma response at this point.

“Guys, the hot tub is on fire!” Kian yells from the backyard.

I roll my eyes. I gave him one job.

Sierra gasps, then pulls me gently to the back porch. The cold air is sharper tonight, but the glow from the backyard makes it feel warm. Blankets and pillows are sprawled across the deck in front of a white sheet, the projector aimed at it. Aiden’s next to Summer, Cole and Seb are cuddled with pillows, and Scarlett is holding Whiskers while tossing popcorn into Kian’s mouth.

Sierra’s gaze snaps to mine. “What’s this?”

“We never got to watch that movie.” I guide her toward the mess of pillows and sink into them. Without missing a beat, Sierra grabs a pillow to prop under my leg, but she doesn’t sit.

“Come here, Sierra,” I say, tugging at her wrist.

“But your leg—”

“Will be fine. Now sit.” I pull her down, and she lands right in my lap. When the projector lights up, Kian shushes everyone. The screen lights up with *Shrek: The Ultimate Edition*.

“Aw, come on!” Sebastian shouts.

“Who let him pick?” says Cole. “He’s banned for making us watch this twelve times.”

“Sorry to break it to you, but some of us have high standards,” Kian says.

“You just ate popcorn off the ground. What standards?” Summer chimes in.

“That was off the ground?” Kian stares at Scarlett.

Scarlett gives a sheepish smile. “Sorry, I didn’t want to waste food.”

Kian starts sputtering. Aiden reaches for the remote and plays the movie. We watch our friends bicker, and every time Sierra chuckles, it soothes my heartbeat.

She burrows farther into me, inhaling deeply before meeting my gaze. “This doesn’t mean I’m not mad at you.”

“Of course not, baby.” I smile, letting her body find its place in my arms.

“I mean it. But thank you.” She says it with her nose scrunched up.

“Anything for you.” I bring the blanket over both of us, wrapping my arms around her. When I bury my head in the crook of her neck, I let myself breathe in her cherry scent.

And this, right here, it’s home.

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EPILOGUE

SIERRA

Seven Years Later

"CLOSE THE BLINDS!" I hiss when the bright morning light assaults my tired eyes.

Dylan doesn't heed my words. Instead, he rips away the comforter I'm using to shield myself. The cool morning air hits my skin, making me gasp, just before he covers me with all six feet four inches of his warm body.

"Rise and shine, princess," he murmurs into my hair in that deep, rumbly voice.

The only reason he's revived that nickname after years is because the massive TV on our bedroom wall is paused mid-movie, stuck on that ARE YOU STILL WATCHING? screen. We got home from a long flight yesterday, and Dylan's genius plan to beat jet lag was to stay up until our regular bedtime. That meant watching four movies in a row—one of them being *Tangled*.

When he pulls back, I can't help but notice he hasn't changed a bit since college. He's still got that wavy hockey player hair; that boyish glint in his eyes; and the massive, muscular body I've only seen grow with time. Sometimes, when we're at the gym, I just stare while he works out in those tiny shorts and forget to do my own reps. Though the heart rate monitor on my fitness watch would beg to differ.

Now, with his hair mussed and his glasses on, he's standing shirtless in only a pair of boxers, and, of course, both our gold medals hang from his neck.

I thought winning the Grand Prix a few months back was our peak. But then came the Olympics. We became Olympic gold medalists together.

When we stepped onto the top of the podium, getting our medals and flowers, he turned to me and planted the gentlest kiss in my hair. Then he took off his medal and slipped it around my neck.

"They both belong to you," he whispered. Cameras clicked, and that photo caused a frenzy.

Dylan had already been a fan favorite, especially after someone posted footage of him playing in a beer league game in Toronto one Thanksgiving weekend. Fans dug up his old college hockey clips and paired them with our skating videos. Suddenly, we had a whole new crowd watching us.

A few of them I was ready to threaten with a rusty skate blade if they looked at my boyfriend for too long. He was mine, I knew that. But I needed everyone else to know it too. What really sent me over the edge, though, was a girl at our Desert Ice USFS Open in Vegas holding a sign that read, MARRY ME.

Dylan reaped the benefits of my irritation—*jealousy*, as he called it—because when we got back to our hotel room, I said, "You know, if you really loved me, I'd have a ring on my finger right now."

An hour later, we were married by an Elvis minister in a chapel off the Strip, with matching smiley-face tattoos on our ring fingers. Dylan also got my name tattooed over his heart, the same place I rest my hand before each performance. He didn't hesitate. It was like he'd just been patiently waiting for me to catch up. Like he always does.

"How's your head?" he asks, pressing his hand to my forehead.

As much as it sucks getting sick after a competition, I don't mind letting my husband nurse me back to health. He won't say it, but he loves it too. It's the only time I let him take care of everything without protest.

"Pounding."

"Come here, baby," he whispers, hauling me into his big arms. He leaves light kisses in my hair, cooing that I'll be okay, and that he's got me. I feel the faint brush of yarn against my cheek—his makeshift ring. He bought me a real one to wear off the ice, delicate and gold, but I'd knit his as a joke until I could buy him one. Just a loop of black yarn, spiraled neat and small. He looked at it like it was made of diamonds. He still does.

I run the pads of my thumbs below his eyes. "Where'd you go earlier? You weren't in bed."

"To check on something," he says vaguely. Dylan's been hiding something since we got home. Everyone's coming over today to see our

renovated house, and I was planning on cornering Kian, so he'd tell me.

Three years ago, after months of traveling for competitions, we wanted a home base. The tiny apartment we rented after I graduated college wasn't cutting it. But we both knew we didn't want to leave Connecticut. Our families are here. Our friends. The memories.

So, when his mom casually mentioned there was a FOR SALE sign on their old house, we sent in an offer the very next day. The family who lived there hadn't painted over anything. Dylan's, Kian's, and Ada's heights are still marked on the bathroom door frame. As I stood there admiring the sweet memories a little Dylan must've made in this house, he threw me over his shoulder and carried me to his childhood bedroom to christen it. Pretty sure we christened every room before we even had furniture.

"You're being awfully secretive. I swear, if you bought that sports car to match Aiden and Kian—"

"I didn't. But we can discuss that another day," he says, and I narrow my eyes. "I want to show you something, but you're going to have to get dressed."

"Where are we going?"

"Let me worry about that."

He spends the next few minutes bundling me up—thick socks, the beanie I knitted, a coat—before slipping into one himself. Dylan's excitement is the only reason I climb onto his back, thighs aching as I wrap my legs around him. He hitches me higher, and we head downstairs.

I reach for the medals dangling from his neck, running my fingers over the ribbon that reads *2030 French Alps* with the five rungs. I lift one to his mouth and he bites the gold. I smile.

My body jerks with each step he takes down the stairs. "How are you not sore?"

"Because I jogged last night. If you hadn't asked me to carry you five minutes in, you'd be less sore too."

"You could've said no," I mutter.

He glances at me. "I'm incapable of saying no to you."

We pass the kitchen, the yellow lilies he had delivered before we arrived spilling across the island as he keeps walking, all the way to the sliding glass doors, where the snow blankets our backyard in white. Dylan puts on my boots and lifts me again before we go out into the cold. My mouth parts on a gasp.

“You always said you felt like something was missing,” he says. “I think this was it.”

It’s an ice rink. Completely solid, with white boards, hockey lines, and markings. Our initials are painted under the ice at the center. My heart flips when Dylan opens the gate and sets me down. My boots touch the fresh ice. I’d told him how much I missed the one my parents used to have. It’s been years since that conversation.

My eyes sting. “When did you do this?”

“Had it built while we were in France. I wanted to surprise you.”

I blink up at my favorite amber brown eyes. “It’s for us?”

“It’s for you. Always for you,” he whispers, pressing his lips to mine. I tell him I don’t feel sick anymore and ask him to take me upstairs. Or we could start right here on the ice. I couldn’t care less.

Before I can get the *yes, baby* I’m fishing for, the alarm system chimes.

“Daddy’s home!” a loud voice booms through the house.

We freeze under the floodlights of the rink, our foreheads resting against each other.

“I’m going to kill him,” Dylan murmurs.

I stifle a laugh. “You’re the one who gave him a key.”

“*Lost* the key in a bet. Never again.”

Kian calls our names when I’m sure he’s spotted us through the sliding door. The rest of our friends follow shortly after, kids in tow, sliding onto the rink. Our rink.

Laughter echoes, kids lie on the ice, someone crashes into the boards and howls with joy. Dylan’s hand finds mine. And that’s when it hits me. The warmth we’d been missing rushes in like sunlight through an open window. Suddenly, everything feels whole. Like we’re not just in a house.

We’re finally home.

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On today's episode of being an author: the girl who couldn't have done it without her emotional support besties. Dylan (and [redacted]—but that's a story for another day) is the character I get asked about the most. That made it even more important for me to write his and Sierra's story to the best of my ability. There's something about them that tugged at the deepest parts of who I am, making this writing experience unexpectedly therapeutic. I've never written more than I have with these two—I'm pretty sure I have enough deleted scenes to fill a second book.

To my readers, thinking about you fills me with overwhelming joy. I never feel like a simple thank-you is enough, but it'll have to do until I find better ways to show how much your support means to me.

My sister, for sharing your invaluable knowledge of psychotherapy and pharmacology, and for treating these characters like real patients.

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Lastly, to the version of me who'll read this someday: I'm proud of you.

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One

ELIAS

TORONTO THUNDER'S GOLDEN BOY KEEPS THE ICE COLD AND THE WOMEN HOT!

Being a rookie in the NHL is as bad as you expect it to be. But being a rookie in the NHL who's constantly in the media and hasn't scored his first career goal is even worse.

The hotel lobby has a selection of magazines to choose from, but the one on the coffee table has my name on the cover. It's a blurry picture of a woman leaving the nightclub, with me right behind her. The rare time I could be persuaded to celebrate a win is when they catch me with a woman. If they bothered to do some research, they'd know the woman is Brandy, our team photographer. I had offered her a ride home, and didn't expect someone to snap pictures.

Avoiding parties and outings isn't something I do intentionally, but it's difficult to celebrate something you had no part in. I prefer going over the games and analyzing my mistakes to find what's preventing me from getting that first goal. So that's exactly what I have planned for tonight.

Except we're in Dallas, and I'm still waiting in the hotel lobby for my room to be ready. Despite knowing not to, I take a closer look at the magazine, and read the smaller headlines.

IS WESTBROOK LOSING HIMSELF TO FAME? ANOTHER BAD MOVE FOR TORONTO?

"Mr. Westbrook?"

I drop the magazine as if I'd been caught reading something illicit and head to the front desk. When I thank the concierge for the key, he shoots me a not-so-discreet wink that confuses me. Ignoring the weird interaction, I

head up in the elevator to my room. Sliding my key card in the door, I waste no time heading straight for the shower.

The hot water unravels the tense muscles in my back and the thoughts of the stupid magazine. Steam wafts out of the shower behind me as I wrap a towel around my waist and run another through my hair. I've been dying to get into bed and turn on the game highlights, but I stop dead in my tracks when I see what's in my bed. Or rather *who* is in my bed.

What the fuck?

Clutching my towel, I take several steps back. "Sorry, did I get the wrong room key?"

I didn't. I'm sure of that since my luggage is only two feet away from me. Suddenly, the concierge's wink makes sense. The woman's long blond hair falls in waves around her face, red lips and perfect teeth forming a smile. She's lying on the king-size bed in one of the hotel-provided robes with half-eaten snack wrappers from the minibar strewn across the covers.

"The key seems perfect to me." Her mischievous smile as she sits up makes me uneasy.

"I'm not sure who you're looking for, but it's definitely not me."

"Trust me"—her eyes map every inch of my torso, lingering on the wet droplets slipping down my abdomen—"it's definitely you, Eli."

If this is a prank, I'm killing my teammates.

"I thought you'd want to celebrate tonight's win," she purrs, taking a step toward me.

The only reason I'd celebrate is if I scored, and that hasn't happened yet. I take several steps back and toward the door. "I'm sure you can find someone else who's interested."

Her brows jump so high I can tell she's never been turned down.

My refusal doesn't have her putting her clothes back on and leaving as I'd hoped. So I turn and walk out. In the hall, naked except for a towel, I head straight for a neighboring room. Aiden and I are only a few rooms apart since the rookies are paired together, and I'm hoping he's still awake.

Aiden Crawford, my best friend and teammate, isn't like me. He got his first career goal the moment he stepped onto the ice in our very first game. His second goal came that next night with an assist by me. Since he's joined the Toronto Thunder, he's been nothing short of stellar, and I couldn't be more proud. But Aiden's not one to throw a party for each goal. His

ambitions extend beyond a single game, a drive he's had since he led us as captain at Dalton University.

So right now I'm hoping he's also bailed on celebrating, because hotel guests are walking in the corridor, and one has taken a particular interest in my half-naked state. If they recognize me, I'm sure cameras will start clicking.

"Aiden!" I knock harder than I should, earning even more looks when the elevator opens to a new batch of hotel guests. *Fantastic.*

Mid-knock, the door swings open, and Aiden eyes me with curiosity. "What's wrong?"

Before I can explain, the reason for my escape strolls out of the room, scanning the hallway for me. "That is." I gesture to the girl and barrel my way inside his hotel room.

"Again?" Aiden chuckles, closing the door. I see the phone in his hand, with his girlfriend, Summer, on a video call.

"Hey, Brooksy." She waves at me through the screen, and I wave back, clutching my towel a little tighter. Although, Summer's probably immune, since she's seen way more than she signed up for when she and Aiden started dating earlier this year. We've become great friends, and there's nothing I wouldn't do for her.

"You need security, man," Aiden says. "I'm pretty sure those people in the hall took a picture of you."

I sit on his bed and drop my head back against the headboard in defeat. All I ever wanted was to play professional hockey, but now it feels like the dream is slipping through my fingers. The extra attention and opinions wouldn't bother me if I could shake off the pressure to perform. It's a weight that conveniently snatches my ability to do the one thing I've always been good at.

"Did Eli just virtually cockblock us?" Summer asks.

Aiden shrugs and smirks at his phone. "I'm still down if you are."

I groan. You'd think them being in a long-distance relationship would give me some reprieve from the PDA.

"I think I'll pass." Summer laughs. "Have fun at your sleepover!"

I drop my head in my hands. "How am I supposed to focus on playing when I know this is the stuff that's hitting the headlines first thing tomorrow?"

Aiden tosses his phone on the nightstand and gives me a pitying look. One he does every time something stupid like this occurs. “This is some pretty shit luck, man. I can’t believe people are buying into the ‘golden boy turned playboy’ narrative.”

In an unexpected turn of events, a video posted by our team went viral. I had hesitantly agreed to film a day in the life of an NHL rookie, and the fans loved it. I’m not sure if it was the bloopers they found endearing, or maybe my workout routine was just that inspirational. But as soon as the media knew what the fans wanted, they became hungry for more. And when I was two games in with nothing on my stats sheet, the criticism started pouring in. They credited my draft to my parents’ connections and discounted my talent, all within a few days. I went from being the endearing rookie to the rich playboy whose only goal is to get laid.

“It’s my fault. I should have turned down the extra press when I had the chance.” When our social media team approached me with ideas for more content, I could have said no. Thinking it would benefit my image rather than dampen it, I stupidly agreed.

“They would have talked you into it regardless. They need eyes on the game, especially with the ratings dropping last year.”

I sigh. “‘Pretty boy hockey player who can’t score for shit.’ That’ll be the next headline.”

“You’ve had plenty of assists. Trust me, you’ll get the goal too,” he assures. “Just find something that lets you breathe. Something that takes away the pressure you’re feeling.”

“Easier said than done. We can’t all have a Summer,” I mutter.

He smiles. “True, but the media only leaves me alone because of her dad. He’d shut that shit down before they tried anything.”

Summer’s dad is in the NHL Hall of Fame, and we were all pretty starstruck when we met him at our last Frozen Four. “Maybe I should date him,” I suggest.

Aiden chuckles and tosses me an extra pair of his sweats. “Good luck with that.”

When I’m changing into the sweats, my phone vibrates with a text from Coach. It’s his sixth reminder about tomorrow’s event. We have to be ready for bidding since the team is auctioning dates with players.

“You going to the fundraiser tomorrow?” I ask Aiden.

“It’s mandatory. The whole Thunder organization is going to be there,” he says.

Great.

OUR FLIGHT BACK to Toronto this morning was more uneventful than anticipated. No new headlines and no more surprise visits from fans. The hotel even apologized for letting the woman upstairs, but they couldn’t have known since she introduced herself as my fiancée. Apparently, she attends every game, whether home or away. Her dedication to the cause would be commendable if it wasn’t so creepy.

The collar of my dress shirt suffocates me as we enter the venue.

“Relax, man.” Aiden nudges me to stop pulling at my collar. “It’s only a few hours, then we can head out.”

“You’re only saying that because you’re not the one being auctioned off.”

The auction happens every year, and since the older women in the crowd are the ones bidding, our PR team thought it would be great to throw me into the mix. That, or it’s a bit of hazing for a rookie. Aiden got to bow out by using his girlfriend as an excuse.

“I got your back, but just know you’ll make someone’s grandmother very happy.” He grins.

I roll my eyes just as Coach comes to stand by me, his presence alone raising panic.

“Westbrook. A minute.” He gestures toward the bar.

It doesn’t take a genius to figure out what this is about.

When I join him by a table, he places his phone on it, revealing an article and a photo of the girl from last night leaving our hotel in a robe, and my face under yet another headline.

TORONTO THUNDER’S ROOKIE IS OUT FOR THE COOKIE.

Seriously? Are they hiring an intern to write these?

“I don’t make a habit of reading this shit, but when the GM questions why my rookie is seen covering more magazines than he is covering the ice, I have no choice.”

Crap. The general manager, Marcus Smith-Beaumont, is the hard-ass of hard-asses. If he’s heard of this, I’m sure I’m the talk of the board of directors—the ones who decide whether I’m worth the advance they’ve paid me.

When I first got recruited, I had heard a rumor that he was against my draft to the Thunder. It isn't a norm to draft two players from the same college in one year, but it's not exactly groundbreaking either.

"There are a few articles from this month alone if you want to do some light reading." His words come out less angry than they should. I'm single-handedly tainting the rookie image, and the organization can't be happy about that. "Another scandal and another game without a goal. I don't know how many press meetings we can control if things like this continue to surface."

The bartender offers a drink, but I refuse. "It's all fabricated. I have no idea why they're spinning it this way."

"Because you're popular. That social media video of you went viral, and the people want more. It's great publicity, but not great for your career if you become the next playboy."

"That's not who I am."

"I'm sure, but the only perception the league cares about is the fans'. You need to pick up your game and keep your hotel rooms empty."

I run my hand through my hair, feeling a headache forming. "I understand."

"Get that first one out of the way, and I can downplay the press we're getting about you. Don't make the organization question whether they should have signed you. You're a strong player, Eli, I can vouch for that, but I can't do it unless you back it with some proof."

He takes the drink I had refused, downs it in one go, and walks off. The echo of his advice and a fading clink of emptied glasses circle my mind. The pressure is overwhelming.

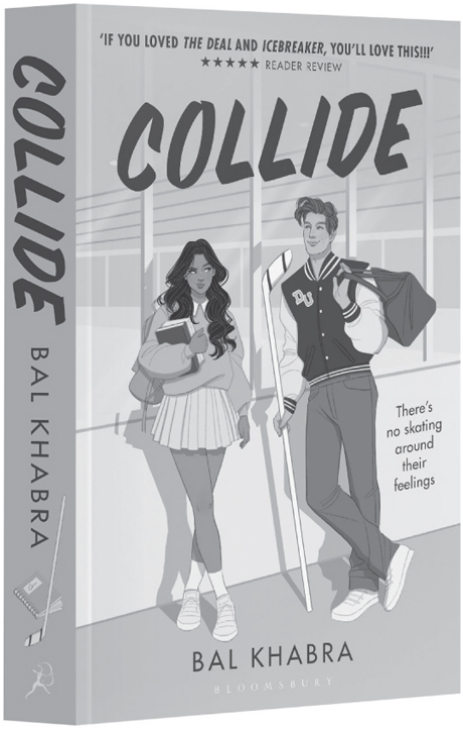
If I stay in here another second, my head might explode. I don't stick around to find out, and bolt for the double doors, signaling to Aiden that I need a break.

And maybe a solution to all my problems.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bal is a Canadian writer and booklover. Before she decided to jump into the romance pool, she spent her time gushing about books on social media. When inspiration strikes, she is found filling her Notes app with ideas for romance novels. She loves reading about love, watching movies about love, and now writing about it herself. There really isn't much else that gets her heart fluttering the way HEAs do. She fell in love with writing and hopes to continue living out her romance author dreams.

VISIT THE AUTHOR ONLINE

AuthorBalKhabra.com
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